

## 23.01.14 Directors Cut Hour

SM Sarah McConnell  
MD Matt Darroch  
JW Jerry Wilson  
RB Chef Ralph Brown  
LF Lauren Francis  
JK Jim Kaste  
AQ Allison Quantz  
BC Bruce Cahoon  
JM Jamal Milner  
SM Sesha Moon  
EM Enjoli Moon

SM

Last year was a doozy. We thank you, our listeners, for tuning in every week across the country. And thank you to the radio stations that air the show. And a special thank you to all the brilliant guests who make time in their busy schedules to talk with us. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today the producers join me to talk about some of their favorite segments from the last year. First up we're hearing from Matt Darroch. Matt was a producer for our sister program, BackStory, before joining With Good Reason in 2020. So Matt, were you able to pick one favorite this year?

MD

I think I'm gonna go with a non-narrated piece I did earlier in the year. It was called the Soulmasters on the show Music As Escape. We heard from our colleague here at Virginia Humanities, Karice Luck-Brimmer, about Jerry Wilson. And Jerry Wilson is the lead singer of a band from the 1960s interracial soul band, and she had told us that he was dying to tell his story. And so we were super intrigued. And he was down in Danville, Virginia. And so, you know, I hopped on a rental car, and drove the the few hours down to Danville, Virginia, which is on the border of North Carolina, in Virginia. You know, the thing I remember most about that interview is, you know, as producers, we talk to a lot of people, but it's not every day that we talked to amazing storytellers. And man, you know, he was such a good storyteller and in the type of storyteller that us producers, you know, dream about. And I had all these questions prepared. And I don't think I ended up using any of the questions.

SM

Right.

MD

I was just kind of swept up in the wake of an amazing storyteller. So this piece is about Jerry Wilson. He's the lead singer of the Soulmasters from the 1960s. He toured the south during the height of

segregation. And this is about all the stories that he had. You know, stories that were, you know, heart wrenching, and really brought together, you know, Black and white people on the dance floor through the power of music.

JW

I started singing when I was 16 years old. At high school I was going to, John M. Langston, we used to have talent shows. And this young lady came and got me one day and said, "Jerry, let's participate in the talent show." And so I said, "Okay. You know, and we did a song called Don't Jump Out a Skillet Into the Fire. That was back in the 60s. And anyway, it went like (sings) "You see those playboys looking at you baby, dressed in fancy clothes? But I'm just a working man baby. And to you is where my money goes? I know you..."

MUSIC

[Recording of Don't Jump Out a Skillet Into the Fire plays)

JW

We got so much applause, so much applause. And I was just flabbergasted by it because we won the talent show. And one day, these white guys came and asked me "How would you feel about singing with some white guys?" And I says, "Well, you know, I never have so, try." You know, when we played at home it was an energy that would feed back and forth, back and forth, for four hours.

JW

John and I used to put on my show, we used to keep the people spellbound. You know, when we, when we would perform. John had a unique voice. Hot, real hot. And I was the one that would deal with the crowd, back and forth. I feel like God had given me a talent to move a crowd. Because when they out there on the floor, I realized they didn't have any worries. Whatever happened, they left it at the door. And they may have went back to it. But on that dance floor you couldn't see it.

JW

The first place we played in Danville was the Rathskeller. And that was the first time we played in a white setting. And John went into the bathroom just before we changed clothes and he wouldn't come out. So I didn't know this was going on. But he was afraid to come out to play before white people. And Wayne went in to talk to him. And I didn't find out till later what happened. But he says, "I never played in front of white people before," he was afraid. But I was looking forward to it. You know, because I knew that we could perform and we were gonna be good. And man, they were they was just, it went off.

JW

I'll tell yah a situation that happened. It was really bad man. I mean, it was really bad. We were playing at North Carolina State. And

it was, it was a fraternity that got us there. But they were mostly athletes. And so we had a valet with us named Otis Garland. And he and I went to the bathroom. And it was this guy in the bathroom. He was really drunk. And he started calling us this and that. And so I said, "Otis, be prepared man, this a big guy." And I said, "we might have to put him on the floor." And so as he was walking towards us, bout five football players came in and said, "Is this guy messing with you guys?" And we said, "No, everything's alright." They said, "No, no, no, he's messing with you." And Otis and I left out the bathroom. But when this guy came out, he didn't have a tooth in his head. They beat him pretty bad, man. And I felt really bad for the guy because he was drunk. I didn't want to see that happen to him.

JW

I enjoyed a mixed crowd more than a segregated crowd because it made me feel like I was doing something. The Soulmasters was my way of saying, "I'm contributing to this whole thing." And John and I used to talk about that a lot. We used to talk about how did they allow Black and white people on the dance floor at the same time. But it was the music, it was the... and it was us getting along, and, and we transferring our energy back to them, and they transferring their energy. I mean, I feel good about how many people we touched in those three years that I played, how many people that can come and tell me a story. It was just, it was just like every day with the Soulmasters was a sunny day. That's the way I feel.

SM

That was Jerry Wilson speaking to producer Matt Darroch about his time with the Soulmasters. We had a lot of fun making features last year. One of my favorites was produced by Lauren Francis last summer. Dozens of our Charlottesville neighbors were celebrating the renaming of a street from Rosser Avenue to the honorary C.H. Brown Way. Reverend Brown and his wife, Angie, had fed the community for years, no questions asked. Now their son, Chef Ralph Brown, is continuing that legacy with his siblings. Here's Lauren Francis with more.

Speaker 1

Corn is in there.

Speaker 2

...Used to drag us to that church every Sunday, Wednesday, Friday. It was prayer night, and Bible study...

RB

Yeah, my parents used to always feed the neighborhood. They shared what they had with people.

LF

That's Chef Ralph Brown.

Speaker 1  
Yeah, this smells good.

RB  
My dad was a very humble man, and he would not have asked for a street to be named after him or anything. He was just doing what he knew. But he was able to come to that neighborhood, build a church, and continue to build houses in that cul de sac until he had built every house in that cul de sac.

Speaker 1  
Hey!

Speaker 3  
So you serving some food up here?

Speaker 1  
Yes, yes. You want baked or fried?

LF  
He's one of the reverend's at the church his father built, the Holy Temple Church of God in Christ. And he keeps his parent's mission going by sharing meals with neighbors.

Speaker 1  
Would you like mashed potatoes and gravy? Okay. Green beans?

Speaker 4  
Yes ma'am.

RB  
They joy of it, my mother... great pies, great biscuits, you know. A great 'tato salad. She could turn around a meal in no time for a huge amount of people. And she must have really had a great sense of satisfaction of putting that much food on the table. Like I said, even into her declining years, she was still, you know, when she prepared her own food, she was always carrying food to the neighborhood. And that's really where we got it from, the whole concept of feeding people.

LF  
This is not to be confused with some nameless, heavily surveyed food distribution program.

RB  
You know, a lot of people think today it's a program, or you know, your church has a feeding program in it. But this evolved out of reality.

LF

People aren't showing up simply because there's food and they're hungry. People show up because trust has been established.

RB

One of the most toughest things that we used to do way back early on, when we got food from the food bank (inaudible), they want you to sign up people. Ascertain as to whether they were low income or not. And you know, that kind of thing. And, and we always kind of ignored that part. Because, you know, hunger knows no boundaries.

LF

The church doesn't ask people to sign up or prove that they're hungry.

RB

We developed a trust from the community over time, that when we show up, we had food. And it made no difference who you were or what your status was. We're going to give food away until it was all gone.

LF

People know that they can go down to the church that C.H. Brown built and be fed with their pride still intact.

RB

So for Charlottesville, we used to pick up 10 to 15,000 pounds of sweet potatoes or potatoes on a single weekend, okay.

LF

How long does it take to distribute 10 to 15,000 pounds of potatoes, one might ask?

RB

We'll get rid of them in the same afternoon. And again, people know you can take as much as you want. Okay. No questions asked. Because hunger knows no barriers. Why would you judge people for taking food. Food is perishable, okay? Nobody throwing their food away.

LF

Now, when congregants go to the white cinderblock neighborhood church, they get there via the honorary C.H. Brown Way.

RB

And they come over to look at this neighborhood, because this is what Angie Brown and C.H. Brown did with their life.

LF

And neighbors know that once inside the church, they'll find Reverend Brown and his siblings serving them yet another delicious meal.

RB

And as a song that we sing in the church, "May the Work I've Done

Speak For Me," okay, "when I'm resting in my grave, may the work I've done speak for me."

Speaker 5  
I appreciate it.

Speaker 1  
You're welcome.

Speaker 5  
Thank you.

Speaker 1  
All right. You need silverware? Okay,

LF  
For With Good Reason, I'm Lauren Francis.

SM  
That was Chef Ralph Brown speaking with Lauren Francis. Lauren joined With Good Reason in March of 2020. In fact, her first day in the office was the same day we all shut down and went home. Lauren likes to say she and the pandemic started at the same time. Here's Lauren with her favorite segment of the year.

SM  
So Lauren, what is your favorite segment from this year? Or could you pick one?

LF  
Sarah, I have so many. But what especially comes to mind is Jim Kaste, who is a professor at William & Mary. And he shared with us that he had his students bring in different items from farmers markets as far south as Florida, and as far north as Maine. And he tested those items for radioactive ingredients from the nuclear bombs test that happened stateside in the 60s. And he found that almost everything is radioactive.

SM  
Oh, he's the one that especially found out honey is hot.

LF  
Exactly, exactly, that honey, more than most other foods, was very dominant in cesium, which is the radioactive, I guess you would say, ingredient from those bombs. I thought that was super interesting. And he also found that especially in southeastern states, further south in Virginia, it was kind of worse.

SM  
Yikes.

LF  
And...

SM  
But it wasn't dangerous, right?

LF  
That's what he said, Sarah, that's what he said. (Laughs)

SM  
What did you especially like about the honey interview?

LF  
Well, for one thing, I think it really exemplifies how while we as human beings try to compartmentalize things, the reality for the earth and the atmosphere is that it remembers in such a way that the honey is hot.

SM  
And his sciency but very human approach to things.

LF  
Very.

SM  
So in a way he's really coming up with new science right there in his classroom with the kids.

LF  
Right. Just having... I mean, I think that's so smart. To have your students, I guess they went home for the holidays, come back with some sort of food item.

SM  
Yeah, and that honey came from a farmers market.

LF  
Right. Right. Because you know, you think about all the medicinal purposes and uses of honey, but it's not safe from what we do to the earth.

SM  
Honey... medicinal, radioactive. Medicinal, radioactive.

LF  
Which one will it be for you today? So let's go ahead and listen to Jim Kaste, How Hot is Your Honey, which originally aired September of 2022.

SM

Jim, you realized one day that neither your students, nor their parents were alive during the years when nuclear bombs were tested above ground. What did you want them to understand about what that testing had done to the environment?

JK

I wanted them to realize that they were brought into a world that was contaminated by radiation from these nuclear weapons tests during the 1950s and the 1960s. And it's everywhere. It's, this, this radiation can be detected on every square meter of the Earth's surface, including the Arctic and Greenland ice caps, in the ocean, on, on mountains everywhere. And so it's really just really, it's very pervasive. And I think most people don't learn about this in high school. And I wanted them to know about this.

SM

When were the tests conducted, and in the U.S., where were the bombs going off?

JK

So the tests were primarily in the very late 1940s, up and through... up into the mid 1960s. And then we had a, an agreement that was made to stop the atmospheric tests in 1963. And in the U.S., the tests started out in the desert southwest, mostly in Nevada and New Mexico. But then, we moved them to the Pacific Ocean because they were getting more and more powerful when we developed the H bomb. And the really big tests we wanted to do we wanted to do outside the continental US. So we went into the Pacific Ocean and went... tested them near the atolls. And the other important thing to know is that a lot of the radiation that we have in the United States is in fact from the Russian tests as well, because of atmospheric transport.

SM

So when these tests were made, let's say the ones that were in the U.S. in the southwest, what sort of fallout or result was detected nearby in people or animals?

JK

Immediately near the tests, one of the most amazing things to me is that people reported tasting metal. And that was the tower, the steel tower that was vaporized. Most of the tests in the southwest were constructed on these huge towers that vaporized when the bomb went off. And then people nearby could taste the metal in their mouth. Sometimes the cattle will be burned, because the fallout would come out and burn sheep, for example. And there are many, many reports of people nearby developing cancer, who lived what's called downwind of the tests.

SM

This is all horrific. But what also fascinates me is, you have taught that a lot of the effects from the fallout from these bomb tests were more prevalent on the east coast of the United States than they were as the fallout drifted across the plains.

JK

Right. So one of the interesting things is that when the bomb goes off, it went off over the desert, where it's obviously very dry. And then that debris drifts towards the east, just with the general prevailing winds, over, you know, the central U.S., which is also kind of dry. But then once the fallout reached the eastern U.S., that's where it rains a lot. And the rainfall, especially thunderstorms, is very effective at scavenging the radiation from the atmosphere and bringing it to the Earth's surface.

SM

So do you think that there were places where the greatest rainfall occurs every year in the United States, where the most radiation fell and got absorbed into the ground?

JK

Well, that's true to an extent. I mean, certainly within about a mile of a test site, I mean, that place is very, very contaminated. But once you get out of the immediate blast zone, and you start to move, let's just say over 100 miles away, then rainfall becomes the major delivery mechanism.

SM

So if the tests were done between the 40s and the 60s and then stopped, is there still any harmful fallout left from all that testing?

JK

Well, again, there are some places where you can't walk at the immediate test site areas. So certainly there's some fallout that came down and contaminated that land to the point where we can't use it for a long, long time. Out, you know, where in the eastern U.S., I would say that most of the radiation has decayed down to the point where it's not dangerous.

SM

Good. You did an interesting experiment. You wanted to show the students how you could detect radiation in the ground, in crops and plants, long after these tests had ended. So you had them bring food samples from their hometowns. Tell me about that experiment, what they brought, and what you did.

JK

Yeah, well, first of all, I had no idea what we were going to find. It was really, it was really just a class project that I thought would be

really interesting. I figured that we would get a sampling of the radiation that's in the food from the 1950s and the 1960s. And I suspected that a small number of the foods that they brought in would have very low trace detectable cesium 137. The students really loved this, they brought in a range of foods, I got apples from New York, and oranges from Florida, and cranberries from Massachusetts. I got a lot of interesting foods that represent a lot of the regions they came from. And we found that more than half of the foods that they brought in had detectable radiation from the nuclear tests. But honey had far more radiation than other foods.

SM

And the detectable radiation you did find wasn't deemed dangerous, right? It was just there.

JK

correct. It's not deemed dangerous. And it's, it's important to keep in mind that we are all radioactive, and the ground is naturally radioactive. And we live in a radioactive environment. But we can detect the specific radiation leftover from the nuclear tests by looking for certain signatures.

SM

Tell me about the test you did on the honey. It astounded you.

JK

It did, and when students... two students brought in honey from, from the eastern U.S, and I did not expect to find a tremendous amount of cesium in the honey. And when I first put the sample on the detector, you know, you can kind of see the data accumulate. And I thought it may have been a mistake. I was so surprised to see the cesium at that level in this honey sample. It was 20 times more than I would have guessed. To the point where I thought that it may have been from a nuclear power plant nearby. So the honey sample that was higher than I thought it would be came from North Carolina, central North Carolina.

SM

I'm amazed that the honey was from a farmer's market.

JK

Yeah, honey is very popular at farmer's markets now. And that's how I did most of my study, is I went around to different farmers markets in, along the eastern U.S. And it's great because honey, honey is a wonderful food. You know, it's thought to be this pure food. And I think that a message of my study is that it's it's hard to have a pure food these days. You can call something organic. Or you can think that your food comes from a very pristine area. But every square meter of Earth's surface, even places that you consider to be pristine, was contaminated by this fallout. And it's still there today.

SM

So what did you do after you realized the honey had a lot? Did you think it was just a one off? Or did you start to think this is a honey thing?

JK

Well, I slept on it, if you will, you know. And then in fact, what I did is I called my friend Andrew Elmore at the University of Maryland. And he's a co-author on the project. And Andrew is an ecosystem scientist. And he's a generally incredible natural scientist. And I just I told him about it, I said, "Hey, I did this project with some of my students. And you know, had them go get food. And we measured it for cesium, which is leftover from the bomb tests. And I found this one honey sample that was just very, very high. And I just wanted to get another scientist's opinion on this." And he said, "You gotta get some more honey and figure out what's going on." And so over the course of about two years, I collected over 120 honey samples.

I got the honey from farmers who can tell me where their hives are, can tell me what kind of plants they think their bees are going to. Over 100 samples from Florida all the way up to Maine. And I was, really decided to focus my study on the eastern United States, because the eastern United States did not see any nuclear weapons tests. And so more or less the distance to the tests were, were all equivalent from Florida to Maine and I can really figure out is this a, you know, is this a North Carolina thing? Or is this a honey thing? Are all the honeys gonna be the same? And what we found was that there was a wide range in the amount of cesium that we saw in the honey. A factor of about 500, which is another very surprising thing. Generally speaking, we found that the honey from the southeastern U.S., from Florida up through Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, those tended to be higher in cesium than the honeys that we collected from Virginia, north towards Maine.

SM

And what is cesium?

JK

Cesium 137 is the radio isotope that is from the nuclear weapons tests.

SM

So why would you see cesium 137 in the honey of southern states, but not see it in the east coast, more northern states?

JK

So the reason why there's more cesium in the honey from the southeastern United States is because the soils are more deficient in nutrients. And there's less potassium in the soils in the southeastern United States. So all plants require potassium as a nutrient. And it

just so happens that the atomic size of cesium is very similar to the atomic size of potassium. So the cesium is in the honey because plants absorb cesium from the ground. Because cesium 137 looks like potassium. So as the plants you know, they're hungry for potassium, they look down in the soil in the southeastern United States, and they don't see much potassium. So cesium can travel up the roots, and essentially mimics the potassium.

SM

Did you find one state that seemed to have the most problem?

JK

Florida. Florida, and it has to do with the types of soils that they have in Florida. So the Florida, Floridian soils tend to be low in potassium. And so we found a far higher cesium 137 in the honey there.

SM

What does all this mean to you? I mean, what's the significance of it? If it's not going to really be too bad for our bodies, what is the lesson you want us to understand from how bees, and honey, and plants have ingested this nuclear fallout?

JK

So honey is a really useful environmental monitor. Because if you think about it, this is, this is really kind of exciting for environmental scientists. The bees, they fly around and they sample plants all over and then they bring back a little sample to the hive. And then they make honey from that nectar. And so a jar of honey is really a bottle of the environment for that small area around the hive. So we can use honey to measure environmental quality or to track environmental quality. Everything from radioactivity to microplastics, potentially, to heavy metals like mercury or lead, or pesticides or herbicides. There's a lot of information in a jar of honey. And I've gotten really interested in this, and interested in looking at other aspects of the honey.

SM

Jim Kaste, this is fascinating to me. Thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

JK

Of course. Thank you for having me.

SM

Jim Kaste is a Professor of Geology at William & Mary. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

SM

Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. Today, producers are sharing some of their favorite segments from the past

year. Thankfully, With Good Reason Senior Producer Allison Quantz has been with us for more than a decade. Here she is on one of her favorite 2022 segments.

SM

So Allison, is there a favorite interview you have produced of all the shows you've made this year?

AQ

It is so hard to choose a favorite. I have to shout out a couple of the ones that I'm not going to play for you in this episode. One of the ones I loved this year was Laura Kolbe on her new book of poetry, *Little Pharma*. And another one was from a recent episode, the interview on smell detectives, Kiechle from Virginia Tech.

SM

She was the one who said cities used to reek and they actually created nose gauze so people could hold them up to their noses to avoid the bad smells.

AQ

And the smelling committees. I love the idea of smelling committees. But anyway, that is a recent episode. So that's not the one we're going to replay today. Instead, I want to share with you the interview with Bruce Cahoon, who is a Biology Professor at the University of Virginia at Wise. And he was on what is pretty much my favorite episode every single year, which is the summer reading recommendations episode.

SM

He was the one who's the biologist who said he actually reads and rereads every summer a book about Virginia algae.

AQ

Yes. And I knew I wanted a scientist on the show. And I reached out to him. And he got back to me and he said, "Oh, I don't know if I'm the right one for this show. I don't really do that much reading." And I said come, just call me, let's talk. And as soon as I got on the phone with him, I fell in love with the way he talked about algae. And there is one moment in particular that I think about again and again. He was talking about the importance of algae, where the big animals eat the little animals, and the little animals eat the algae. And the algae is taking energy from sunlight. And so what it means is we're all running on borrowed sunlight. And for me, it's like the natural world's notion of grace.

SM

Beautiful.

AQ

I mean, I told everybody I know about that interview. I feel like for weeks, anytime I saw anybody I said, "I have to tell you about algae." And I also remember, there was a moment where I was in a kind of contentious conversation with someone and I was feeling frustrated and angry with them. And then I had a thought, "oh, you know, she's made of sunlight." And I swear, I swear, it's like, I took a deep breath. And I was able to return to the conversation very differently. It sounds hokey, but honestly, I can't stop thinking about it.

SM

That's gonna be my thing from now on.

AQ

So let's play Bruce Cahoon from the University of Virginia at Wise. And this is from an episode that originally aired in July 2022.

BC

I spent quite a bit of time with the scientific literature during the summer. In fact, that's that's most of my reading. And so far this summer, I have, without a doubt, spent more time with a book called Freshwater Algae of North America than any other resource

SM

Is it reading that delights you, or that you feel compelled to do?

BC

It's both. You know, when you're a scientist, my work is also kind of like a hobby. And I get to explore. And so I'm reading and even though it's part of my work, it's a delight, you know, to get to learn something new and get to explore things. This book, it tells you about all the major groups of algae that you're going to find in streams, and ponds, and lakes throughout North America. And so when we find something, when my students and I find something, when we're exploring around in southwest Virginia, this is what we're going to use to try to figure out what it is.

SM

Tell me something about algae that would be interesting to me, or that I should know.

BC

Well, they are, of course, primary producers. Meaning they are at the very bottom of the food chain. And without them, there's essentially nothing. You have to have these small organisms that are going to produce energy, or they're going to collect sunlight through photosynthesis. They're going to be consumed by smaller animals, and bigger animals, and so on. And without them, there's nothing. We're all running on stored sunlight. They are the basis of life as we know it. And most of them are just beautiful, but we can't see them because they're microscopic. So without the aid of a microscope, you would

never even know that they're there. And people didn't even know they existed for most of human history.

SM

So I know you're enjoying Freshwater Algae of North America. I understand you also like audiobooks. Have you heard anything recently that you could recommend to others?

BC

Oh Sure. When I'm relaxing, which is essentially when I'm driving, or when I'm running, or, you know, when I'm in my woodshop and just listening to something while I'm making something. I do listen to audiobooks, and they tend to be pretty light. One that I've really enjoyed lately was Dave Grohl's The Storyteller. And Dave Grohl was, he was the drummer in the band Nirvana in the early 90s. And then later became the main creative force behind another band called the Foo Fighters. And I, I've really enjoyed it. It's really resonated with me on, in different ways. One of which was that we were both born the same year in 1969. He grew up in Springfield, Virginia, and he describes his life as a boy in the 1970s. And getting to go out of the house and explore around in his neighborhood. And he describes looking for crayfish and running around and really just having a great time as a kid.

And that resonated with me because I, I was fortunate enough to grow up in Smithfield, Virginia. And it was very similar, you know, adventures were outside. If you wanted to find something, if you wanted to explore, you had to go outside. And you and your friends would get together and look around and see what was there. And then there's all these brackish water marshes that when I was a kid, they were a source of fascination, and I think fear too. I was, I was probably afraid of what was lurking in those marshes as much as anything. But those times exploring it was a major influence on why I became a biologist in the end.

SM

I grew up across the river from you, across the James River from Smithfield.

BC

Oh really? Which, which city?

SM

Williamsburg?

BC

Oh, of course, yeah, you catch the ferry in Surrey

SM

Many times. Rode my bike to Jamestown and then across the ferry and

then just explored in Smithfield.

BC

Yeah, I always really loved the ferry. So another thing with with the book, Dave Grohl he, he became part of the punk scene around DC that was so prominent in the 1980s. He found freedom by touring with a band and quitting school. Whereas I found a similar freedom, weirdly enough, by going to school, by going to college. The rest of the book, where, you know, he becomes a famous rock musician is interesting and fascinating just from the point of view, like a fly on the wall. You get to read about him meeting his musical idols and, and getting to, you know, play in stadiums filled with tens of thousands of adoring fans. That's that's the fun part of the book. But I'd say it's the early part that really resonated with me the most.

SM

It's so interesting that there would be such commonality between the biologist and the rockstar. What else do you think other, other than the fact that your paths diverged, what else do you think maybe is similar to the core of each of you?

BC

Wanting to explore. I think, you know, is it was just there was sort of some sort of dissatisfaction with with the education that we were offered in early childhood. And it was a different time. And I think that my K-12, teachers, they tried their best. I can't blame them at all. It was all me. But something was missing. It just didn't work for me. But once I sort of got out of that mold, and got into a setting where I was able to maybe learn at my own pace. Learn at a different pace, figure out how I learn, it, I got on the right path, fortunately. Maybe there are some parents, you know, of rambunctious little boys who are worried that they'll never amount to anything, but you know, they, it's possible. It is possible that they will someday become, you know, productive members of society.

SM

We just all need that fire lit, right?

BC

I think so. Yeah, I think that's a good way to put it. You know, if you just have something that ignites a passion, something that you're willing to really spend your time on. Yeah, who knew? Who knew that it was going to be a botany class that got me excited. I was a kid who loved science fiction. And when I started learning about plants and algae, to me, I learned that you don't have to make something up from whole cloth to be interesting. It's right there under our feet, it's just you have to spend a little bit of time figuring it out. The things that seem commonplace are actually really weird. Plants are pretty weird. Algae is pretty weird. You just have to take the time to get to know them.

SM

Right? Well, Bruce Cahoon, what a joy talking with you. Thanks for talking with me on With Good Reason.

BC

Oh, thank you. It's my pleasure.

SM

Bruce Cahoon, is the Buchanan Endowed Chair of Biology at the University of Virginia College at Wise.

SM

Every week, our engineer Jamal Milner, who's also a terrific musician, makes us sound good. He's here with me to talk about one of his favorite segments this year. It was about the Harlem of the South, Jackson Ward, which is an historically Black neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia.

JM

I loved so many of the shows this year. We had a great variety of guests and different subject matter. But one that I particularly enjoyed was the story that producer Lauren Francis made, was Sesha and Enjoli Moon from the Jackson Ward area. And they are actually the directors of something called the JXN Project.

SM

And Jackson Ward is what?

JM

It's a historically Black neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia. And that it has been over the years victim of urban renewal, and attempts to discover what the actual neighborhood is, and has been, are being done now by these young ladies.

SM

What did you especially enjoy about the conversation between Lauren Francis and these two women?

JM

Well, while passing on very informative data, they interact so well and it's just really a conversation. And that, we find that difficult to you know, to make in radio world sometimes. But they just did it.

SM

Let's listen to it now.

SM

What JXN Project's work really focuses in on is what happened before 1871. So our research really starts in like that 1760 timeframe, when

William Byrd, the namesake of the park that we grew up across, he is technically the founder of Richmond, quote unquote. And he, you know, he comes into some financial troubles in the mid 1700s. He parcels off some of his privately owned land and does like a lottery, I guess you could say. Then what you have is the first known Black homeowner in 1793. And so you know, when we were at the height as a Harlem of the South, and a Black Wall Street, it's because we were standing on a good three, to four, to five generational shoulders of Black home owners and entrepreneurs in what will become Jackson Ward.

LF

Tell me about Abraham Skipwith, that first Black homeowner in 1793.

SM

This is a Black man who revealed to have direct ties to the founding fathers. We know that he's enslaved as early as around 1760s, in the 1760s by a gentleman named Jacquelin Ambler, Secretary of State under Thomas Jefferson. He's enslaved with him for several years, and then in 1782, he's sold to a gentleman named Thomas Bentley in Williamsburg. He's enslaved with Thomas Bentley from around 1782 to 1785, at which time he files a legislative petition for his freedom because apparently Thomas Bentley has passed away. All that we know is that the legislative petition wasn't granted. So we had to do a little bit more digging, understand more about Thomas Bentley. In short, he abruptly dies.

There are some issues with his will. And what that causes is that his estate is caught up in court for several years. Once the estate is actually settled in December of 1789, two weeks later, that's when we have Skipwith manumitting himself from two local merchants named Warrington and Keen. His next known whereabouts after 1789 is when he lands back in Richmond on the northern edge. He buys these parcels, that following year he manumits his wife Chloe and his granddaughter Maria. He, in addition to being the first known Black homeowner, he's also one of the first Black Richmonders, or Virginians with a fully executed will which he establishes in 1797. He then uses that will to earmark funds for the descendants that he's unable to manumit during his lifetime, so they can manage it themselves hopefully.

But then it's a remarkable will. I mean, he writes this in May of 1797. And he bequeaths, in addition to the funds to manumit yourself, but he bequeath a gun, silver, gold, livestock and a horse and buggy. We're from Richmond, Virginia, former capital of Confederacy. Never in my wildest dreams did I learn in school that a Black man was riding around Richmond, Virginia with his own horse and buggy.

LF

Yeah, like his own, not in service.

SM

His own, not in service. It's so outside of the narrative that we've ever been told.

LF

So what, what became of his home and his land?

EM

It stayed in the family for about 100 years. It was then, his family kind of over time, either moved out of the state or passed away. And so it was left into a trust, the trust sold the home to the Coleman family. And the Coleman family kept the home until the 1950s. They only left because the home was forcibly condemned in order to make way for the interstate. Like most homes in Jackson Ward, we were under the impression, because of some records that we found, and then just because of the fate of most other homes, we were under the impression that the home was demolished. And so it was moved by the family who is considered to be really the godmother, one of the women is the godmother, of Virginia preservation. She and her crew saw the architectural value of the home, decided to dismantle it, and to move it to their land. Let's be clear about this land, though. This land was 5000 acres, a former tobacco plantation that was once owned by the Secretary of War for the Confederacy, James Seddon.

So what we have in Skipwith is a man who worked his entire life to manumit and free himself and his family, in order to establish his own place, his own dwelling, and pass that down, for that home to be broken down and then taken back to a plantation. And it's been at that site since 1958. And as Sessa said, this kind of leads us to our work. Because what we saw when we came across this home was, as Sessa likes to say, our Monticello. Right, this is an opportunity for us to have an actual remnant. First of all, to have a remnant from the 1700s is rare, typically, in general. But most certainly it's rare for something that was owned by Black people.

And so initially, our desires were to move the home, to actually lift it off of the foundation, and move it back to Jackson Ward. But after doing the architectural reviews, you know, we were able to kind of denote that maybe it's not as much historical structure there as we would like. And so we are exploring what it means to actually rebuild the home, reconstruct the home for interpretive purposes, but to be able to do that in a place that is geographically accurate within Jackson Ward. And so that is what the JXN Project current initiative is, is, which is the Skipwith-Roper homecoming,

SM

It was sad to know that a lot of the original fabric was removed from the home. But the, but what this reconstruction for interpretive purposes will allow us to do is to actually rebuild the home with accuracy that reflects what Skipwith's home originally looked like. But I think some of the bigger opportunities with this, one as Enjoli

said, to have remnants remaining from the 1700s, but especially of a Black man is rare. And not only was the house an opportunity to reconstruct his property, but we also have this man's legislative petition, his manumission papers, as well as his will. A lot of Black American history from that time is based on oral traditions.

But to actually have papers that are his exact words are quite rare. But then when we even think about how, what does this mean, one, it means that we can tell a more multi-dimensional narrative about what it means to be Black, and from Richmond, and from Virginia, and in America at the time of, of this country's origins by leveraging the origin story of Jackson Ward. But then we're also able to look at the field of historic preservation, you know, what does it mean to protect Black spaces, and faces, and places, and, you know, decide, deciding what sites are worth saving. Because this is an exercise in, in what it looks like to have to reconstruct, because our spaces weren't held sacred. Once they were, quote, unquote, saved. But this will also make us come face to face with the role of infrastructure projects in disconnecting communities of color like a Jackson Ward.

LF

Yeah, it almost seems to me like the more I learn about Richmond's history, the more I'm like, "oh, people like made a decision that I wouldn't know this. That they would take me until like, my 20s..."

SM

...Oh, yeah...

LF

..."To really start to connect these dots."

EM

You know, I want to mention, Gary Flowers. We, we took one of his tours. Okay, brother Flowers is just like...

SM

...everyone needs to do that tour...

EM

...he's a man, he understands Jackson Ward's history, and is so beautifully anecdotal and rich in texture when he delivers it. But in talking about it, talking about the history of Virginia, at one point he was talking about what was called the Virginia Way. That was an actual thing that was created in the late 1600s, early 1700s, as they were thinking about, like revolutions that are happening, specifically the one in Haiti. There was a level of fear, you know, going around the globe around is that what we have to anticipate? [Inaudible] Well, in Virginia, what they decided was, "if we don't talk about it, no one will know that it existed. How else will they know? There is no internet.

They only know what we tell." And you know, that was labeled the Virginia Way, to suppress information that we don't want out. And so I think that that's what we see at play with a great deal of histories, unknown Black histories, histories that you know, maybe white histories that people want to submerge. And that's just been the reality. And so to be here in 2022, but launching this in 2020, at a time where people can actually respect the stories like a Skipwith that are being told, and they don't just collect dust in the corner, is really exciting and important.

EM

And so while JXN project is helping to lead this work alongside several other organizations that have been doing this work well beyond the year in which the Moon sisters have, you know, started to enter into this space. That was our question. We know what the Virginia Way is. But what are institutional responsibilities to chart a new way for Virginia moving forward? We know what the last 150 years meant for Jackson Ward. What is the commitment to chart a more diverse, and equitable, and inclusive, and accessible future for the Ward? Because that access is important.

Sure, we can have the desire to want to find out who is our Jackson, but do we have access to the archives, and to the records to be able to do that? And when we walk into these spaces, are, do we feel welcome? Do we feel like we belong? And and I think that's one of our overarching goals with the Jackson House, is to help partner with institutions across the city to create a space where the community members, as well as travelers that are coming into Richmond can, can say yes, "I found that space where I can find out who my Jackson is."

EM

And once the those Jacksons are found, are those institutions ready to elevate those truths? Right. Are they really ready to add that into their coffers in terms of the stories that they tell? And that is what I'm hoping to see. I'm hoping that JXK Project is one of many, right? Because we've been embracing certain spaces, but we also know – people love to – we don't want to be tokenized in the work that we're doing, right? And so how do we hold these institutions accountable to say, we are looking to open the door and keep it open for others who come behind us to continue the tale. Because we know that Skipwith isn't the only story that's emerged. So as they continue to be unearthed, are you holding space for them and will you hold them in the proper regard?

SM

Sesha Moon and Enjoli Moon are the founders of the JXN Project, an historic reparative nonprofit that aims to recontextualize the history of Jackson Ward as the nation's first federally registered Black neighborhood. Since this interview first aired the JXN Project has

hosted a community archeological dig at the site of the Abraham Skipwith cottage and publicly released renderings of the forthcoming Museum.

SM

With Good Reason is produced by Virginia Jumanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of our home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team is Alison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis and Jamal Milner. Cassandra Deering and Aviva Casto are our interns. Special thanks to Jennie Taylor for booking assistance. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening