

OPENERS

Virginia Libraries—Past, Present, Future

by Cy Dillon

This issue contains the last Virginia Reviews column contributed solely by the staff of the Library of Virginia, and it is well worth taking some time to reflect on how LVA's reviewers and editors have added value to this publication over most of the past two decades. In addition to being a source of scholarly reviews for acquisitions librarians who read *Virginia Libraries*, the corpus of carefully considered appraisals of books on Virginia history and culture has made our past issues at the Virginia Tech Digital Library and Archives more valuable to the internet searchers who now access our back pages at a rate that increases each year.

A message from Sandra G. Treadway, Librarian of Virginia, reminded me recently how the column started: "I remember when Peggy Rudd first approached me back in the early 1990s about launching the feature, and we eagerly agreed to take this project on, first with John Kneebone as editor, then Julie Campbell and now Sara Bearss." This distinguished cast of characters deserves a bit of elaboration. Peggy Rudd went on to become the State Librarian of Texas, and is justly recognized as a national leader in developing innovative library and archive services. Dr. John Kneebone is currently a tenured professor in the graduate history program at Virginia Commonwealth University where he specializes in the area of his discipline known as public history. Julie Campbell is now producing

award-winning publications for Washington & Lee University, where she edits the alumni magazine. Sara Bearss remains at LVA, and is the managing editor for the massive *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* project. It has been our privilege to work with these outstanding editors over the years, and *Virginia Libraries* readers—past,

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present, and future—owe them appreciation for their success at the difficult tasks of finding reviewers, obtaining review copies, assigning reviews, enforcing deadlines, and producing a clear, concise finished product.

Of course, we can hardly give all the credit to the review editors. The LVA staff who wrote the dozens of insightful reviews must also be recognized for their contribution to collection development and scholarship in general. The consistent quality of their output assured that *Virginia Reviews* was always worth reading, and they will be as difficult to replace as the editors.

Readers who saw our call for reviewers in the last issue of 2009 realize that the current *Virginia Libraries* editors are going to attempt to develop and maintain a group of reviewers from all over the Commonwealth. For those interested in participating, there is still time to get on our growing list of potential reviewers. Contact information for the co-editors is on the contents page of this issue, and we look forward to hearing from you.

We got a chance to hear from a significant number of readers, including some of our most dependable authors, at a session of the 2008 VLA Annual Conference, as noted in the conference coverage in this issue. One of the most interesting—and difficult—questions that came up was whether to change the format of *Virginia Libraries* to online only. The switch to electronic publication is a strategy that will save money, and it is a change that has already been made by the *VLA Newsletter* and many other professional association publications around the world. We also know that our archived issues hosted by Virginia Tech are accessed almost 400,000 times annually, and we expect that number to continue to increase now that each article will be available as a separate PDF file. Nevertheless I see a pair of compelling reasons to hold on to our tradition of mailing copies to VLA members and other subscribers.

First, there are symbolic and practical advantages to the print

journal as an artifact. Authors like a material acknowledgement of their accomplishment, readers like the heft and texture of paper and the freedom from the requirement to mouse through page after page, advertisers still believe in the efficacy of print advertising and are willing to pay less for online ads, and editors—well, editors like to have something attractive to show off to a spouse, boss, or colleague. Of course, being able to say “Our journal got 400,000 hits in 2007” has significant impact during a professional development committee review.

Second, publications that are born digital need an absolutely reliable server on which to live. Our archive at Virginia Tech is probably as safe as any web location, including Brewster Kahle’s Internet Archive, but even Tech, when faced with budget challenges, has had to modify our archive by publishing issues as PDF documents only, giving up conversion to HTML. VLA would have to answer the question of what kind of redundancy we need to assure the preservation of a purely digital journal. But we are librarians, and that is one of the many challenges we overcome regularly and reliably.

That said, and my reluctance to give up the artifact noted, I understand that *Virginia Libraries* will eventually leave paper behind. I just hope we can stick to articles and columns, rather than becoming a scattered assortment of tweets voiced randomly in the restless noise of cyberspace.