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## Filling in the gaps

### Library to launch tool for researching African-American history

by Janet Rems | Special to the Times

The Virginia Room in the City of Fairfax Regional Library is preparing to make available an invaluable tool for researching African-American history and genealogy.

Suzanne Levy, Virginia Room librarian, expects this new and extensive annotated bibliography of the library's regional and general African-American materials will be fully available in the spring. When complete, the bibliography will be accessible at both the Virginia Room and online via the Fairfax County Public Library's Web site.

"We're quickly becoming one of the larger African-American resources [in Virginia] outside of Richmond," said Fairfax City resident Maddy McCoy, 38, a historic preservationist, genealogist, compiler of the Slavery Inventory Database for Fairfax County and a Virginia Room volunteer.

The collection is not solely academic, but more broad-based and surprisingly rich, said Levy, 62, a Fairfax resident. Levy added she keeps finding new things to add to the collection, "often when just shelving books or looking for another title."

The annotations, which give quick summaries for each item, make the bibliography particularly user-friendly, Levy said.

Organized in one place into easy-to-use categories, the bibliography will make existing but dispersed materials once "hidden in plain sight" much more accessible, McCoy said.

"It was a wild goose chase," McCoy explained. "This pulls all the materials together with a guide to point you to those places."

The bibliography starts with a guide to materials for tracing African-American ancestry and segues into materials for studying the history of slavery, both general and regional.

A "big section," these include first-hand slave narratives -- including the slave families of Thomas Jefferson -- as well as materials on slave insurrections, the Underground Railroad and escapes from slavery.

Civil War materials are another major category, followed by important materials from the post-Civil War period, including revealing late 19th century Virginia School Reports and school board records, written when segregation of the races was the law.

The content of these reports are often "horrifying" to read, according to McCoy, but provide insights into a period when a number of important African-American communities and institutions like churches and fraternal groups --which still exist in Fairfax County -- were founded.

Materials for studying Fairfax County's particular African-American history and that of nearby jurisdictions like Loudoun County and Alexandria may be found in another major bibliography category. Though it mostly consists of post-Civil War materials, it runs from the 1600s to today.

In addition to the usual historic materials, "golden nuggets" of information can be found in resources cited in

every category, McCoy said.

For example, lists of slaves transported to New Orleans for sale, with identifiable names and from ships' records dated 1808 to 1860, may be found in Ralph Clayton's book, "Cash for Blood."

There also are transcripts of probate records; lists of African-American Civil War-era troops on both sides; materials on the Buffalo Soldiers; information on African-American office holders; and first-hand accounts in various memoirs.

"It's incredible what we have," said McCoy, noting "there's vast amounts of sociology as well as history."

African-American history and genealogy is a fairly new discipline, McCoy said. "It was previously thought that the records were not there. They are there, but we are learning how to decipher them."

Already a "super-size collection," she expects grants from Exxon-Mobil and Friends of the Virginia Room to expand the materials even more. Most recently, for example, Exxon-Mobil grant money was used to augment the collection with the purchase of a major encyclopedia of Africa-American history.

McCoy will be available by appointment to help patrons interested in exploring their family histories or learning more about African-American history.

While the bibliography will be online, much of the materials are not yet digitized and need to be used on site.

McCoy noted that she is already working with historian Terry Buckalew, the head of a historical research consultancy in Falls Church, where he lives. He is in the first phase of a project to research Northern Virginia's slave insurrection history.

"I've been working with him on very local stories never told, never before researched," she said.

Buckalew, 60, who moved to the area last summer from Philadelphia after his wife was hired as the top fundraising executive at Gallaudet University, said his project was inspired by his reading of local history. Looking for something to develop into a film treatment for a documentary, almost immediately, he found an "amazing" local story.

Known as the "Spring Bank confrontation," the 1840 incident involved a confrontation between a county slave patrol and a group of local slaves that has been called "the most renowned patrol attack by slaves in the history of the United States."

The history of Northern Virginia Buckalew discovered, is "rich" with such stories, full of vivid characters and "lots of lessons to be learned."

Buckalew said he is especially excited by the stories of how, hundreds of years before the Civil War, African-Americans were "liberating themselves."

Working with the Virginia Room and Levy and McCoy has been a "wonderful experience," said Buckalew, who has a master's degree in history and previously consulted on a PBS "American Experience" documentary on the civil rights movement in antebellum Philadelphia.

Working with McCoy, he kept bumping into other stories, which he put in a file. "Soon I realized it was a pretty big file," said Buckalew, who hopes to use this material not only in a film but also in two books, one written for adults the other aimed at middle-schoolers.

He also expects to shortly have a Web site to disseminate the stories he collects.

Describing her as "Fairfax County's Sherlock Holmes," McCoy, Buckalew enthused, "is much more than a genealogist or archivist, she's an activist. She's able to pull together all the threads, threads you would not think of. ... She weaves raw information into stories that have been lost to history."

Levy, the Virginia Room's "guru," and her other staff, according to Buckalew, are likewise, "sophisticated and deeply knowledgeable thinkers." Always intellectually honest, they are excellent teachers, too.

They "not only know where the bodies are buried they also know which ones are worth digging up."

"Suzanne Levy embodies all these qualities," he said, "and leads by example and is always available for that consultation that ends with that stare over her glasses that makes you feel you just received the best advice available."

While the Virginia Room offers lots of invaluable written materials, for Buckalew, "it's the people," unfailingly generous with their time, who make it such an invaluable resource. "Suzanne," he said, "has collected quite a team."