

HOW I CAME TO WRITE HISTORY

BY PAULA S. FELDER

I ARRIVED at adulthood after World War II, when young women college graduates in English and history, especially in the South, were simply told not to "bother the placement office."

It was the time of a great upward movement of the middle class, a social revolution created by the GI Bill affording educational opportunities to returning veterans.

I'd had an excellent grounding in my small Mississippi high school by an English teacher who was a local institution, then an unusual college teacher who thought "outside the box" and told me I had a potential for writing dramatic and literary criticism (when I had never even seen a professionally performed play!).

The closest I ever came to celebrity was waiting on Eudora Welty at a stationery store in Jackson, but somehow, by sampling a variety of low-level jobs in mostly lateral moves, I was acquiring an education without realizing it.

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It was a time of shifting population patterns, resulting from the exposure of military personnel to the milder Southern climate during their wartime training.

I headed the other way. Leaving the state where my ancestors had lived for five generations, I migrated to New England and later to Washington. In Boston, I took advantage of new graduate programs—a management-training program for women to help make us professionally employable, and another in adult education, a field so new that there was no way to fulfill the degree requirements.

The disciplines were new but very valuable for my generation, and we achieved interesting jobs, in my case rising to editorial positions.

I was fortunate to have an inherited gene that drew me to English and American history, and Boston was the

perfect setting for learning history from good biography.

Then, a distinguished elderly cousin who had been painstakingly collecting piles of miscellaneous information from a genealogist in South Carolina handed them all to me and designated me the family historian.

MY INTRODUCTION TO AREA HISTORY

I arrived in Fredericksburg in 1976, homebound with small children and with the beginning of a manuscript and my unsorted genealogy tables in boxes stored under my bed.

The late Ralph Meima asked my help in writing something to promote the Tiffany windows at St. George's Episcopal Church, which needed protective care. "I think there's some old books in the church office that you can look at," he said. At his invitation, I took them home and hadn't a clue what they were.

I took notes in my spare time (thank goodness they were only photocopies), and I gradually perceived that they were minutes of the first vestry meetings of St. George's Parish, which was all of the county. (John Frederick Dorman has since indexed and annotated these.)

They led me to the records at the courthouse in Spotsylvania, a room filled with incredible treasures dating back to the creation of the county in 1721. Matching them up with the vestry's business was like having a newspaper at hand, once you understood the relationship of the court and the equally powerful church laws.

I confess I felt pretty smart to be able to master so much material so easily. But then I was humbled to learn that Spotsylvania was really an artificially created county, without traditions or population, devised (and run out of his Germanna headquarters) by Gov. Alexander Spotswood to exempt himself from size restrictions on his huge land acquisitions for his mining venture. My visits to the courthouse were now producing copious and useful notes.

By this time, Radio Shack's word processors were coming out. Primitive or not, they revolutionized the work of note-taking and writing history. But the expensive new printing technologies were forcing the Main



Paula S. Felder has written several books about local history.

Street printers to specialize, and this shut off opportunities for local historians. To this day, Fredericksburg has a dearth of history books.

So the history of my German ancestor in 18th-century South Carolina became my training ground in publishing while I was writing "Forgotten Companions"; it also provided me a dramatic contrast in Colonial histories.

I set my family history on a Radio Shack Model 4, and sold it by sending announcements to hundreds of descendants. (A cousin whom I've never met converted the entire book to a Web site and has continued to add to it.) Though I then turned my full attention to my first book on our local history, the contrast between the two Colonial cultures has stayed with me, giving me a context I would not otherwise have acquired.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCHERS

When I moved to Fredericksburg 30 years ago, I was fortunate to see things the way they had been for a very long time. The town and Spotsylvania County each had a population of about 13,000 people. There was one school at each level in town and in the county.

There were still dairy farms along State Route 3 west.

But the interstate highway was the beginning of the change that has now all but overwhelmed our area. And the shopping malls endangered Fredericksburg's economic existence.

Fortunately, there has been an economic revival and also a renaissance of our historic identity (though we still suffer from a dearth of written history).

But still mesmerized by our traumatic Civil War experience, we have neglected to chronicle the rest of our 19th-century history.

Still, we have had continuous newspapers since 1786, and in the 19th century there were several at one time. They have been preserved and await our scholarship.

The Free Lance-Star has a very colorful history of its own, and its output has been an invaluable historic resource. Its news and articles, indexed by Robert Hodge, are accessible at the library on microfilm. Contributors to the paper's Town & County magazine have made it our largest repository of local history.

The contributions of our modern indexers merit an article all by themselves. We now have digital access to the ledgers of Weedon's Tavern and Dr. Hugh Mercer for the 1770s, as well as to the ships on the Rappahannock in the 18th century.

Thanks to the work of John Copley and Skip Nolan, I was able to fix the time when the Friendship from Whitehaven carrying John Paul (later Jones) as a 13-year-old cabin boy was in port in the summer of 1762.

Then by consulting George Washington's diary and expense ledger, I learned that the rising leader from Mount Vernon was visiting his mother and it was the time of the June fair. So it is very likely that when Washington crossed on the town ferry to the foot of Wolfe Street he may have glimpsed the future naval hero, whose ship was docked nearby.

There are also opportunities to learn, from Skip Nolan's digital records of Weedon's tavern, just which patriots were meeting in his rooms. Mann Page and Fielding Lewis conferred there on their assignment to build row galleys to defend the river. And Dr. Hugh Mercer stood the new Independent Company to a round of punch after a monthly muster.