At work in the

Center sets out to prove that business is a serious business.

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 Reynolds 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-

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

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 company'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-
Work
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tions of business history. The so-
ciety, however, is unique in hav-
ing 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 James-
town and the Southern insurrec-
tion.

A century ago, nine of 10 Vir-
ginians 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 popula-
tion shift than by collecting busi-
ness 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 Rob-
ins and Richard H. Reynolds, who
built large international corpora-
tions?

Virginia has been home to
more than 70 Fortune 500 compa-
ies, 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-
bility giving in Richmond and be-
yond, Bryan said.

Notable collections

The society already houses
more than 50 major collections of
business records in addition to ar-
chives as modest as a single busi-
ness ledger book. The records are
kept in acid-free containers in the
new wing’s fourth floor. The cen-
ter has a paper-conservation labo-
ratory for records preservation.

Sharing archival space with Rey-
nolds Metals’ records are the major
collections of Best Products, Bas-
kevill and Son, Overnite Transpor-
tation, Miller & Rhoads, Thalhims-
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 restric-
tions that may be placed on access
d by a donor, according to Paul Le-
vengood, program coordinator for
the business history center.

A major undertaking of the cen-
ter’s staff has been to consult with
companies about what sort of
things are of historical value that
they should keep, Levengood said.
Some businesses have rec-
cords-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,
Levengood said. It would wel-
comes material from small busi-
nesses, particularly those owned
by women or minorities. It is seek-
ning to build a collection that
represents a cross-section of Vir-
ginia 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 re-
searchers to determine how soci-
ety and business was changing
during a business’ lifetime.

Bryan said one of the center’s
big challenges will be to avoid be-
ing overwhelmed by material. An-
other challenge is acquiring mat-
erial 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 le-
gal 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 begin-
ing to get the word out to re-
searchers about the information
available at the center.

“In the future,” Bryan said, “I
would like to see [the center] rec-
ognized as major business history
center, one that would draw na-
tional attention” and serve as a
model for other states.

From FDR to Edison, files offer some gems

Already, the new Reynolds Center for Virginia
Business History has plenty of material that could in-
terest 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 proc-
ess patented by Edison for making metal foils by an
electrolytic method. Reynolds wants to know if Edi-
son 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 pre-
fers 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 radia-
tors.