

Great Road Style

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Top to bottom:

Nora Goode of Smyth County, VA made this fretless banjo in the late 19th century.

Though informed speculation attributes this early 19th century earthenware jug to the Cain pottery in Sullivan County, TN, it may have actually been made by a potter named John Wolfe, whose name appears below the handle.

History places this late 18th century tea table (which has a "birdcage" and a tilt top) in the Damascus area of Washington County, VA. The use of black walnut is unusual for that location.

The picnic basket has a double hinged top and is signed by its maker, "Will Triplet, Dec. 1934 Benhams, Va."

pictures and the other for slides, taking field notes, documenting everything from furniture and pottery to textiles, musical instruments, metalwork and paintings. He and I met weekly to transfer film and field notes, make plans for the coming weeks, and discuss the amazing things he was finding. On occasion I would go out with him, especially when a big house full of family pieces with long-term regional provenance called for more than one person's attention."

The first Cultural Heritage exhibit was held for two weeks in 1996 during the Virginia Highlands Festival. White says, "We decided that pierced-tin furniture was made so extensively in this area that we should give it its own exhibit and that it would serve as an early introduction to our fieldwork." The show, held at Abingdon United Methodist Church on Main Street, drew about 13,000 visitors.

After about two years, King completed his work in 15 counties. The Arts Center continues the fieldwork on an "as needed" basis, particularly for each of the exhibitions that have come after. The Cultural Heritage Project and its goals have become a stated part of the WKRAC mission and now accounts for about 40 percent of all programming: exhibitions, the Fields-Penn 1860 House Museum, the permanent collection, archives, and publications, and WKRAC weaves it into educational programs whenever possible. "One of the reasons I returned to my post as director of WKRAC was to integrate the Project into our programming," White says.

When White retired from her administrative post in 1993 to supervise the Center's Cultural Heritage Project, she thought she would be able to spend more time with her family, but she found she had gone from the frying pan into the fire. The Project quickly grew beyond anyone's imagination and "really sparked my interest," she recalls.

"Once we knew that our fieldwork was uncovering a rich legacy of material culture and that we would have more than just the one exhibition that we had originally anticipated, I 'hedged our bets,' so to speak, and had professionally-produced color transparency images taken of most of the objects in our exhibitions, just in case a book became a possibility," White explains. Also very early on, she had discussions with the University of Virginia Press and knew that good images would be a plus. About two years ago, she met with the Press, showed them the images, and the book became a reality.

Where to Find "Great Road Style" Items

White says estate sales and big auction houses such as Robert Brunk in Asheville, NC; Ken Farmer in Radford, VA; or Kimball Sterling in Johnson City, TN are a few places to find the region's antiques for purchase.

Area antique shops will have these pieces from time to time. White says, "It's just a matter of making the rounds on a regular basis and asking the shop owners if they have any local pieces." For example, during the 2005 Virginia Highlands Festival, White purchased a Washington County, VA pie safe from Highlands Antique Mall on Abingdon's Main Street. She notes that, once the *Great Road Style* book is published, people will have a good visual record to use as a guide.

About the Author

White began her association with WKRAC in 1980 as a member of the early trustee board. She had been off the board for a few years when she took the helm as the Arts Center's part-time chief administrator and led a planning effort to determine what programming should be put in place that would utilize the whole building, so it could be renovated before it decayed further.

Her part-time obligation swiftly grew to full-time, once the Arts Center surveyed the state's arts organizations and our region's cultural resources, both private and through the schools, and discovered two "over-arching voids" — there was no sequential art program in most elementary schools throughout a nine-county area of Virginia and no high-security gallery spaces. The Arts Center board created a new mission that focused on addressing these two regional needs, mounted a capital campaign, and moved forward. The building was closed from 1990-92 for major renovations. White retired from the top administrative post in late 1993 to lead the research effort for WKRAC's Cultural Heritage Project. In 1997, she returned as director.

When *A! Magazine* first talked to White about the Project in 1996, she referred to herself as a detective. We described her as a treasure hunter, genealogist and spokesperson, all rolled into one.

Always interested in history and historical preservation as well as the arts, White still feels the Project, and the resulting book, is "the most interesting thing I've ever done." She sees the data from the Project as providing an opportunity for a lifetime of research into unanswered questions. "This isn't an open-and-shut project but will be an on-going and sustained program. There will be continuing exhibitions of loaned materials," she says. "Aside from the on-going nature of our research over the past 10 years and the fact that I have personally had the privilege of curating several of our exhibits along with their specific research, writing the book has been a wonderful re-connection with the research as a whole," she notes.

"Last summer (2004) I was fortunate enough to spend a month at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, NC for the annual Summer Institute which focused on the 17th century history of the Chesapeake region and its decorative arts, the area where many of our settlers and artisans originated."

White says, "My hope is that the next step will be to create a research center within WKRAC for people who are interested in studying the region's material culture history. We plan to computerize the records and set up an area that can be used for this purpose. Right now our records are easily accessible only to me and, to a lesser extent, the rest of our curatorial staff."

"My next project will be to trace our artisans' histories to the places where they learned their craft and to try to link their particular techniques to a particular place; in other words, to do a more in-depth study of our 'Great Road Style' and try to place it more specifically within its origins," she concludes. *A!*