



Virginia  
Folklife  
Program



## The Virginia Folklife Program

The Virginia Folklife Program serves to **document and interpret** traditional cultures in the Commonwealth; to **advance the understanding** of traditional culture **through public presentations** of folklife; and to **reinforce** Virginia's folk traditions by providing support services to traditional artists.

By developing and promoting projects to document and present folklife throughout the Commonwealth, the Virginia Folklife Program strives to conserve the resources of cultural diversity that make life in Virginia a unique, exciting and meaningful adventure.



Kyle Creed, master fiddler in the "Old Time" style of traditional stringband music, at the Galax Fiddlers' Convention in 1978. Photo by Terry Eiler, courtesy American Folklife Center.

## Folklife in Virginia

Historically, Virginia has played a crucial role in the emergence and dissemination of American folklife. From the cultural interchange between Native Americans, African-Americans and European settlers in Virginia in the 17th and 18th centuries came traditions now regarded as typical of Tidewater folk culture. And in the 18th and 19th centuries other settlers moved into the Valley of Virginia from farther north, bringing folkways which would eventually become characteristic of the Upland South.



At quilting bees such as this one at the Meadows of Dan, VA, women gather to quilt the patchwork tops they have already pieced together—a special occasion that combines material tradition and social custom. Photo by Lyntha Eiler, courtesy American Folklife Center.

Since the colonial era, immigrants from all corners of the globe have settled in Virginia and begun the two-way process of adapting to a new social environment while sustaining a distinct cultural identity. Today, Virginians all over the Commonwealth—rural and urban, young and old, and of all cultural and ethnic heritages—continue to evolve, adapt, and invent folk traditions as aesthetic ways of giving form to values and shaping a meaningful existence from experience.

Folklife in Virginia is also marked by distinctive regional variation. Traditional maritime occupations lend a unique character to the folklife of communities on the Eastern Shore and the Bay; folklife in Northern Virginia reflects the region's ethnic diversity and urban environs; an agricultural economy characterizes folklife in the Piedmont, the Southside, the Valley and the mountains of western Virginia, but differences in environment and social history give distinct qualities to the traditions of each area.

## What is Folklife?

Folklife refers to expressive and material traditions that are passed along by word of mouth or learned informally. Folk traditions are deeply rooted in the history, experience, and identity of groups that share some common bond as members of a family or community, or as members of a regional, ethnic, religious, or occupational group.

Folk crafts and folk art, customs, foodways, folksongs, folktales, traditional music and dance — these are a few examples of folk traditions. But folklife includes the living processes as well as the ‘things’ of tradition. Folklife is best understood in terms of the community context in which it lives, the local aesthetic that shapes it, and the meaning it acquires in the social life of those individuals and groups that perpetuate it.



In Tidewater Virginia, on the Bay and the Eastern Shore, many people wrest a living from the coastal waters using traditional methods to harvest crabs and oysters, or like Captain Joe Taylor of Reedville, above, by trapping herring and shad in pound nets. Photo by Starke Jett.

Traditional foodways are an essential and persistent component of any group's sense of identity. At their store in Falls Church, Panos and Metaxia Dousikos nourish the folklife of the local Greek-American community by providing the ingredients for traditional recipes, and by displaying images and icons of a shared identity. Photo by Margaret Yocom, courtesy Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution.



## Objectives of the Virginia Folklife Program

- To document the rich folklife of Virginia
- To initiate grassroots cultural programs, including performances, exhibits, and media projects
- To provide assistance to community groups interested in developing their own folklife projects or programs
- To meet the needs of Virginia's folk craftspeople and performers
- To promote public awareness and appreciation of folklife in Virginia

## Public Services of the Virginia Folklife Program

The Coordinator of the Virginia Folklife Program is available to the public as an **educational resource**, offering workshops, lectures, seminars, and multi-media presentations on aspects of folklife research and Virginia folk traditions.

The Coordinator also serves as a **consultant** for state organizations, local agencies, community groups and individuals who are interested in starting their own projects to document or present the folklife of Virginia.

You are invited to contact the folklife coordinator . . .

- If you want to **develop a project** dealing with folklife
- If you need advice on **writing a grant** to support a folklife program or project
- If you want training or assistance in **conducting field research** to identify and document traditional artists and performers
- If you would like guidance in devising formats for **presenting folklife** in public contexts
- If you **are a traditional performer**, artist, or craftsperson, or if you know folk artists who might be interested in participating in the Virginia Folklife Program

**Educational materials and media products**—such as teaching kits, exhibits and audiotape, videotape, and slide-tape productions—resulting from the Virginia Folklife Program's own field research will be made available to schools, and other civic, public and private organizations.



Weaving rugs from scraps of material at her loom, Thelma Melton of Coal Creek, Virginia, perpetuates an inherited tradition that is both artistic and functional. Photo by Lyntha Eiler, courtesy of the American Folklife Center.



The economic basis of life for many generations of Virginians, tobacco farming has given rise to a body of occupational skills and crafts, and provided a social setting for a variety of customs and expressive traditions. Photo by Carl Fleischauer, courtesy of the American Folklife Center.

### VIRGINIA FOLKLIFE PROGRAM

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