

Creating YOUR Commonwealth

BACKGROUND

In May 2022, the Virginia Museum of History and Culture opened an exhibition titled Our Commonwealth. This exhibit takes a fresh approach to Virginia's history by encouraging people to think geographically – how do different cultural regions of Virginia and their landscapes impact how people work, live, and play?

STEP 1. Understanding Our Commonwealth Community

The Commonwealth of Virginia is a community. **A community is a group of people with shared characteristics.** Can you name some communities that you are a part of?

IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Ask students to write individual definitions of **community**.

If they need assistance, offer some examples of communities to get them thinking about how they compare (schools, neighborhoods, cities, cultural groups, sports teams etc.).

Create a classroom definition of **community**.

Ask students to contribute their ideas, so the class can compose a definition together, with the teacher leading the discussion. Ask students what communities they are a part of. Also ask them what brings communities together! These are similar traits, like history, identity, goals, economy, and location, for example.

Have students write a **community** they want to form.

For example, maybe one of those whose favorite color is green, or a community of people who love to eat spaghetti. Give them a silly example!

Existing communities form based on those traits mentioned in your classroom discussion!

People who live near water are likely to form fishing communities because that is a natural resource everyone can access. Communities offer a way for people to connect and feel like they are a part of something bigger!

In *Our Commonwealth*, **curators** decided to divide Virginia into 5 different regions – this choice was made by looking at what made areas in Virginia similar or different.

The five areas they decided on are: Tidewater, Northern, Shenandoah Valley, Southwest Virginia, and Central Virginia.

DEFINITION

Curator: Curators are people whose job is collecting and caring for objects that teach us about topics like history, art, and science. They use those objects to create exhibits.

Some of these are slightly different names for areas you might have studied before – The Tidewater is also called the Coastal Plain. Central Virginia is often also known as the Piedmont Region. The Appalachian Plateau is part of Southwestern Virginia. They also made changes by breaking out Northern Virginia to be its own region and combining the Blue Ridge Mountains & Valley and Ridge into the Shenandoah Valley Region.

BRAINSTORM: Can you think of any reasons they might have done that?

*Example: Northern Virginia's **community** shares characteristics that make it feel different than the rest of the state. Some of those characteristics are: diverse people from around the world, jobs in the government or the military, and closeness to Washington, DC.*



STEP 2. Telling the Stories of Our Commonwealth

In this lesson plan, you will view some examples of stories that VMHC Educators associate with each region, then work together as a class to create YOUR Commonwealth by researching & collecting stories you think best represent your school, your city, or your region.

STORY 1 | Historical Moment

Each region focuses on several historical moments that were important to that area of Virginia.

Shenandoah Region & The Creation of Shenandoah National Park

Shenandoah National Park is a beautiful natural area perfect for recreation. It holds over 500 miles of trails, 654 campsites, and lots of wilderness. However, this area wasn't always a park. It used to be home to many different groups of people (**communities!**) through history. At least 500 families once lived within the bounds of what is today Shenandoah National Park. The families who called the Shenandoah Mountains home were displaced by the creation of the park and were forced to leave. They would have lived in cabins much like the one pictured on this postcard.



Old Mountain Cabin, Blue Ridge Parkway, VA, 20th c.
(VMHC 1999.17.851)

Northern Virginia & The First Trans-Atlantic Telephone Communication between Arlington, VA and Paris, France

Ring ring! In 1915, the first Trans-Atlantic (across the Atlantic Ocean) telephone communication happened between Arlington, VA and Paris, France. This is a reminder that Virginia is an important part of United States history, but also the history of the world. How do you think the ability to call people across the ocean change people's lives and jobs?

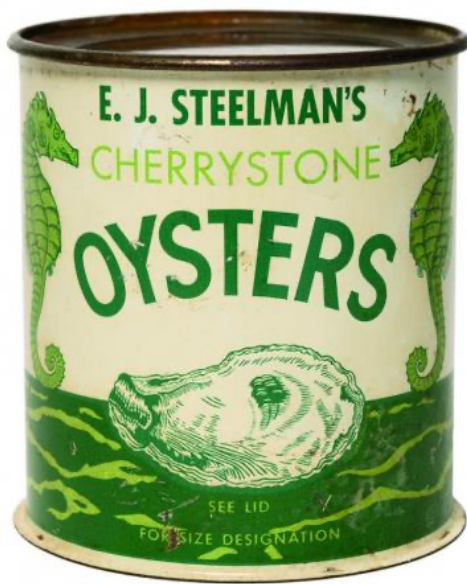


First Transatlantic Telephone Call, 1915
(VMHC 2002.299)

BRAINSTORM: What has been an important moment in your life?

Story 2 | Geographical Feature

Geography has a large impact on how people live – individuals that live in a city will have different resources than those in the country. The same is true for people that live by the water vs. the mountains.



Tidewater & Oysters

The Tidewater, or Coastal Plain, is notable for centering its coastal identity through fishing and shipping economies, as well as a large tourism market! Oysters are one food with a long history. Long before English colonists arrived in Virginia, American Indians relied on oysters for food. When English colonists arrived, oysters also quickly became part of their diet. By the 1800s, canning technology made it possible for oysters to be packaged and shipped throughout the country. Today, Virginia must actively work to conserve and regrow the oyster population that has been lessened by centuries of demand.

E. J. Steelman's Cherrystone Oysters can, 20th c.
(VMHC 2004.362.2)

Southwest & Coal

Southwest Virginia is known for mountains, music, and mining. In 1872, the discovery of large, high-quality coal fields transformed southwest Virginia. Steam locomotives—powered by coal—carried the products of the mines to Norfolk and Newport News for export worldwide. People flocked to this region and companies set up towns where employees lived. However, coal mining is extremely dangerous. Hazards include suffocation, gas poisoning, roof collapse, gas explosions, and dangerous diseases such as black lung. This, in combination with changing forms of energy, has put the coal industry into decline.



Coal Mining Helmet, 20th c.
(VMHC 1991.24.3)

BRAINSTORM: Where do you live? How does this impact the jobs or activities available to you?

Story 3 | Cultural Story

Can you define culture? Definitions for the term may vary; however, broadly speaking, culture is a term that refers to the behaviors & beliefs of a certain group of people. Food and music are often considered ways we can understand culture, because they vary between places, people, and age groups.

Tidewater & Pamunkey Pottery

Indigenous Virginians in the Tidewater region traditionally created pottery using a coil method – laying coils on top of one another before pinching them together to create a solid wall. The surface would then be smoothed out and decorated by creating textures with fabric, cord, or net. Archaeologists can trace different Native communities through time and place by observing changes in pottery, housing, or tools between groups. Today, descendants connect to the past through learning these pottery traditions.



Ceramic Bowl, about 1000
(Courtesy of Virginia Department of Historic Resources)

Shenandoah Valley & German Immigrants

Beginning in the 18th century, European settlers began to move further westward into Virginia. The initial waves of settlers were mostly made up of Scottish, Irish, and German immigrants. By the early 19th century as many as three quarters of the population of the northern part of the Valley had German ancestors. Some of them, like the Henkel family, found ways to preserve their culture. The Henkel family started a printing business that focused on materials printed in German, like this children's book.



UND Bilder Buch, ABC and Picture Book, 1817
(VMHC Rare PF 3114 H38 1817)

BRAINSTORM: Think about the objects you use every day. What will people in the future be able to learn about you from the foods you eat, the music you listen to, or the books you read?

Story 4 | Important Person

History is made up of people. They create the objects & events we learn about. Some are famous and some are less so – but all are important to understanding the different places and moments in time.



Southwest & Laura Lu Scherer Copenhaver

Laura Lu Scherer Copenhaver of Marion dedicated her life to educational, economic, and spiritual uplift for communities in southwest Virginia. In 1916, she founded Rosemont Industries, a craft collective that produced household items—including hooked rugs, bed coverings, and furniture—based on traditional Appalachian designs. By using local artisans and raw materials (such as sheep's wool), Copenhaver pioneered a business model that provided much-needed economic opportunities for rural areas that were often impoverished and underserved by state resources, as well as an avenue for women to use their traditionally undervalued skills to empower themselves & their community.

Rosemont, Rosemont Industries catalog, 1970
(VMHC TT699 .R81 1970)

Central & Arthur Ashe

Arthur Ashe was a tennis champion from Richmond, Virginia. During high school he moved to Missouri in order to train on courts that were not as strictly segregated. Ultimately, Arthur Ashe became the number one tennis player in the world, and became the first African American to win the men's singles championship at Wimbledon. As an adult he spent his life mentoring youth and speaking out against racism.



Arthur Ashe Tennis Equipment, 20th c.
(VMHC 2001.556, 2005.326.1-3, 2005.326.5)

BRAINSTORM: Who is someone you remember learning about & considered important? Why?

STEP 3. *Creating YOUR Commonwealth*

Now it is your turn! After reading the examples above, choose your own community. What is it?

Think through each of the categories above and pick one image or object to represent an important moment in history, a fact about the geography, information about culture, and a person that you think are related to your community. See below for tips & tricks to get started.

LIST OF RESOURCES, TIPS & TRICKS:

- **IDEA 1:** Look at maps of a place over time and see what has changed and why.
- **IDEA 2:** Visit local museums or their websites to see what they think is important to talk about.
- **IDEA 3:** Visit monuments and public art in your town to see what someone thought was worth remembering. Do you agree?
- **IDEA 4:** Go to a festival and learn about different cultures.
- **IDEA 5:** Choose a big moment in time, like the Civil War or the Civil Rights Movement. How can you find information about what was happening in your town at that time?
- **IDEA 6:** Talk to people who have lived in your town a long time and see what they think is important to know!
- **IDEA 7:** Look up highway markers in your area. Highway markers are put up to draw attention to a place where something important happened. You can find a list of them here: <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/programs/highway-markers/>
- **IDEA 8:** Look at the names of places in Virginia and see how many are named after other communities. For example – Chesapeake Bay uses the Algonquian word “Chesapeake” - which refers to a village at a river. And, Richmond is named after a place back in England!