

2008

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Recommended Citation

Sherwood, R. (2008). Germanna's Treasure Trove of History: A Journey of Discovery. *Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges*, 13 (1). Retrieved from <https://commons.vccs.edu/inquiry/vol13/iss1/6>

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Germanna's Treasure Trove of History: A Journey of Discovery

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By Rob Sherwood

If you heard that there was an Enchanted Castle and a 300-year-old fort called Fort Germanna in some woods across the street from your community college, would you want to go to see them? Well, of course! This was my situation when I began working as an English instructor at Germanna Community College (GCC)'s Locust Grove Campus in the fall of 1993. At that time, like almost all the faculty, staff, and students, I had no idea of the rich and fascinating local history of our campus – or that it would soon become my overriding passion, lead to many student activities, and blossom into an ongoing series of events with local community groups that continues to flourish today. Perhaps this learning journey may serve to encourage other campuses in the VCCS to embrace more fully their own local history – as a source of pride, passion, and community involvement.

First Journey

In the spring of 1994, I was ready for my journey across the road into what I had learned was a protected 70-acre site owned by the Commonwealth and administered by the University of Mary Washington. (As you may know, Germanna's Locust Grove campus is halfway between Culpeper and Fredericksburg on Route 3, at the easternmost point of Orange County.) I had already done much research on Germanna history in our library, poured over scrapbooks of articles, and met Archaeologist Doug Sanford, who had excavated the site from 1985 to 1991. I also had obtained permission to enter the site before I set out on a fine April afternoon.

I followed Germanna Highway west a quarter mile to the Germanna Bridge where I gazed down at the lush Rapidan River with its thick, greening banks of oaks, maples, and poplars. I could see down to my left a parking area for a boat landing that covered the foundation of an elaborate three-story 18th century grist and saw mill built by Virginia's most famous colonial governor, Alexander

Spotswood. Though brash and opportunistic, Spotswood, who served from 1710 to 1722, was a man of vision and uncommon ability who left his mark throughout the Commonwealth and most especially on Germanna.

Cars whooshed past as I turned, crossed the four-lane road, and entered the tangled undergrowth of dark woods. I found a path along the river that led me past remnants of Civil War trenches and sentry pits that once guarded the strategic Germanna Ford, a place where the river bottom was smooth and once men, beasts, and wagons could cross when the river was low in summer. This river crossing had been used since Indian times and was no doubt a factor in Spotswood's interest in the area, along with rumors of silver ore in the vicinity.

The Germanna Ford had also been at a strategic location in the Civil War – a major river crossing on what was then called the German Rolling Road. Many skirmishes were fought at Germanna, and four Civil War campaigns included large scale crossings at the ford: Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Mine Run, and the Wilderness.

Ahead of me, the path led to a narrow stone bridge that spanned a small stream. This pedestrian bridge was built in the 1930s by the Colonial Dames of Virginia to encourage motorists to stroll in from the road for a drink from a famed spring just to the other side, the old Spotswood Spring. According to the 1732 diary of William Byrd II, *A Progress to the Mines*, which records his visit to Colonel Spotswood at Germanna, this spring once had a fountain spouting out of it and thus the little stream was called Fountain Run. The area had become overgrown and a bit forlorn, so I could just make out the date of 1932 on a rusted metal sign over the spring, the date the Colonial Dames rehabilitated the spring.

An old roadbed led away from the spring to a clear area on the river bank; this was the landing once used by the Germanna ferry, established in 1724 some 150 yards downriver from the ford, which employed a pull rope to cross the Rapidan. I followed the curving roadbed uphill past more Civil War sentry pits. As I reached level ground, I continued through a cedar thicket and saw numerous mounds; these, I was to soon learn, held the foundations of the early 18th century community of Germanna: a tavern, a forge, and homes.

Site of Enchanted Castle

Abruptly the roadbed opened into an open grassy area, and I approached a cabin that had been transported to the site in the 1980s as part of the excavation work. Steps led up a seven-foot-high terrace, part of the landscaping done by Spotswood. I passed by several millstones from Spotswood's Mill set in the ground outside the cabin.

Fifty yards behind the cabin were the remnants of a large archaeological dig, the site of Spotswood's elaborate Georgian-style retirement mansion. This lavish home, the centerpiece of Spotswood's large plantation at Germanna, was built in the 1720s and became his primary residence when he returned from a five-year trip to England in 1730. He lived there until his death in 1740.

Byrd's *A Progress to the Mines* details his visit to Spotswood to learn about the retired governor's successful foray into iron-making. We have this sentence in the diary to thank for the name given the mansion, Enchanted Castle, and for our understanding of its proximity to Fort Germanna: "This famous town [Germanna, in 1732] consists of Colonel Spotswood's enchanted castle on one side of the street and a baker's dozen of ruinous tenements on the other, where so many German families had dwelt some years ago" (132).

The excavation revealed that the mansion was a whopping 40 feet by 90 feet, extravagant by any standards, especially as a home built on the edge of the Virginia wilderness. The house may have been three stories high and was built mostly of stone and brick. It featured a four-sided cloverleaf central fireplace that opened into four hearths on the first two floors. The archaeological remains, once carefully reconstructed, revealed many outbuildings connected by columned walkways.

One of these buildings was a kitchen that featured a large circle of bricks built into the ground that may have held a hot-tub-sized vat for brewing beer. There was also an outbuilding that may have been used as the courthouse. It had slabs of slate around its interior along the floor, just one of many unusual building techniques used at the Enchanted Castle. During the excavation, many pieces of well-carved sandstone were found in scattered piles, raising questions about their making. Another mystery was the purpose of a seven-foot-high underground vaulted stone passageway that led some 32 feet away from the house. It was easy to imagine the way this castle would have intrigued the Germanna community growing up around it. Like many early 18th century homes, the Enchanted Castle burned down. One theory is that soldering being used to install a new roof caused the fire that destroyed most of the building around 1750, only ten years after Spotswood's death (Barile 79).

The excavation of this site, which lasted from 1985 to 1991, cost several million dollars. Shovel-test pits revealed the site only days before it was slated to be bulldozed by developers who were building the Governor Spotswood Estates (which now partially encircles the site). A coalition of groups, including Germanna Community College and the Germanna Foundation, was able to save the site just in time.

What remained from all these years of archaeological travail? There was a shed once used to house artifacts and a large area covered with black plastic and tree branches. Under the plastic were the painstakingly uncovered walls, foundations, and structures the excavation had unearthed, only some 55 percent of the site. Truckloads of sand had also been used in an effort to preserve the work until some future time when the excavation could be resumed or preserved in a suitable manner for public viewing.

Fort Germanna and the First Germanna Colony of 1714

There was no sign of a fort, but I had learned that, at this spot in 1714, Governor Spotswood settled a colony of 42 German immigrants who eventually formed thirteen families, the First Germanna Colony. Because Spotswood paid off the £150 debt this group owed the captain of their ship, they were contracted to work for Spotswood for twelve days a year for four years. This group of immigrants had left their homes in towns around Siegen, Germany, the year before; they had been accompanied by a 70-year old minister of the protestant German Reformed faith, Reverend John Henry Hager, to seek better economic circumstances in the New World. They were part of the first wave of German immigration to the colonies.

Spotswood went to great lengths to sponsor this colonization experiment both with his own money and, where possible, at public expense. Part of this effort included passing an act in 1714 that specified that the colonists would owe no taxes for seven years (Blankenbaker). Furthermore, that this group was from a mining region in Germany was not lost on Spotswood. He wrote the Lord Commissioners of Trade in London a letter dated July 21, 1714 that outlined his plans to put them to work finding the supposed silver ore in the area around the fort (*Official Letters of Spotswood 2: 70*). It is apparent that Spotswood never got the green light from the Lords of Trade to mine silver, and, alas, no silver ore seems to have been discovered. Evidence of the Germans having looked for ore, however, has been found recently, in April 2005, just east of the Locust Grove Campus, where some dozen mounds of white quartz boulders (the rock known to yield metallic ores) have been located.

Spotswood also took care of the religious needs of the German Protestants by promulgating an act in 1714 that established the Parish of St. George, allowing services in German and exempt from the tithe to the Anglican Church (*Acts of Assembly*),

For four years, the First Germanna Colony lived at the fort, cleared land, farmed, hunted, raised livestock, and occasionally searched for silver. They attended daily church services in their native tongue given in the fort's central

blockhouse, establishing Germanna as the site of the first German Reformed Church in America. Then, in early 1719, their contract with Spotswood fulfilled, they bought a 1805-acre parcel of land at what is now C. M. Crockett County Park in lower Fauquier County and moved onto family farm plots that came to be called German Town (*Germanna Record* 2: 20-21).

Students Catch the Spirit

After that first visit, I began to talk about my discoveries with my classes, always beginning with the magic words “Enchanted Castle” and “Fort Germanna.” Students in my English 111 and 112 classes began to choose Germanna history as the topic of their research papers, and in the fall of 1997, we formed a club devoted to the discoveries we were making, the Fort Germanna History Club. One of the club’s projects was to launch a website in spring 1998 that featured student essays on Germanna history. This site has now migrated to www.germanna.edu/lgc_history.

The club also began sponsoring the Germanna Historical Legacy Series (GHLS), a monthly series of presentations by Germanna history experts that had several presentations in 1999, and then monthly presentations from fall 2002 to the present. So far, through May 2007, there have been 25 presentations with an average attendance of 80. The series has highlighted a distinguished group of experts on Germanna history, some of whom have given several presentations. Each presentation has used slides or PowerPoint and has been videotaped, so we have made DVD copies of the presentations, providing a fast and entertaining way to learn about Germanna history. In addition to being available at the Locust Grove library, these DVDs are available to the public for a donation.

GCC student Ana Schramm wrote the following in an email after a presentation she attended in fall 2006:

I really did not know so much history was hiding in either side of Route 3, and under Germanna Community College. It is really amazing to know that the college is on top of Civil War trenches, and that in the forest next to the parking lot are the remnants of another life so different to our lives today.... Being from Spain with a history so different to American history, it is very interesting to me to know that across the street are sacred Indian burial grounds, and the ruins of German pioneers' way of life.

Another student, Judy Hahn, wrote this reaction to a GHLS presentation on 21 September 2006:

The area also felt the effects of the Civil War...which you can still make out today. . . . Some of the worst fighting took place in the battles of

Stevensburg, Wilderness, Chancellorsville, and Culpeper. With all these battles, supplies were sent wherever the men were and some passed over Germanna Ford. If you visit that area today, the “Ford” is still discernable. The land has seen more history than we can catalog going back centuries, and the events that shaped and molded the area are forever etched in the land for our archaeologists to discover.

Students have also written articles for publicity, made videos of walking tours and presentations, volunteered at the Germanna Foundation, helped to make maps of history sites, and organized history fundraisers. All of these efforts have raised awareness among students, staff, faculty, and local residents of the rich legacy of history at and around the Locust Grove Campus of GCC – and its relevance to and lessons about today’s world.

Success Breeds Imitation

The enterprising character of the 1714 Germanna Colony encouraged Spotswood to settle a second colony of German immigrants at Germanna in 1717. All the 80 or so members of this second colony were Lutherans from the Palatinate and Baden/Württemberg, regions in southern Germany that had been ravaged by religious persecution and war. This Second Germanna Colony was procured for Spotswood by the ne’er-do-well Captain Andrew Tarbett of the ship *Captain Scott* in a process of collusion that detoured the ship from its intended destination of Philadelphia to Tappahannock, Virginia, on the lower Rappahannock. This does show, however, how much Spotswood valued populating his holdings with skilled Germans. The group was settled on 400-acre family farm plots just across the river from Fort Germanna. To work off their ocean crossing debt to Spotswood, they spent their workdays harvesting naval stores to be shipped to England: tar, pitch, hemp for rope, and trees for masts. They also brought German grape stock with them and were able to begin the first successful viticulture in Virginia.

Beginning in the GHLS of 2003 and continuing for a span of four annual presentations, Thom Faircloth, president of the Germanna Foundation, has proposed a thesis with important national significance about the way Governor Spotswood sponsored the two Germanna colonies. In both these ventures, Faircloth asserts, Spotswood was trying something new. Instead of granting the rich Tidewater planters large patents of forests to be cleared by slaves to grow more tobacco, he was “seating” poor, land-hungry colonists in the new lands opening up in Virginia’s Piedmont. Spotswood wanted to sponsor “small farmers” who would stay on the land, populate it, and form permanent settlements. Germanna, then, became one of the first Virginia settlements of landless immigrants willing to farm

small plots, a pattern of land settlement now familiar to us all in the subsequent westward expansion across America.

Faircloth argues that the unique and far-sighted manner in which Governor Spotswood located these two colonies of German immigrants at this site opened a new chapter in the way immigrants groups were settled in America. In a complex and far-seeing way, Spotswood was experimenting with what would be the first of a new pattern of settlement of the colonies: settling groups of skilled immigrants on large plots of land that they would “civilize.” The success of these two colonies can be ascribed to a set of important values, values at the heart of the American immigrant experience:

- communal values to insure a colony's survival and ultimate success;
- religious tolerance for attracting useful immigrants (Spotswood gave the Germans their own German-speaking Protestant parish);
- accommodation with prevailing culture (German and English);
- good skills and the knack for improvisation amidst difficulty, travail, and the wilderness; and
- ability to forge an “American character” from adversity and diversity (Faircloth).

As he continues research to support this thesis, Faircloth would like to write a comprehensive survey of Germanna history that details and updates the full record of what is now known about the Germanna story. He asserts that the notes he has used for his four sequential GHLS presentations will comprise the outline for the book.

Evidence for the Site of Fort Germanna

Dr. Doug Sanford, who excavated the Enchanted Castle from 1985 to 1991, uncovered tantalizing evidence that could lead to discovering the position of the five outer walls of the 1714 fort. Late in the 1991 season, holes thought to be from Fort Germanna's palisaded walls were found in a clay substratum of the Enchanted Castle excavation, suggesting that both these structures overlapped. As we have seen in William Byrd's diary, the Enchanted Castle is right across a small street from “a baker's dozen of ruinous tenements...where so many German families had dwelt some years ago.” One day, when it can be done, this enticing archaeological clue will be tested—perhaps with ground penetrating radar or a similar device called a magnetometer—and the exact location of Fort Germanna will be determined.

The Germanna Foundation

No group has done more to research, honor, and preserve the Germanna historical legacy than the Germanna Foundation, a nonprofit group of descendants of the two Germanna colonies. In fact, the Locust Grove Campus of GCC owes its existence to this group. Its 100-acre site was donated to the state in 1969 by the group, whose full name is Memorial Foundation of the Germanna Colonies in Virginia, Inc. In giving the site to the state, the Germanna Foundation only had one request: that the college be named Germanna. One estimate gives the number of descendants alive today from the two Germanna colonies at 2.3 million, and the Germanna Foundation is the group that knits them together. With a membership of around 2,500, the Germanna Foundation, according to its website, was founded in 1956 “to preserve and make known the history and culture of the several Germanna Colonies, their operations under the patronage of Alexander Spotswood, his residence and activities at Germanna and in the surrounding area.”

Just off the drive of Locust Grove Campus is the Brawdus Martin Germanna Visitors Center, which houses a museum, a library, and the offices of the Germanna Foundation. Completed in 2001, this distinctive pentagonal building known as the Visitors Center attracts tourists interested in Germanna history, genealogy, and Civil War history. The third Sunday in July is Germanna Reunion weekend, when three days are packed with bus tours to Germanna history sites, walking tours, history talks, book and memorabilia sales, a banquet, an auction, and special meetings within the Germanna families. In the summer of 2006, the Germanna Foundation celebrated its 50th anniversary with a gala celebration.

Many of these reunion activities occur at the college, which enjoys a close relationship with the Germanna Foundation. The two groups share facilities and research materials, collaborate on history projects, and, of course, share a common interest in the Germanna legacy.

The Germanna Foundation also owns 176 acres that surround the Locust Grove Campus south of Route 3. Both the 100 acres of the campus, itself heavily wooded, and the foundation’s land, virtually all woods, are crisscrossed by four Civil War trench lines as well as by a network of history, nature, and fitness trails – and many historical sites.

Other Historical Features

Just to the left of the entrance to the campus, a Civil War breastwork trench rises almost chest high and leads right up to the main building. Just outside the campus library are cannon pits whose ordinance would have been trained on the Germanna

Ford only a quarter-mile away. On the other side of the main building of the campus is a continuation of this main breastwork trench, which bisected the entire horseshoe peninsula of Germanna, a distance of about a mile. About 150 yards to the east of this trench and an equal distance off the faculty parking lot into the woods is the well-preserved stone foundation of a large house thought to date to 1734. The basement fireplace is of good workmanship and is still intact, as is an unusual corner entranceway into the basement. Dozens of large, finely cut stone pieces litter the site whose quarried stone is thought by Dr. Kerri Barile, an archaeologist with a cultural preservation business in Fredericksburg, to be from the same quarry as that used by Spotswood to build the Enchanted Castle.

In January 2006, a second foundation was discovered by Jeff Yowell, the groundskeeper at GCC (and himself a Germanna descendant), on Germanna Foundation property to the east of the campus soccer field. This foundation, which is smaller than the one off the faculty parking lot, features similar examples of well-hewn stonework. Both of these sites will require full excavations to explore their mysteries.

Just behind the Brawdus Martin Germanna Visitors Center is a striking black granite obelisk flanked by four large inscribed granite markers, the Germanna Foundation Memorial Garden. The obelisk marks the grave of John Spotswood (1725-62) who was Alexander Spotswood's elder son. The four memorial monuments celebrate the accomplishments of two Germanna colonies and the formation of the Germanna Foundation.

A trail into the woods behind the Memorial Garden leads to a small family cemetery bordered by a small rock wall. Here is the gravestone of Dr. Charles Urquhart, the doctor who pronounced President Lincoln's assassin John Wilkes Booth dead in Port Royal, Virginia, on April 26, 1865. Dr. Urquhart was born at Germanna; his parents operated Spotswood's mill, then called the Urquhart Mill, until it was burned down early in the Civil War.

Chimneys survive from the Urquharts' house that was also burned down early in the war; these chimneys are a short walk to the west from the cemetery at a nice spot overlooking the river and the site of the mill.

Right along the bank of the river for a quarter-mile upstream from the mill site are the remnants of the original Mill Race that was dug in the 1720s to supply a steady source of water power for the mill. Then, in the 1820s, under a project begun by President George Washington to improve the navigability of American rivers to the west, the mill race was enlarged into a canal around a stretch of rapids, and it is one of what were thought to be eight such canals on the Rapidan. The

Visitors Center houses several bell hasps found in the river at Germanna that once held bells used to summon a lock keeper to admit boats in and out of the canal.

Right at the mill site, just about fifty yards upriver from the present-day Route 3 Germanna Bridge, piers of two previous bridges can be seen in the river, the 1917 bridge and the 1848 Germanna Bridge that was burned in the Civil War.

In 1990, as the excavation of the Enchanted Castle was underway just across Route 3 from Locust Grove Campus, Ivor Noel Hume, former resident archaeologist of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, called Germanna “the most important eighteenth-century archaeological site in Virginia” (qtd. in Mary Washington College). Dr. William Kelso, chief archaeologist for historic Jamestown, assents: “I have always thought the Fort Germanna/Enchanted Castle site ranks among the most significant historical archaeological sites certainly in Virginia and arguably in the nation.”

Steps into the Future

Needless to say, we at GCC are blessed to have this treasure trove of history right on or just adjacent to our Locust Grove Campus. This history has become a source of pride and a legacy to ponder, question, and research. The woods, the river, and the proximity of wilderness are great blessings, too, especially as development after development now threatens to engulf GCC from Fredericksburg to the east and Culpeper to the west. But the real blessing is the impact this history is having on the minds of students, staff, faculty, and local citizens at and around the Locust Grove Campus.

As we try to bring the past into the present, the enterprise of the Germanna legacy presents intriguing opportunities. Germanna Community College, in alliance with the Commonwealth of Virginia, the University of Mary Washington, the Germanna Foundation, and local community groups, can embark on a series of exciting projects – eventually open to the public – to firmly implant Germanna history on a regional, state-wide, and even national basis. These might include the following:

- Find Fort Germanna, using ground-penetrating radar, and then mount a full-scale excavation.
- Build a replica of Fort Germanna nearby the excavation to show what it looked like.
- Re-open the excavation of the Enchanted Castle site so that it can be completed.
- Preserve the excavation work on the Enchanted Castle for public display.

- Selectively excavate the foundations of other structures—taverns, shops, homes—from the town of Germanna, first county seat of (the old) Spotsylvania County, c. 1722-28. Build replicas nearby as appropriate.
- Set up a walking tour around the Locust Grove Campus and another that goes from the Visitors Center to the Fort Germanna/Enchanted Castle site.
- Excavate and interpret the 1734 colonial ruin off the faculty parking lot, and build a replica of it nearby.
- Start a historical interpretive docent program at GCC.
- Preserve and partially restore sections of the Civil War trenches and gun pits of the Locust Grove Campus.

This learning about the local history at my community college has taken the form of a journey that I share continually with my classes, my colleagues, and my community. Furthermore, this journey continues to gain momentum as more and more students get involved; as more local historians share their insights and ideas; as new history sites continue to be found, explored, and shared; and as college support increases each year.

The historical legacy at the Locust Grove Campus is of great significance to Virginia and should be an inspiration to all those who learn about it. I hope faculty, staff, and administrators at other VCCS campuses derive some encouragement by this article to embark on their own odysseys of discovery of their own campus's affiliations with local history. This year, 2007, as Virginia celebrates its 400th anniversary, we at the Locust Grove Campus of Germanna Community College know that 300 of those years have played out a rich pageant of that history right on and adjacent to our campus!

Rob Sherwood is an instructor of English at Germanna Community College's Locust Grove Campus.

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