

At work in the

Center sets out to prove that bu

BY GREG EDWARDS

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

“Dear Mr. Lewis:”

It was with that courteous greeting that pop artist Andy Warhol began a March 1966 letter to Richmond’s Sydney Lewis, co-founder and president of Best Products Co., a now-defunct catalog showroom retailer.

Warhol wanted Lewis to get him four 16-millimeter Bell & Howell film projectors, model 550, so Warhol could use them for musical and film concerts. Lewis and his wife, Frances, were avid collectors of pop and modern art, including Warhol’s.

Warhol concluded his letter on a more personal note, by thanking Lewis for a gift of [presumably Virginia] smoked ham. “We ate it on our Bus ride to Ann Arbor, Michigan for a college concert. It was very good,” the artist wrote.

The Warhol letter to Richmond business legend Lewis is one of the many tantalizing morsels in the thousands of records on file at the Virginia Historical Society’s new Rey-

nolds Center for Virginia Business History.

The business history center occupies a large portion of a new \$16 million addition to the southeastern corner of the society’s headquarters and museum on North Boulevard. The new wing includes 22,000 square feet of storage for business records and 3,800 square feet of exhibit space for Virginia commerce artifacts from the past 400 years.

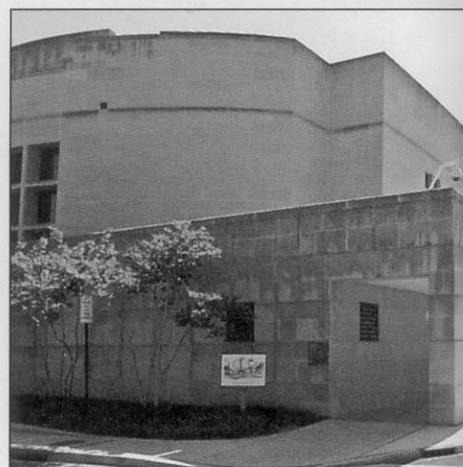
The business exhibit, called “Virginians at Work,” will open July 22. It is on the same floor as the society’s popular “The Story of Virginia” exhibit.

The new center thrills Scott Nelson, who teaches business history at the College of William and Mary.

“Especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, business history is American history,” Nelson said. “To understand westward settlement and secession and the rise of the Republican Party, you have to understand the formation of modern American business.”

How it started

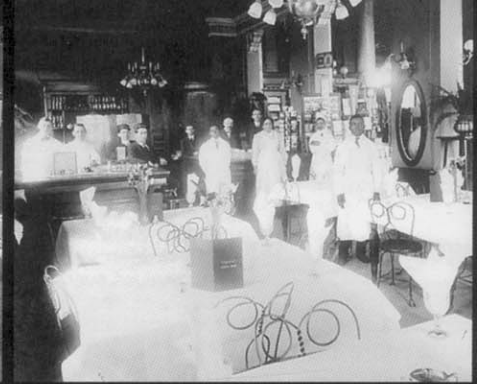
The genesis of the business history center lies five years back, when, during a re-



The business history center occupies a large portion of the society’s headquarters (right above)

treat, the Virginia Historical Society’s staff began considering what sort of items they should collect. They played around with the idea of a business history collection, said Charles Bryan, the society’s president and CEO.





Old Dominion

Business history is Virginia history



DON LONG/TIMES-DISPATCH

...e portion of a \$16 million addition (at
...nd museum on North Boulevard.

About the same time, the Reynolds family, working with Alcoa Inc., proposed placing the records of Richmond's Reynolds Metals Co. with the society. Alcoa bought Reynolds Metals in 2000.

That idea, and major gifts to the society

by the Reynolds family and Alcoa, were the catalysts for development of the business history center and the new wing, Bryan said. A society brochure reports that the family gave \$1 million and the Alcoa Foundation added \$500,000.

"I think it is an absolutely fantastic program" said Randy Reynolds, former vice chairman of Reynolds Metals. The center will help people understand societal changes in Virginia over the centuries, he said.

Speaking of his former company's own interesting history, Reynolds recalled how his grandfather R.S. Reynolds had gone to Europe before World War II looking for aluminum. The company was not making aluminum for its products at the time but buying it from others and aluminum had become hard to find.

His grandfather discovered that Germany was buying up all the aluminum of European manufacturers and using it to build airplanes, Reynolds said. His grandfather, alarmed by his discovery, returned to America and convinced Congress to help the company build, in Alabama, the com-

pany's first aluminum plant.

In addition to the space for the business history center, the new wing includes a 500-seat auditorium, a classroom, offices and photographic storage. The auditorium hosts roughly a dozen lectures a year open to the public as well as society members, including luncheon talks this week — by British historian Simon Schama, on the hopes of slaves during the American Revolution, and by former Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering, on the challenges and opportunities in the Middle East.

Scholar driven

The business history center is the first of its kind at a historical society in the South and, as far as Bryan can determine, the business history center is only the second in the nation. The Minnesota Historical Society, which established a center roughly 10 years ago, was very helpful as the Virginians planned their project, he said.

Other institutions, such as the Library of Virginia and Virginia Tech, have fine collec-

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Work

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tions of business history. The society, however, is unique in having a specialized, scholar-driven center with a staff dedicated to business history, Bryan said.

Major changes

Bryan said Virginia has changed more since the Civil War than it did during the entire time between the settlement of Jamestown and the Southern insurrection.

A century ago, nine of 10 Virginians were born in Virginia and worked on farms. But in 2000, fewer than 5 percent of Virginians were in farming, and nearly half were born elsewhere, Bryan said. Business and the economy brought people from the field to the factory and from the country to the city.

While the society has collected much material on Virginia's role in World War II and on the civil-rights movement, Bryan said there is no better way to help trace the past century's population shift than by collecting business history.

People may think of Sen. Harry F. Byrd Sr. and other politicians as major Virginia figures of the 20th century, but Bryan asked: Are they any more important than people such as E. Claiborne Robins and Richard H. Reynolds, who built large international corporations?

Virginia has been home to more than 70 Fortune 500 companies, Bryan said. Richmond alone is home to eight Fortune 500 headquarters and will have nine when MeadWestvaco moves to town.

The socio-economic influence of business leaders has extended beyond their own businesses and the state's economy. For instance, Robins built A.H. Robins into a major corporation, which created personal wealth that, in turn, led to an incredible record of charita-

Saving history

The Virginia Historical Society has created the Reynolds Center for Virginia Business History to preserve the state's business past. Complementing the center is a long-term exhibit, which opens in July, called "Virginians at Work" — it looks at how residents supported themselves over the past four centuries. The new center's goals are to:

- **Tell** the human stories of significant Virginia businesses.
- **Show** how culture is affected by corporations.
- **Prevent** the loss of valuable documents and make them available to researchers.
- **Teach** Virginia businesses the importance and skills of archiving and saving documents.
- **Document** the contributions of women- and minority-owned businesses.

Society Web Site:
www.vahistorical.org

ble giving in Richmond and beyond, Bryan said.

Notable collections

The society already houses more than 50 major collections of business records in addition to archives as modest as a single business ledger book. The records are kept in acid-free containers in the new wing's fourth floor. The center has a paper-conservation laboratory for records preservation.

Sharing archival space with Reynolds Metals' records are the major collections of Best Products, Baskerville and Son, Overnite Transportation, Miller & Rhoads, Thalhimers Brothers Inc., A.H. Robins Co. and the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad.

The collections are open to anyone who registers to use the society's library, subject to restrictions that may be placed on access by a donor, according to Paul Levensgood, program coordinator for

the business history center.

A major undertaking of the center's staff has been to consult with companies about what sort of things are of historical value that they should keep, Levensgood said. Some businesses have records-destruction schedules, and many businesses do not know the historical value of what they have.

A wide footprint

The center is not just seeking the records of large corporations, Levensgood said. It would welcome material from small businesses, particularly those owned by women or minorities. It is seeking to build a collection that represents a cross-section of Virginia business, he said.

William and Mary's Nelson said a problem with acquiring the records of small businesses, such as farms, is that individual- and family-owned businesses tend to focus on family records and "throw away the good stuff," the kinds of records that enable researchers to determine how society and business was changing during a business' lifetime.

Bryan said one of the center's big challenges will be to avoid being overwhelmed by material. Another challenge is acquiring material from existing companies, he said.

"A lot of what we have here is from corporations that are no longer around," Bryan said. The society, aware of the potential legal worries of ongoing concerns, tries to assure those companies that it can restrict the use of their records by the public.

The society is just now beginning to get the word out to researchers about the information available at the center.

"In the future," Bryan said, "I would like to see [the center] recognized as major business history center, one that would draw national attention" and serve as a model for other states.

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From FDR to Edison, files offer some gems

Already, the new Reynolds Center for Virginia Business History has plenty of material that could interest professional historians or an amateur sleuth.

Consider a letter in the Reynolds Metals archives from President Franklin D. Roosevelt to Richard S. Reynolds, just five weeks after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. In it, the president seeks to assure Reynolds that the government is "fully cognizant" of the need to protect the nation's aluminum plants.

And there's the correspondence, nearly 18 years earlier, between Reynolds and the great inventor Thomas A. Edison. The two men discuss a new pro-

cess patented by Edison for making metal foils by an electrolytic method. Reynolds wants to know if Edison manufactures the foil machines for sale or if he would license the process.

Edison responds that he might consider, under certain conditions, licensing the machines but prefers to make the foil and sell it himself, "so that prices could be maintained at a fair profit."

Edison adds a handwritten P.S. related to Henry Ford's use of Edison's copper foil in automobile radiators.