"Down Where the South Begins": Virginia Radio and the Conversation of Nationhood

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"DOWN WHERE THE SOUTH BEGINS"
Virginia Radio and the Conversation of Nationhood

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by
Caroline Chandler Morris
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Caroline C. Morris

Approved by the Committee, August 2005

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Laurie S. Koloski
To John, Crickett, John, and Judson, who got me here.
To Sarah, Jennifer, and Sarah, who kept me going.
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When University of Virginia professor John Sullivan asked his upper-level English seminar in the fall of 2002 whether “radio made America” in the early twentieth century, he planted the seeds for this research and set me on the path that led me to the graduate program in History at the College of William and Mary. At William and Mary, professors Melvin Ely and Laurie Koloski have provided critical insight into both my theoretical framework and interpretation of evidence. In challenging my ideas, they pushed me to better articulate and strengthen my argument. American Studies professor Charles McGovern intervened with this work at a critical juncture, encouraging me to conceptualize Virginia radio within a national discourse of citizenship. He generously lent me his expertise and his support, energizing me when my endurance was ebbing.

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ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American and white southerners advanced different visions of what “the South” should be; the visions rarely complemented one another and relations between southerners of all political persuasions and colors were uncertain and occasionally violent. The tension manifested itself culturally when Virginians had to decide how to engage with the trappings of a mass culture that came to them from the urban centers of the Northeast. Accepting the “modern” culture meant abandoning certain traditional values and practices, while opposing it necessitated the creation of some sort of unified regional identity – highly unlikely considering the legal and social segregation of the region’s inhabitants.

The cultural expressions that traveled the airwaves of Virginia’s first powerful radio station, WRVA of Richmond, betrayed the terms of that confrontation. The program scripts and everyday administration of the station illustrate negotiations between broadcaster and audience, Virginian and non-Virginian, cosmopolitan and rural. A careful look at the production and reception of WRVA’s most widely-acclaimed program of the first decade of radio broadcasting, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, reveals the degree to which ideas of whiteness and blackness, long associated with the South, came to signify something larger in a national cultural arena.

The first decade or so of radio broadcasting quickly became a conversation of nationhood, with nothing less than the meaning of “America” at stake. When WRVA joined that debate, as a self-identified southern voice selling southern products to Americans, it introduced a way for Americans of diverse backgrounds to challenge the emerging national culture. By choosing to be consumers of a program demonstrating nostalgia for a rural way of life and a bygone era where relationships between men and women, blacks and whites, were hierarchically organized and maintained, white listeners redefined the terms of their citizenship in 1920s and 1930s America. Neither accepting nor rejecting cosmopolitanism, they were reasserting “tradition” by effectively creating a past that they could all share. Thus even as America became thoroughly “modern,” Americans clung to the ghosts of the past, which were configured and reconfigured to fit the changing needs of a rapidly growing country.
“DOWN WHERE THE SOUTH BEGINS”

Virginia Radio and the Conversation of Nationhood
INTRODUCTION

Once a prosperous city with a thriving business district, Richmond contained little more than smoldering ashes by the time the Civil War ended in 1865. Not only had the warehouses and banks burned, but the unfree black men and women who had carried the economy forward became citizens and free laborers overnight, in principle if not entirely in practice. When white businessmen returned home to rebuild their wealth, they quickly discovered that if Richmond’s business was to be profitable once more, they would have to adjust their practices to account for a new labor system. African American men and women, now moving into and out of the city freely, had to develop economic and social strategies for survival in the vacuum left behind when a racial hierarchy several centuries in the making collapsed. The social customs of the wealthy planter class that had carefully defined and policed the behavior of, opportunities for, and freedom of every southerner in the antebellum period – male or female, black or white – were suddenly destabilized and sometimes abandoned in the years after the war.

Over the next century, and arguably beyond, African American and white southerners advanced different visions of what “the South” should be; the visions rarely complemented one another and relations between southerners of all political persuasions and colors were tense, uncertain, and occasionally violent. The industrial expansion of the last quarter of the nineteenth century generated further complications for black and white southerners, simultaneously
opening avenues of advancement for some individuals while enclosing or
eclipsing potential opportunities for others.

Nowhere was the struggle for control over the fate of Richmond
specifically, and “the South” generally, more evident than within the intersections
of race, class, and gender in the cultural arena. In the late nineteenth and early
twentieth century, Virginians had to decide how to engage with the trappings of a
mass culture that came to them from the urban centers of the Northeast.
Accepting the “modern” culture meant abandoning certain traditional values and
practices, while opposing it necessitated the creation of some sort of unified
regional identity – highly unlikely considering the legal and social segregation of
the region’s inhabitants. The emerging debate thus inflamed existing
contestations over what a regional vision should be, even as it pushed Virginians
to confront their place within and response to a burgeoning national culture.

The cultural expressions that traveled the airwaves of Virginia’s first
powerful radio station, WRVA of Richmond, betray the terms of that
confrontation. Within the program scripts and everyday administration of the
station, we see evidence of negotiations between broadcaster and audience,
Virginian and non-Virginian, cosmopolitan and rural. On a broader level, we see
the ways in which regional identity – in this case “southern-ness” – informed the
creation of a national culture that many contemporary observers and modern
historians attributed predominantly if not completely to the industrial Northeast.

A careful look at the production and reception of WRVA’s most widely-
acclaimed program of the first decade of radio broadcasting, the *Corn Cob Pipe
Club*, reveals the degree to which ideas of whiteness and blackness, long
associated with the South, came to signify something larger in a national cultural
arena. Indeed, the white perceptions of the “Old South” demonstrated through
the program had little if any historical basis. The performances of whiteness and
blackness spoke directly to contemporary debates about social, economic, and political inclusion in a growing country.
CHAPTER I
THE STAGE: POST-CIVIL WAR RICHMOND

The story of post-Civil War Richmond is a story of energetic confusion. In many ways, the men and women of Richmond peered eagerly into the future, hoping to develop and industrialize at the same speed as the northern region of the nation. The city’s white residents did so, however, while apparently clinging to fantasies of a different, “simpler” time as a model of life at its best. All across the South in the late nineteenth century, people of all races and genders were coming to terms with the destruction of one form of life and the confusion of developing another. Many white southerners, including white Richmonders, worried that becoming participants in an urban economy would mean the abandonment of existing customs built on notions of racial and social hierarchy for the adoption of a perhaps more disagreeably egalitarian, northern culture. The leading white people of Richmond did not necessarily seek to reconstruct antebellum life, but rather they fabricated and circulated a specific vision of the Old South that provided cultural “solutions” to contemporary problems. With one foot in a rhetorical past and one in an industrializing future, white Richmonders thus began negotiating their terms of entrance into a national economy, and eventually a national culture.

In the early 1870s, tobacco manufacturing, flourmilling, and coalmining seemed to be the quickest ways to jumpstart Richmond’s war-ravaged economy, with tobacco providing most of the impetus and capital. The decade started with the manufacturing primarily of chewing tobacco, but the continual rise of interest in cigarettes from the mid-1870s through the First World War gave the city’s
principal industry a timely shot in the arm.\textsuperscript{1} With the help of tobacco capital, enterprising business men and women set out to rebuild the city’s infrastructure and industrial capacity with more modern methods of product distribution and transportation, a better banking system to retain and process the capital brought in, and new labor practices that included employment of free African Americans and women. Because of this rapid growth – growth that relied upon the northern economy – Richmond industrialized quickly and resolutely, far surpassing its accomplishments of the antebellum period.

Indications of the city’s economic recovery and growth abounded. In 1874, only a year after an international economic depression had threatened to destroy what progress the war-torn city and state had made, Richmond’s City Council adopted an ordinance providing for an optimistic, business-minded city seal. The seal depicted a bundle of tobacco leaves lying in the lap of a young, sumptuous white woman clothed in classical Roman attire: “at her feet was a river flowing to her left, on the banks of which are shown mining operations, iron works, and a steam engine...above her head the motto Sic itur ad astra ['Such is the way to the stars,' from Virgil’s Aeneid]...and this inscription: ‘Richmond, VA., Founded by William Byrd. MDCCXXXII.’\textsuperscript{2} The adopted seal portrayed the white councilmen’s wishes and beliefs that Richmond would rise from the ashes

\textsuperscript{1} For a detailed explanation of the rise of the cigarette industry, please see Cassandra Tate, Cigarette Wars: The Triumph of the ‘Little White Slaver’ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). In 1880, tobacco manufacturing in Richmond pulled in $1,683,000, or 24.4 percent of Richmond’s total business that year, with flourmilling pulling in $1,226,500, or 17.8 percent. Between 1880 and 1890, the amount of capital per worker more than doubled in the tobacco industry, whereas the flourmilling industry saw a decline of the same statistic. Report on the Manufactures of the United States, Tenth Census, 1880, pt. 2 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1883), 430; Report on the Internal Commerce of the United States (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1886), 80; Report on the Manufacturing Industries of the United States at the Eleventh Census, 1890, pt. 2 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1895), 5.

\textsuperscript{2} A contemporary account of the debate over the Richmond city seal can be found in W. Asbury Christian, Richmond: Her Past and Present (Richmond, VA: L.H. Jenkins, 1912), 335. See also Virginius Dabney, Richmond: The Story of a City (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 232.
of defeat through industrialization and tobacco: a golden combination then and later in Virginia.

The growing American tobacco company paved the way to the stars. Richmond's tobacco industry grew by leaps and bounds in the 1870s and the 1880s as new technology made factories more feasible, efficient, and numerous along the James River.\(^3\) Just five years after the war, thirty-eight plants were up and running in Richmond, employing nearly four thousand people.\(^4\) Many white men made fortunes either directly through the tobacco industry or else through the banks and railroads that kept the industry running smoothly, while African American men and women provided manual labor. Indicating a degree of confidence in Richmond's future, many successful white businessmen reinvested their funds to further develop the city as they saw fit.

In the early twentieth century, businessmen translated their industrial and financial success into large buildings intended for purposes other than producing and warehousing manufactured goods. By the 1890s, local tobacco entrepreneur Lewis Ginter had paid for and erected the grandiose Hotel Jefferson in order to attract and house northern capitalists eager to invest in Richmond's industry.\(^5\) Despite the towering presence of the nine-story hotel built in the style of the Villa Medici in Rome, the new Art Deco skyscrapers of the next two decades dwarfed Ginter's civic donation on Richmond's growing skyline.\(^6\) If

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\(^3\) For a complete catalogue of Richmond firms and factories that developed in the period, please see Andrew Morrison, *Richmond, Virginia and the New South* (Richmond, VA: G.W. Engelhardt, W.W. Jones, printer, 1889?), 76-99. Morrison gives the biographical history of thirty-five of the largest firms, including Larus & Brother Company, the firm that founded WRVA radio station in 1925.


\(^5\) Jefferson Hotel: *Declaration of Independence to the Tourist and Traveler*, ([Richmond, VA]: n. pub., 189?).

the Jefferson Hotel supposedly showcased Richmond’s capacity for elegance to out-of-town guests, however, the rising bank buildings proved that Richmond could reach the same heights as the financial districts of northeastern cities. By 1904, Richmond insurance agents could boast that their twelve-story Mutual Building was the tallest building south of Washington, D.C., a record that remained unbroken until executives of the First National built a nineteen-story bank a few blocks away in 1913. The very next year, the federal government chose Richmond over Baltimore as the site for the Fifth Federal Reserve Bank. Richmond’s businessmen and financiers had grown fat and confident on a constant diet of tobacco and railroad monies in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the early twentieth century saw the financial district assuming a prominent national position.

The people of Richmond imported or created national pastimes that stretched beyond the business and banking districts as well. Movies like The Perils of Pauline came to Richmond, as in other major urban centers, and the city’s inhabitants began to fill their increasing amounts of free time with leisure activities. Like many other American residents at the turn of the century, the people of Richmond – particularly African American and white men – developed an avid interest in the burgeoning world of sports, and the city enjoyed several sports teams by the 1890s. Sports seemed to be the “embodiment of everything new, youthful, and wholesome in the United States...The South eagerly embraced each of these sports, finding that they fit well with a longstanding Southern fascination with physical display and competition.”

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7 Dabney, Richmond, 292, 311; Winthrop, Architecture in Downtown Richmond, 168, 170-173.
8 Dabney, Richmond, 287-288.
college football and local baseball leagues were the main sports attractions, and the city rewarded its teams with zealous support.\textsuperscript{10}

When southern sportsmen donned baseball and football uniforms, however, they purposefully donned them as \textit{southern} men, as opposed to colonial subjects of a northern culture. Officials from colleges and universities for white students created mascots, cheers, and school colors that reflected regional or Confederate flavor. As historian Edward Ayers has remarked, "modern innovations did not so much dilute Southern identity as give it new, sharper focus."\textsuperscript{11} The migration of northern sports to Richmond did not transplant northern customs, but served to reinforce a particular strain of regional loyalty and identity among white Richmonders. The performances of unity and strength that sporting events inspired relied upon a shared sense of allegiance among white men. The rebel yells and Confederate mascots that accompanied the sporting events demonstrated an attempt to create solidarity between contemporary spectators and the soldiers of the previous generation, who had fought to preserve a hierarchy built on the chattel principle.

Indeed, despite the "forward thinking" of businessmen and bankers, the African American and white residents of Richmond remained enmeshed in the social and racial hierarchies that slavery had created. The "New" South was new in several ways, but Jim Crow laws, encoded into both social and legal custom by the turn of the century, reasserted a racial hierarchy that was

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{10} In 1908, a pennant-winning season for Richmond, the Richmond Lawmakers (part of the Virginia League) drew 442,622 spectators to 82 home games (averaging 5,300 per game), which is a better attendance record than many major league teams had that year. Harry M. Ward and Milton J. Elliott, \textit{Richmond: An Illustrated History} (Northridge, CA: Windsor, 1985), 217-9. Football was a somewhat harder sell for the southern spectators, as many self-appointed moral guardians reacted with horror to the rough nature of the full-contact game. But despite grumbling from the pulpit, football enjoyed a rapidly expanding and devoted fan base, particularly among white men. For an excellent discussion of the evolution of college football in the South, see Ayers, \textit{The Promise of the New South}, 310-314.
\bibitem{11} Ayers, \textit{The Promise of the New South}, 315.
\end{thebibliography}
inflexible and oppressive. Despite the rapid industrial, economic, and social change that white businessmen sought to bring about in late-nineteenth-century Richmond, white residents fought to preserve a cultural link between the Old and New South that was also a response to modern concerns.

After the Civil War ended, the waging of it seemed to pass from the hands of white men to the hands of white women. In the first decade after the war's end, voluntary organizations of white women arranged for the “repatriation” and interment of fallen Confederate soldiers, often at great expense.\textsuperscript{12} Burying the dead literally, however, did not mean burying the dead figuratively. After the conservative Democrats took over the government from the Republicans in 1869, the official remembering of “the South” began; within thirty years, voluntary organizations that had worked to bury the dead were working to resurrect them.\textsuperscript{13} After white women arranged for the transportation and burial of Confederate remains, they turned their energies toward the building of a Confederate museum. By 1893, a variety of white women's civic organizations had raised sufficient funds to purchase the White House of the Confederacy from the City of Richmond and restore it before opening it to the public on February 23, 1896, “with interesting and elaborate exercises.”\textsuperscript{14}

The White House of the Confederacy did not stand as the only memorial to the Confederate dead in Richmond, however. The main road that ran through

\textsuperscript{12} As early as the spring of 1866, white women of Richmond were meeting to discuss the interment of the Confederate dead. They resolved “to collect funds to be applied in enclosing, arranging, returfing and otherwise placing in order the graves of the Confederate dead interred in Hollywood Cemetery, so that the tombs of our fallen soldiers may be permanently preserved from oblivion, and their last resting place saved from the slightest appearance of neglect or want of care.” By 1869, the Ladies’ Hollywood Memorial Association had erected a monument to the dead for the substantial and almost prohibitive cost of $26,000, “in order to mark, by every appropriate means in our power, our sense of the heroic services and sacrifices of those were dear to us in life and we honored in death.” \textit{Our Confederate Dead} ([Richmond, VA]: Authorized by the Ladies' Hollywood Memorial Association of Richmond, Virginia, 1916), inside cover, [7], 8.

\textsuperscript{13} Ayers, \textit{The Promise of the New South}, 8-9.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Our Confederate Dead}, 11.
the business district in Richmond, Franklin Street, became an avenue of monuments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Commissioned immediately after the conclusion of the Civil War, a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee was the largest and most expensive of the monuments erected on Franklin Street, part of which was later named Monument Avenue. On May 31, 1890, thousands of volunteers used ropes to pull the Lee statue to the site with a wagon, as had been done with an equestrian statue of Washington at its installation in 1858. The parade that accompanied the statue included fifty Confederate generals, fifteen thousand Confederate veterans from all the states of the Confederacy, and ten thousand other citizens. The Richmond Dispatch reported that 100,000 people attended the unveiling, far exceeding the city’s population of 81,388.\(^\text{15}\)

As much as white men and women may have wanted to believe that memorialization of the Confederacy was a common desire, many of Richmond’s residents opposed the ritual. Of Richmond’s 81,388 inhabitants, 32,330, or 39.6 percent, were African Americans.\(^\text{16}\) The black community’s newspaper, the Richmond Planet, was vehemently opposed to the funding and fanfare provided for the monument. African American editor and councilman John Mitchell, Jr., wrote scathing denunciations of the project, despite threats from the white community. Mitchell saw nothing to celebrate about a dead Confederate general, and – much worse, in his estimation – he saw no reason why people should wish to preserve a memory of which they were not a part. “The men who talk most about the valor of Lee and the blood of the brave Confederate dead are those who never smelt powder,” Mitchell wrote. “Most of them were at a table, either on top or under it, when the war was going on.” He warned that

\(^{15}\) Richmond Times-Dispatch, June 1, 1890.
\(^{16}\) Dabney, Richmond, 245.
memorializing war figures would pass on a “legacy of treason and blood” to future generations, and prevent the white people of the South from moving forward.\textsuperscript{17} To Mitchell and many of his readers, a white preoccupation with preserving the memory of the Confederacy went hand in hand with the extension of social and racial oppression and injustice. The continued resurrection of a specific white vision of the Old South – a vision that profoundly informed a specific white vision of the New South – had dangerous implications for African Americans trying to gain a foothold in a post-slavery society.

Despite disagreement about what constituted Richmond’s past, Richmonders seemed to agree in the present that Richmond could and would be a healthy, thriving, modern city in the early twentieth century. Richmond’s position on several major railroad lines brought the businessmen of the city into close contact with northern capital and industrialists. Increased manufacturing, marketing, and distribution on a national scale kept goods and money flowing into and out of the city at an impressive speed, and Richmond’s economy weathered “busts” with enviable ease. In particular, an increase in demand for cigarettes during and after the First World War led to national and international expansion of the tobacco industry and a resulting boom in profit for anyone who managed the tobacco sector. In the decade following the outbreak of the First World War, Virginia farmers and businessmen enjoyed unprecedented sales with record-breaking profits that rose with each subsequent year.\textsuperscript{18}

The sudden boom in cigarette sales combined with several years of good tobacco crops, filling the pockets of people who rarely benefited from the first wave of prosperity: African American and white laborers, women, and

\textsuperscript{17} Editorial, Richmond \textit{Planet}, May 31, 1890.
\textsuperscript{18} Tate, \textit{Cigarette Wars}, 65-92.
immigrants.\textsuperscript{19} By the end of 1925, Richmond had seen two large additions to tobacco plants that generated thousands of jobs. The sudden increase in revenue from tobacco sales and in job availability brought a large flow of currency into the city and Richmonders became larger market consumers, causing retail sales to soar. Real estate agents anticipated a swell in population to accompany the rise in industry and scrambled to buy land in suburban areas as property values steadily increased. There was seemingly no end in sight to the wave of prosperity.

The majority of observers attributed the increased general wealth to the benefits of a modern, industrial economy. Big Business had been the friend of Richmond businessmen, bankers, and laborers, it was said, and wealthy residents in particular were eager to continue on the same trajectory. On New Year’s Day of 1926, the \textit{Richmond Times-Dispatch} reported, “a year of prosperity, probably of unparalleled proportions, is strongly indicated in nearly every factor contributive to the advancement and expansion of business.”\textsuperscript{20} The article clearly implied that such advancement and expansion were highly desirable for the common wealth and the common good. The profits of 1925 were accomplished with hard work, ingenuity, and luck, and the bottom line was a measure of personal and collective success. The writer ended his report on the year’s fiscal success by noting, “altogether Richmond’s outlook [was] most gratifying to Richmonders and Virginians.”\textsuperscript{21}

If Richmond residents were eager to integrate themselves into a national economy, they were more reluctant to subscribe to a national culture. The white

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 2. In many ways, the “gratifying outlook” was made possible by African Americans and whites who had moved to the city from agricultural regions to provide the necessary industrial labor as much as by the white tobacco executives and white and African American farmers who had pulled Virginia onto a new playing field with national corporations and a global market.
residents’ accelerated exaltation of the Confederacy and the antebellum period combined with a fear of “modern” (i.e. northeastern cosmopolitan) entertainment to make white southerners particularly hostile to the acceptance of northeastern social customs and practices.\(^{22}\) White southerners found it difficult to repackage movies, dance moves, attitudes, and music as a southern product simply with the addition of a Confederate mascot or cheer, as they had done with football several decades earlier. And yet, Richmond residents were smart enough to intuit that subscribing to a national economy necessarily entailed some sort of subscription to a national culture. The tension of wanting to participate, but not wanting to be passive recipients of northeastern values, drove white Richmonders to experiment with mass culture in specific ways. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, the impetus for one of the greatest experiments of all came from the tobacco industry that had pushed Richmond into the national arena in the first place.

\(^{22}\) Ted Ownby, for example, has examined the complex relationship between desire for and fear of cosmopolitan cultural practices among southern people. He concludes, “the South’s cultural balance, which had grown increasingly precarious in the late nineteenth century, began in the twentieth to tilt back and forth dramatically, as mass culture extended its influence throughout the population and evangelicals responded by trying to infuse all of Southern culture with their values.” Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1886–1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 194.
CHAPTER II

THE SCENE: WRVA AND "DOWN WHERE THE SOUTH BEGINS"

In the mid-1920s, executives of the Edgeworth Tobacco Company, owned by Larus & Brother Company, decided to finance the construction and operation of Virginia's first high-powered radio station. The first two commercial radio stations had gone on the air in 1921 in Detroit and Pittsburgh, and the number of radio stations had been growing steadily since. Executives of the Westinghouse Electric Company were the first to recognize the potential of public broadcasting, and their station KDKA of Pittsburgh was the first to go on the air. Until that time, most of the people who engaged in radio transmission were technical-minded individuals more concerned with the science of wireless communication than the content. Westinghouse vice-president Harry Davis realized that if Westinghouse could guarantee regular broadcasting, more people would buy radio sets, hopefully bearing the Westinghouse logo. Davis had a vision of a radio market composed "not of electrical wizards but, simply, of everyone." The financial potential of owning and operating a radio station soon attracted the attention of other large national corporations, and by the end of 1922, a variety of organizations had acquired stations, including Ford Motor Company (WWI, Detroit), Gimbel's Department Store (WIP, Philadelphia), and the Omaha Grain Exchange (WAAW, Omaha). In Richmond, executives of a prominent tobacco company saw the opportunity to nationalize sales of their

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product, and they wasted no time in arranging for the construction of a local radio station.

The vice president of Larus & Brother Company, Pleasant Larus Reed, was visiting the home of owner Charles Larus, III, in 1924 when he first seriously considered using company money to build a radio station. Some houseguests were casually listening to Larus's homemade crystal set, and Reed heard the Attorney General of Missouri broadcasting from station WOR in Jefferson City, Missouri. Impressed by radio's ability to reach large numbers of people across long distances, Reed began to consider the possibilities of a company-owned station.

Reed convinced the tobacco businessmen that a company-sponsored radio station would increase profits in two ways. First, Reed explained that the company could fill airtime with programs designed to educate farmers about new agricultural techniques, thereby increasing the caliber and efficiency of the tobacco farming industry. Reed was not alone in his conviction that radio could be used as a farming implement in its own right. A survey conducted by the National Farm Radio Council and recounted in Radio Broadcast magazine revealed that radio had become an “important factor” in the marketing of farm products by 1926. Forty-six percent of the surveys returned from forty-three states gave specific examples of ways in which farmers had saved money by using the radio. Practically every report indicated “the importance and value to the farmer of having market reports from 24 to 48 hours earlier than they are

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27 In 1924, a United States Department of Agriculture spokesman asserted, “weather and reports as well as talks on agricultural subjects” should be broadcast over the radio every evening so that the farmer might listen to them and incorporate them into his next day’s plans. Reed may have been using this study when he made his proposal. Thomas Stevenson, “Radio News for Amateur and Adept,” Washington Post, Oct. 5, 1924, EA9.
available through any other medium.”

Everything from the broadcast of market prices to daily weather reports helped the farmer make educated decisions about how best to nurture or protect his or her crop. The Bright tobacco variety that Richmond firms used was notoriously temperamental, and Reed had some grounds for believing that radio would help the farmer anticipate its needs.

Second, the results of a United States Department of Agriculture national survey indicated that young people were more likely to stay on family farms and maintain the family business if they had something to do in the evenings. The Department of Agriculture only put into statistics what other people had been saying for years. Many people in the 1920s associated old age, boredom, and isolation with rural life, while youth, excitement, and opportunity were the privileges of a city resident. Though generalizations, these associations were not entirely imagined. The census of 1920 showed the urban population of the United States to be larger than the rural population for the first time, signifying a demographic trend away from farming. This trend alarmed several observers, who worried that there would soon not be enough farmers to produce the food to feed hungry urban dwellers. Many of these observers readily welcomed radio as an instrument of defense against the city-bound movement. As one journalist said succinctly, “radio broadcasting is turning the wanderlust spirit of youth away from the big cities back to the country and great open spaces.” If Reed wanted his firm to have tobacco leaf to turn into pipe fodder in the future, it was in his

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29 Ibid. The writer asserted "radio demonstration and installation on farms ought to help keep the young people on the farm by bringing the farm into touch with the rest of the world."
30 As one journalist put it for Country Life magazine, "It was generally felt that while employment and shorter hours of labor in the city were contributory causes, there were several other reasons for the movement cityward. Among these was the isolation of the farmer and the dweller on the country estate from the events of the world at large and a lack of opportunities for amusement."
best interest to fund an incentive for young people to forgo the pleasures of the city for the farm life.

A third benefit of radio, not discussed by Reed or the contributors to radio trade magazines, was the egalitarian nature of radio as a resource. Both African American and white farmers harvested tobacco, but white farmers received the majority of any available government, corporate, or community aid – an injustice made glaringly apparent during government intervention programs with agriculture during the New Deal.\textsuperscript{33} Women, whether white or African American, were also rarely regarded as proper farmers in their own right and received less community support than male farmers.\textsuperscript{34} Information distributed via radio offered counsel to anyone who had hearing and a wireless set. Reed’s decision to broadcast tips to farmers at large no doubt increased the quality of the leaf that came to his factories to some degree, because farmers other than white males then had access to aid that would not have been extended to them otherwise.

By April of 1925, Reed had convinced the other executives to invest in a radio station, and they had given him the responsibility of building it. He quickly put together a station and a team. He ordered the equipment for a top-of-the-line radio station over the phone from Western Electric and began surveying possible locations for the studio, finally settling on a building on Main Street that was adjacent to the block-long Edgeworth factory. Reed then selected a talented young engineer named Calvin T. Lucy to be the station’s first manager. Lucy

\textsuperscript{33} For a firsthand account of discrimination against black farmers, please see Nate Shaw, \textit{All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw}, compiled by Theodore Rosengarten (New York: Knopf, 1974).

\textsuperscript{34} Margaret Hagood’s study of white women living on tobacco farms in the 1930s revealed a common depth of understanding of and involvement in actual farm labor among women farmers. In fact, seven-eighths of the women interviewed professed to prefer field work to household work. Hagood was surprised by this because she had seen no representation of women in the voluntary agricultural associations. Margaret Jarman Hagood, \textit{Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Women} (New York: Norton, 1977), reprint of 1939 Chapel Hill. See also Carolyn E. Sachs, \textit{The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production} (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983).
took his new job seriously, and within six months he and Reed presented Larus & Brother Company with a fully operational, high-powered radio station.\(^{35}\)

After his appointment in April of 1925, Lucy spent months traveling around the country taking notes on other stations in urban centers. He consciously designed his studio as a hybrid of the studios he had investigated, with a pronounced emphasis on elegance and cosmopolitan style. Reed and Lucy convinced the owners of the Edgeworth Tobacco Company to build a studio in the heart of Richmond’s business district that could keep up with the Joneses – or in this case, the WEAFs of New York and the KDKAs of Pittsburgh. The end result, according to one Richmond newspaper, was a studio so “formal,” that one breathed the very “air of refinement” when inside it. Spectators marveled at the oak paneling, lush carpets, hand-carved Italian Renaissance chairs, and an overstuffed Chesterfield suite of taupe mohair. Elegant monks cloth draperies hung in wide swaths of coordinating colors to muffle any wayward noises.\(^{36}\) Lucy intended his new station to enter the world of radio broadcasting on an equal footing with the stations in the Northeast.

Richmonders eagerly anticipated the opening of the station for reasons other than its appearance. When Larus & Brother announced its intention of building a high-powered station in Richmond in April of 1925, the news made the front page of the papers.\(^{37}\) Though Virginia did not have any long-range radio stations of its own, many if not most people were well aware of the radio’s potential because they had been picking up stations from Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, New York, and other northern cities from the small crystal sets for a

\(^{35}\) The Edgeworth Tobacco Station WRVA Richmond, Virginia: “Down Where the South Begins” ([Richmond, VA]: n.p., 1929?).

\(^{36}\) “Larus Brother Radio Station to Open Tomorrow,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, Nov. 1, 1925, 12.

\(^{37}\) “Larus Bros. Plan to Put in Large Plant in Richmond for Broadcasting,” Richmond News Leader, April 27, 1925, 1.
few years. Richmond newspapers had published daily lists of radio program schedules since early 1924, and now residents could discuss local speakers and performers in the same columns where they discussed programs from the Northeast. For the next six months, people speculated excitedly about the difference the station would make in their lives. As in other towns, many believed that radio would provide a cultural and moral “uplift” for the community. The future Virginia audience had a particular notion of what that “uplift” would be, however, and it was frequently at odds with the established opinion of the northeastern broadcasters.

Trade magazine writers and northeastern broadcasters delighted in their conviction that rural listeners would somehow better themselves by listening to performances of classical music and opera. One writer urged parents to purchase radio sets for the benefit of their children, so that America could become “a nation of music lovers who have an intelligent understanding and appreciation of good music.” Up until the mid-1920s, “Americans, except those living in the larger cities, have been denied the priviledge [sic] of hearing the best in music.”38 Another journalist, while agreeing that rural American life was lacking something because of a dearth of “good music,” worried that rural Americans would not be interested in classical performances once radio provided access to them. She estimated that the total amount spent on “good music” in the United States amounted to perhaps a billion dollars each year, but the amount spent on “so-called popular music” and “out-and-out trash” probably totaled “far more than that spent to hear music of high standard.” While conceding that “good music” was perhaps not as popular as not-good music (a category never defined by any of the commentators), she concluded

nevertheless that “every broadcast director has the responsibility of using for a constructive purpose this greatest musical opportunity that has ever been made available to the public,” and “lower sorts” of music should thus not be permitted to dominate the radio.39

Attracting an audience for the purpose of indoctrination into the more “desirable” cosmopolitan world of the post-World War I era had to do with more than inspiring classical music appreciation. Indeed, the stakes were much higher. Four decades of mass immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Russia, and East Asia had threatened Americans of Anglo-Saxon heritage. Many longtime citizens feared the cultural power immigrants could wield should they fail to adopt certain “American” values. If the newcomers maintained ties to each other and their countries of origin, they might subvert the political and economic patterns “native,” white citizens had worked hard to establish. Many observers hoped that radio could provide a common experience through which all listeners could become American in the sharing of a broadcast, even if that common experience lasted no longer than fifteen minutes.

Many people in Richmond and Virginia also believed that radio could provide members of the community with some sort of uplift, but it was an uplift of a different variety. Though opinion about what that precise uplift should be was unclear, no one mentioned privileges of “good music” or organs of assimilation. Though much was made of radio’s positive effect for farmers and their families, few people hinted that they wanted to bring the farmer into a better, cosmopolitan cultural sphere. Rather, supporters of the station hoped that broadcasts would construct lines of communication among Virginia residents that would provide “channels for co-operative service in the interest of Richmond and for the city’s

Though “the object of the Tobacco Company [was] to boost Richmond,” the manner of boosting did not require listeners to abandon some sense of themselves in order to participate in whatever the broadcasts would be. The station was supposed to connect people, not assimilate them, though the manner of that connection was yet to be articulated.

If any generalizations about public opinion regarding the radio station can be made at all, one would have to conclude that people were simply excited about the prospect of listening to local broadcasts that would somehow propel Richmond and Virginia into the ether where a new, perhaps national, culture was emerging. A good example of this is a long-winded editorial about everything and nothing that appeared in the *Richmond News Leader* six months before the station opened. Unable to decide precisely how the community would benefit from the station, the editor finally landed on the safe conclusion that, whatever else happened, the station would be an “asset of obvious value.”

As the second of November drew near, state officials, artists, and interested bystanders scurried to secure tickets for the big event. In the end, no less a figure than the governor of Virginia, E. Lee Trinkle, attended the initial broadcast with his entire staff. Those not lucky enough to be invited to the premiere found their own ways of celebrating the broadcast as a significant event. Some individuals threw “radio parties” in apartments or houses with radio sets, and furniture and department stores opened their radio set showrooms to the public, no doubt hoping that a visitor would impulsively decide to purchase a

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41 A statement issued by the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, working closely with Larus & Brother in the promotion of the new station. “Larus to Install Big Radio Station,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 28, 1925, 1.
42 Ibid.
set at the broadcast's end. No matter who you were in Richmond in November of 1925, you would have had a difficult time avoiding the event.

At nine o'clock in the evening on Monday, November 2, 1925, a station with the call letters WRVA began broadcasting from downtown Richmond. The modest 1,000-watt transmitter stood on top of the Edgeworth Tobacco warehouse at 22nd Street and Cary Street, in the heart of the business district (built by tobacco money) in Richmond. The 125-foot antenna rose 215 feet above street level, an impressive height by the standards of the time, from a booth planted squarely in the middle of the rooftop with room for only one or two people. A half-mile away, the recording studio on Main Street was filled to bursting with engineers, dignitaries, artists, and well-wishers.

The first broadcast ran for precisely three hours, between 9:00 PM and midnight. The station's first offering to the audience was a prayer given by Dr. W. Taliaferro Thompson of the Union Theology Seminary. The rest of the line-up alternated musical performances and speeches from the governor of Virginia, the president and vice-president of Larus & Brother, Mayor J. Fulmer Bright, and "other prominent Richmonders." At precisely 11:55 PM two musical groups, Arion's Orchestra and the Old South Negro Quartet, joined forces at the microphone to perform "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," which was the station's closing song from that point forward. The "Voice of Virginia," as heard

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43 Both the Columbia Furniture Company and C.B. Haynes Co., Inc. had promotions in their stores to let non-radio owners hear the magic of radio during WRVA's first broadcast. For discussion of groups listening to the broadcast in private homes, see "Last Night and To-Day on Radio," Richmond Times-Dispatch, Nov. 13, 1925, 13.
44 "Radio Station Opens Here Officially," Richmond Times-Dispatch, Nov. 2, 1925, 1. See also "Broadcasting Station Here Makes Official Bow Tonight," Richmond Times-Dispatch, Nov. 2, 1925, 1.
45 "Radio Station Opens Here Officially," Richmond Times-Dispatch, Nov. 2, 1925, 1.
46 The state legislature adopted "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" fifteen years later as the state's song.
47 WRVA pamphlets and advertisements used the slogan "Voice of Virginia" from the station's conception in 1925 through the 1940s.
through WRVA's first broadcast, had been a harmony of regional, masculine sounds: a devout prayer from a leader of the white religious community, the proud pontifications of white state officials, white Richmond officials, white tobacco representatives, and unspecified town dignitaries, and musical strains from both an all-white orchestra playing classical music and a black, male quartet singing traditional "Negro" songs.\textsuperscript{48} If the first night of broadcasting was any indication, WRVA would consciously represent diverse areas of local and regional life over airwaves that reached Virginian and non-Virginian alike.

On the other side of the coin, however, those representations would be carefully choreographed and highly scripted. The white musicians performed music associated with whiteness – either so-called hillbilly tunes or European orchestral pieces – while the African American musicians performed music associated with blackness – spirituals, working songs, and antebellum slave music. The people who spoke to listeners directly through the microphone were white male authority figures who claimed a prominent role in the transmission of culture because they claimed prominent roles in the social, political, and economic institutions governing Richmond and Virginia life. As the self-appointed "Voice of Virginia," WRVA made a great show of delivering its conception of Virginia culture to the wireless sets of Virginians which had heretofore picked up only northeastern voices. That voice was hardly improvisational, however, and WRVA's "speaking" became a performance.

From the beginning, WRVA's broadcasting style, content, and station policies were intended to be representative of its self-defined position "down where the South begins."\textsuperscript{49} Despite any national ambitions, or perhaps because

\textsuperscript{48} "Broadcasting Station Here Makes Official Bow Tonight," \textit{Richmond Times-Dispatch}, Nov. 2, 1925, 1.

\textsuperscript{49} WRVA advertisements and programs frequently used the expression "down where the South begins" to represent the station's cultural as well as geographic location. \textit{The Edgeworth
of them, the station managers wanted to play the northeastern game of broadcasting with their feet firmly planted on Virginia soil. The call letters "WRVA" stood for Richmond, Va., unlike call letters for other stations that stood for newspapers or companies, like the Chicago Tribune's WGN (World's Greatest Newspaper), or WRVA's eventual local competition WRNL (Richmond News Leader) and WMBG (Joe's Motors and Batteries Garage). Though the station was owned and operated by a private firm, its name implied that it was there to serve and represent a community without ambitions for profit.

Most stations in 1925 identified themselves with their local surroundings, as WRVA did. In 1925, the staff of WRVA knew they were reaching primarily a local audience and they tailored their programs accordingly, even as they kept their eyes trained on potential audiences outside the state. As one veteran employee remarked of the first WRVA staff, "these men [knew] Virginia and what Virginians [wanted] in news, educational, and entertainment features." It is unremarkable in and of itself that WRVA began life as a locally oriented station in 1925. What is remarkable is that it remained locally oriented, even as newly formed national "networks" tried to absorb it throughout the 1930s.

The morning of the first broadcast, one unnamed reporter for the Richmond Times-Dispatch wrote, "for radio fans all over the city and State it will be one of the most exciting nights in the history of broadcast. For those all over the country – perhaps Canada and Mexico – it will mean just one more station to log and one more city to remember." The statement underlined the station's dual role as a business enterprise and a cultural tool. Ostensibly, the station had

_Tobacco Station WRVA Richmond, Virginia: "Down Where the South Begins" ([Richmond, VA]: n.p., 1929?)._

_50 "Advertisement Booklet – Norfolk and Tidewater Region, ca. 1938," WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000, LOV._

_51 "Broadcasting Station Here Makes Official Bow Tonight," Richmond Times-Dispatch, Nov. 2, 1925, 1."
been created to sell Virginia tobacco and increase the profits of the tobacco businessmen located in Richmond. The Edgeworth Tobacco Company executives had always intended to sell their smoking tobacco to a national consumer base through the use of radio, but did their agenda include making Richmond into a "city to remember"? Certainly, they had talked vaguely about "boosting" Richmond in the beginning, but they had been unclear about the specific details of such a boost. Almost as soon as WRVA hit the air, however, it took on the additional role of spreading cultural ideas to an audience on the far side of the state line – an audience that did not necessarily share Virginia’s rural, southern background.

The white residents of Richmond, represented by WRVA, seemed to have a specific idea of what “Virginia culture” meant – an idea that was born of the white community’s split focus on the past, present, and future. WRVA’s signature song “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” later the state song, perhaps best captures the complicated amalgamation of symbols and beliefs that constituted white Virginians’ general notion of their “culture,” as well as the tensions inherent within that conceptualization. That the song, originally written by an African American minstrel named James Bland in the 1880s, gained widespread popularity among a white audience in the early- to mid-twentieth century is not insignificant.

The African American narrator of the song wants to be in Virginia because “There’s where the cotton and the corn and tatoes grow,/ There’s where the birds warble sweet in the springtime.” The narrator apparently finds enough enjoyment in the pastoral fields of corn “where I labored so hard for old massa”

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that he can attest, "no place on earth do I love more sincerely," despite his enslavement. Because Virginia is "where the old darke'ys [sic] heart am long'd to go," the singer declares that he will remain in the Dismal Swamp of Virginia, "where long...have I wandered," until "this old darke'ys life will pass away."

Two aspects of the song in particular must have appealed to a white audience. Bland's lyrics convey a sense of nostalgia for an era defined by agriculture and slavery. "Old Virginny" is the Virginia of the antebellum past, where farming and chattel slavery are intertwined in the imagination of twentieth-century whites. By speaking of the old Virginia, the "darke'y" recalls a slave society in which he belonged to a "massa and missus." A constructed memory of antebellum racial stability, achieved through the white-controlled slave system, was profoundly important to white men and women of the early twentieth-century South; whether the memory was realistic was immaterial. Furthermore, the black singer's devotion to his white owners may also have comforted some white listeners who confronted resistance to their hegemonic control on a regular basis. If white men and women troubled by a seemingly unstable social and racial hierarchy could conceive of this song as evidence, they could tell themselves that despite the violent and uncomfortable realities of racial segregation and black resistance, African Americans must still love (and possibly need) white overseers.

Robert Toll has argued that Bland's songs, particularly "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," "were free from antislavery protests and from praise of freedom." His "nostalgic Old Darkies expressed great love for their masters and mistresses," and represented grotesque images of African Americans that had a disturbing similarity to stock blackface characters.53 While Toll's argument

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makes sense to some extent – the former slave in the song certainly does not
direct anger or blame toward his white owners (or audience) – we cannot write
off Bland’s narrators as simply being “Uncle Toms.” Though Bland’s song may
reinforce a white memory of slavery, the lyrics and form also reflect the dignity of
African American folk music. The narrator is neither lazy nor grotesque, as one
might expect a black minstrel character to be, for example. He is also neither
untrustworthy nor violent, as many white cultural products of the early twentieth
century would cast blacks.  

While we cannot discern the feelings of African Americans listening to the
song in 1925, we can speculate that, despite some of the more dignified aspects
of the song’s narrator, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” poked at many old
wounds. For one thing, African Americans were hardly wandering around the
Dismal Swamp thinking about their dead owners. Since the time of
emancipation, African American men and women had had to struggle against
horrifying odds in order to survive economically and spiritually in the face of new
forms of oppression. For another, it is difficult to imagine that African Americans
living in the Jim Crow South felt any devotion to their white oppressors, much
less love.

Virginians, as humans are wont to do, also defined their culture by what it
was not. The white residents of Richmond, Virginia, self-consciously thought of
themselves as southern, judging from newspaper ads and articles, high school
sports, and annual social events.  Though I have found no records indicating whether African American Virginians considered
themselves southern, it stands to reason that their southern identity could not be the same as a
white southern identity, if indeed they considered themselves southern at all. Jim Crow laws
socially and legally defined a “black South” specifically to prevent African Americans and whites
from occupying the same space, culturally or physically. Furthermore, the massive African
American migration of the first half of the twentieth century to urban centers in the North and

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54 For a comprehensive analysis of Bland’s songs as texts, please see William R. Hullfish,
55 Though I have found no records indicating whether African American Virginians considered
themselves southern, it stands to reason that their southern identity could not be the same as a
white southern identity, if indeed they considered themselves southern at all. Jim Crow laws
socially and legally defined a “black South” specifically to prevent African Americans and whites
from occupying the same space, culturally or physically. Furthermore, the massive African
American migration of the first half of the twentieth century to urban centers in the North and
begins," a motto that proudly asserted the city's identification with the South. The Richmond Chamber of Commerce had flirted with the notion of using the slogan for tourism purposes off and on in the decade following the First World War, and WRVA officials decided to use it as their station's tagline in 1926. By saying "down where the South begins," broadcasters implied that a line could be drawn and two groups of people separated. What ended where the South began? The Civil War provided an obvious, if not entirely complete, answer: the North. Within one generation after the war, white Richmonders had begun collecting and celebrating a body of Civil War relics. Monument Avenue, with its marble shrines to Lee, Jackson, Davis, and Stuart, and the vast and well-maintained Confederate graveyard in Hollywood Cemetery were visible reminders of a white society that rallied together against both an erstwhile northern opponent and local dissenters, most notably African Americans who had frustrated whites accustomed to absolute power over blacks by demanding citizenship during Reconstruction. In the sixty years between the Civil War and the opening of WRVA, many of the bitter animosities lingered in the breasts of white Virginians.

At the same time, though, white southerners and white northerners were aggressively pursuing reconciliation. For more than four decades, white businessmen had worked tirelessly to industrialize and modernize Richmond's economy. City leaders, both African American and white, had built hotels and banks, and had fought hard to establish multiple railroad lines from Richmond's warehouses to the coast and continental interior. If WRVA employees wanted to identify themselves with the South in some ways, they wanted to dissociate

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Midwest suggests that African Americans may have felt alienated by, more than included in, a notion of southern identity.

56 The Edgeworth Tobacco Station WRVA Richmond, Virginia: "Down Where the South Begins" ([Richmond, VA]: n.p., 1929?).
themselves in others. If Richmond was where the South began, it was also where the South ended in some senses; many businessmen were undoubtedly comforted by that thought.

While the Edgeworth Tobacco Company expanded into the national market, WRVA programming also spread a specific conception of Virginian and southern culture to the nation beyond the state's borders. Governor E. Lee Trinkle's speech at the beginning of WRVA's first broadcast exposed the ambition and pride with which white Virginians sent their voices northward:

Sixty years ago the State of Virginia was at war with the State of Pennsylvania. There was the crash of artillery at Gettysburg and a harvest of death in the mountains where that battle was staged. Tonight our guns are muffled. Our sabers are melted into song. So that the musicians of Richmond sing into the homes of Pittsburgh and our municipal and State executives send messages of peace and of good-will to the hearts of the people of Philadelphia.

The grandeur of our past, the splendid facts of our present, the magnificent dreams of our future, soon to be enacted into material realization are no longer to be nursed within our own bosoms or cradled within the confines of our own Commonwealth.

The Mother of States, the land of Washington, the home of John Marshall and of Woodrow Wilson, still stands as the natural gateway between the North and South. Over the arch of that gateway, inscribed in letters of gold, is written that all may see this one word – Welcome.

With a most bountiful prosperity within her borders and with a proverbial hospitality awaiting all such as would enter within the paradise of her natural loveliness, Virginia tonight sends greetings to her sister States of the Union, as well as to the nations of the world.57

Trinkle's speech highlighted what he hoped would be a new form of cultural peace that radio would provide for formerly belligerent regions. That cultural peace had a sharp edge, however, if his unspoken words were any indication. By sending "greetings" to outsiders, Trinkle implied that northerners, such as people from Pennsylvania, had never before been invited to be a part of white Virginian culture. Now that the voices of Virginia's sons and daughters, white and African American, could enter the living rooms of people living in the North, outsiders might understand and appreciate "the grandeur of our past, the

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splendid facts of our present, the magnificent dreams of our future." A northern understanding and appreciation of Virginian culture were crucial first steps toward acceptance and respect—a logical goal for white Richmonders who worried that a national culture would overlook or, worse, assimilate them.

If WRVA staff hoped vaguely in the beginning that the cultural expressions they were broadcasting would meet with approval in the Northeast, they began to develop explicit strategies for garnering more out-of-state listeners by the late 1920s. Early broadcasts of white and African American folk music elicited a substantial positive response from New Yorkers and Pennsylvanians. One program in particular, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club,* attracted a large enough following among northeastern listeners that network radio executives from WNBC, New York City, picked it up to broadcast to the country in June 1932. The "Voice of Virginia" was slowly carving a place for itself in the emerging national media coming from the Northeast.

WRVA gained further national prominence in 1928 when it ceased being a strictly noncommercial station and began importing national broadcasts sponsored by companies other than Larus & Brother Company for a local audience that grew larger every month. After realizing how much money they could make as a commercial station, as opposed to operating as an advertising

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58 The Edgeworth Tobacco Station WRVA Richmond, Virginia: "Down Where the South Begins" ([Richmond, VA]: n. pub., 1929).
59 "Richmond is Easily Heard in Capital," *Washington Post,* Sept. 3, 1929,10. WRVA was considered a noncommercial station prior to 1928 because the station wrote and produced all of its own material, and only advertised its own tobacco products. By the late 1920s, many larger stations had begun to "sell" airtime to any individual or corporations with the means to purchase it. The transition from "noncommercial" to "commercial" radio broadcasting sparked an impassioned conversation among radio enthusiasts as they debated whether radio should be a public institution or a private enterprise. For a comprehensive discussion of this debate, please see Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). In particular, please see chapter 3, "Arguments over Broadcast Advertising," 65-92.
60 This was a common trend in the years following the creation of the Federal Radio Commission in 1927. For a comprehensive and admirable explanation of the transition from radio as a civic tool to a commercial enterprise, please see Smulyan, *Selling Radio.*
expense for Edgeworth, WRVA executives decided to become an NBC affiliate and broadcast some of the new nationally syndicated programs, while keeping the rest of their schedule in-house.\textsuperscript{61} Station Manager Calvin Lucy assured worried listeners, "...it must be understood that WRVA is not transferring its studios to New York City, and local programs will continue to be produced in our own studios in volume that we desire."\textsuperscript{62} Though WRVA was accepting programs produced in the Northeast, it still produced and controlled the majority of its programming, which continued to reflected a specific vision of Virginian culture.

On January 1, 1929, WRVA broadcast the programs coming from New York for the first time. That same week, with the help of the network programs to round out the schedule and revenue brought in from the sale of advertising time, WRVA began broadcasting twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Up to that point, it had only been broadcasting five days a week for eighteen hours at a time due to limited material and resources.\textsuperscript{63} The introduction of a 5,000-watt transmitter nine months later in August of 1929 also meant that WRVA began reaching a much wider audience than before. Even as WRVA began importing radio programs from areas outside Virginia, then, it also began "exporting" in-house programming in larger quantities across a wider geographical plane due to the boost in broadcasting time and power. Virginians with radio sets must have felt as though national voices and local voices were accessible any time of the

\textsuperscript{61} As new technology made station-to-station broadcasting possible in 1923 and 1924, enterprising radio broadcasters from New York City collected enough talent and capital to build a station devoted entirely to chain broadcasting. By 1927, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was readily to begin regular broadcasting. Just as in the first years of radio broadcasting, professionals and casual observers alike speculated excitedly about the potential of network broadcasting because of its unique ability "to speak at once to east and west, city and country, rich and poor." Barnouw, \textit{A Tower in Babel}, 189-193. It was in this climate of anticipation and excitement that WRVA officials decided to "hook up" to the broadcasting company.


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
day or night; indeed, it must have been hard at times to distinguish between them.

Unsurprisingly, out-of-state interest in WRVA expanded after 1929. Not only had WRVA joined the NBC network team and boosted its signal strength, but the newly formed Federal Radio Commission (FRC) had cleared the way for WRVA’s exclusive use of its frequency in late November of 1928. Until that time, anyone with a transmitter could broadcast over any available airwave, meaning that signals were crashing into each other from various points and causing large amounts of static that sometimes obscured licensed radio stations, despite their signal strength. The unregulated traffic on the airwaves had prompted the federal government to pass the Radio Act of 1927, which created the FRC and gave it the power to license stations and assign dial frequencies in the hopes that such a move would dramatically improve reception. The result cut out large areas of static and interference in the Northeast, and suddenly listeners in New York and Washington, D.C. could consistently pick up station WRVA.64

The Washington Post heralded the station as a "national clear channel" that "sounds as if it were a local station."65 While the Post had been publishing WRVA’s program line-up in the daily radio program guide since January 3, 1927, the radio editor also began frequently discussing WRVA’s programs in his daily column after 1929.66 WRVA’s in-house programs were attracting and affecting a much larger audience than the original studio managers had anticipated. By April 1930, the sky was the limit, and WRVA was requesting a license for a 50,000-watt transmitter from the federal government less than a year after asking

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66 In particular, Robert S. Heinl, the radio editor, was a big fan of the Corn Cob Pipe Club and wrote about it extensively on half a dozen occasions.
for and receiving one of 5,000 watts. At the time, only a handful of stations in the country could boast transmitting strength of 50,000 watts, and all of them were from the Northeast or Chicago. Though WRVA did not receive a license for a 50,000-watt transmitter until 1939, its request in 1930 indicated that station management felt WRVA could compete with the largest stations in the country.

Within five years of broadcasting, WRVA employees and audiences both within and without Virginia's borders had propelled the "Voice of Virginia" into the national conversation generated by radio technology. The station that billed itself as the point "down where the South begins" simultaneously transmitted regional and northeastern programming, for an audience that was both regional and northeastern in composition. Such an ambitious objective meant that station officials had to think in many directions at once, a tricky situation at best.

The staff of station WRVA believed they were providing two crucial services to the state of Virginia, and they took their job seriously. From the outset, station managers tried to establish a program schedule that would provide "entertainment, information, education, worship or comradeship." They hoped that the farming news and musical programs would increase the overall wealth of the community and provide a welcome source of entertainment for their idea of the average (white) Virginian. Like its counterparts in other regions, WRVA promised to improve the lives of the people who listened.

While station executives focused on the local importance of their programming, they also took great pride in introducing their perception of the

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68 The Edgeworth Tobacco Station WRVA Richmond, Virginia: "Down Where the South Begins," 1.
best of Virginia's talent to a national audience. In particular, the station managers reveled in positive responses from non-Virginians to local performers, as was the case with the "Country Fiddlers" who played for the station from 1925 to 1929 or 1930. Studio Manager E.G. Hoelzle specifically thanked the artists for "showing the country that we have lots of things in Richmond and Virginia to brag about."70

The station's managers regularly reminded employees that they were representing Richmond and Virginia to a national audience and had a responsibility to the community to lead by example. In a general memo sent on May 17, 1933, Studio Director Calvin T. Lucy asked the staff to

Remember that you are not only representing Virginia's Premiere radio station and reflecting Richmond and Virginia in your every activity, but also the good name of Larus & Brother Company and the world-wide reputation of Edgeworth Tobacco. Courtesy has been our constant watchword for which we have many times been commended by visitors. We must also bear in mind that Southern hospitality still prevails "Down Where the South begins." Your visitors must leave with pleasant impressions of Richmond, WRVA, and Edgeworth Tobacco.71

For the station managers, the conduct of station employees and content of station programs reflected more than the opinions of WRVA staff. Within the station itself, broadcasters felt that they were ambassadors of Richmonders and/or Virginians and as such had a responsibility to represent that group of people to best advantage. They identified that group, implicitly if not explicitly, as white, morally sound, proud, and hospitable. If the staff seemed to agree on what they were representing, however, the cultural products through which they would do so were far from decided.

70 "Applause Memos, 1926 (Geographic Distribution of Applause Memos, 1929)," WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000, LOV.
71 "Memo to the staff. 17 May 1933," WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000, LOV.
CHAPTER III
THE SHOW: THE CORN COB PIPE CLUB AND ENTERTAINMENT AS IDENTITY

Once the initial excitement of going on the air had subsided, the real adventure began. Listeners and broadcasters alike had to decide how best to use WRVA’s potential. For months, Virginia residents, not unlike millions of other people around the country, had been debating the “responsibilities” and obligations of radio. Would it be an organ of public opinion? An extension of the pulpit? A messenger of “cosmopolitan” culture? The frenzy of WRVA’s opening had encouraged everyone involved in the debate to assert his or her opinion all the more forcefully. For their part, the founding group of WRVA owners and managers seemed open to various uses of their airwaves, permitting diverse groups of persons to broadcast it. WRVA’s program listings for the first few months reflect this cheerful confusion about what to broadcast and exactly how to do it. Market reports, one-man music/dance routines, speeches from local notables, prayers offered by prominent members of the religious community, and all manner of music performances crowded the fledgling station’s four-hour programs offered twice a week in late 1925. Though certain musical groups and agricultural counselors might be invited back, there were no “regulars” and no consistent program formats or time slots. Listeners sat around their receiving sets, staring at the box with rapt attention as they became part of a seemingly

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72 For example, WRVA’s New Years’ Eve broadcast, extended by four hours to four o’clock in the morning, included, among other things, a ten-minute market report, piano solos, hymns and prayers, jazz performances, instrumental trios, classical orchestras, and vocal quartets. “Radio, By The Fan,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, Dec. 31, 1925. On non-holiday evenings, a local community group such as a college might come to the studio to provide music, narration, and other entertainment routines. See for example the broadcast of the “Virginia Polytechnic Institute Collegians,” or the “Petersburg (Va.) Night.” “Radio, By the Fan,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, Jan. 2, 1926; “Radio Last Night and Today,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, April 8, 1926.
unorchestrated local parade for a few hours, never knowing what was coming next. The only invariable element of the station’s broadcasts was its signature sign-off of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.”

Broadcasting choices may not have been as obvious to either the audience or the producers of WRVA as we might think, children of television programming that we are. Until Congress passed the Radio Act of 1927, radio was largely unregulated, untested, and the domain of anyone who cared to build a tower and send some sort of noise into the air. Everyone from educators to law enforcement officials to clergy to bureaucrats from the Department of Agriculture jockeyed for position on the airwaves, and though music was by far the most common sound to be heard from early radio stations, it did not necessarily stand to reason that radio would become a venue for entertainment.

For one thing, station owners had very little capital at their disposal with which to pay entertainers – especially in the early days when advertising, or the selling of advertising space, was not a common practice. As Susan Smulyan demonstrates persuasively in her book *Selling Radio*, the commercialization and monopolization of the airwaves ultimately established rigid programming formats that were more responsive to the owner’s financial needs than to listener requests. Network officials and sponsors were more likely to design programming according to their *impressions* of what people liked, impressions that were built largely on perceptions of consumer interest and desire.\textsuperscript{73} As a non-commercial station from 1925 to 1929, WRVA’s owners had little direct business pressure for their programming decisions.\textsuperscript{74} Without formalized listenership data, decisions about what to include in the nightly program were

\textsuperscript{73} Smulyan, *Selling Radio*.
\textsuperscript{74} Even after becoming a network affiliate in 1929, WRVA retained a significant amount of control over in-house productions, because the relatively small amount of money that local commercial sponsors contributed did not translate into absolute decision-making authority, as it did for network sponsors.
partially based on guesswork and financial realities, but mostly based on the community’s response.

For another thing, programming choices were more political than was perhaps readily apparent. A common perception of radio as a potential organ of public opinion and information made new stations lightning rods for controversy. Broadcasters were not the only ones worrying about what sorts of things to play over the air. For many observers, the voice that reached thousands or even tens of thousands of people through the radio could potentially wield unprecedented amounts of power. Even as radio enthusiasts and casual listeners delighted in the boundlessness of the new medium, others fretted that it could become a dangerous tool in certain unscrupulous hands.75

As with any new piece of technology that people believe might influence human behavior, “experts” began researching, predicting, and debating the consequences. The so-called experts came mostly from the ranks of the relatively new sociology departments in universities across the country. Having gained influence during the Progressive Era, sociologists had been sounding off about the social health of the United States for several decades. Mostly white and mostly upper- or middle-class, these men and women dutifully investigated groups within American society, hoping to identify, categorize, and hierarchically arrange patterns of behavior, ways of living, hygiene, and so forth.76

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75 Newspaper journalists, for one, worried that it would supplant the newspaper, which is more of a personal economic interest than concern for the greater good. See W. Barton, “What Broadcasting Does for a Newspaper,” Radio Broadcast 4 (February 1924): 344-466. Members of the clergy also worried that radio would seduce parishioners away from both the pews and the pious life. See “Is Radio Hurting the Church?” Literary Digest 76 (January 27, 1923): 35. Perhaps most incendiary of all, however, was the debate over political uses of radio—specifically during campaigns. See “Doubts about Campaigning by Radio,” Literary Digest 82 (August 1924): 11; J. H. Morecroft, “Who Will Pay for the Campaign Broadcasting?” Radio Broadcast 5 (October 1924): 470-471. For a general discussion the debate among “experts” over radio’s effect on the American population in general, please see Michelle Hilmes, Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 18.

76 Henry Yu has detailed the development, expansion, and subsequent influence of sociology departments in American universities during the first three decades of the twentieth century. In
Sociologists were eager to identify the role that “programming” in particular, and radio in general, would play in American family life and education.

After the first five or so tentative years of radio broadcasting in the United States, sociologist Marshall Beuick published the first academic article about the impact of programming on American life in 1927. Perhaps in an attempt to ease concerned minds, Beuick deprecated radio’s chances for success – a verdict that might have dampened the hopeful spirits of WRVA’s personnel had they read it. Beuick felt that radio was doomed to fail as a means of public communication because there was nothing fulfilling about being in the audience. Despite the fact that “the great majority of radio programs...are prepared for the public at large,” only “isolated dwellers” like farmers, invalids, and the blind would enjoy them, Beuick assured readers. He reasoned that human beings like to “herd,” and there could be no group socializing around a squawk box. “By some bond of sympathy like race, religion, education, or trade men enter a human group. In this crowd the individual feels a fundamental resemblance with his fellows that gives him the same comfort that his prehistoric forbears felt in the roaming human hordes.” Radio programming would ultimately fail because it required humans to think they were part of an unseen human herd. The considerable imagining this would entail would be too much for people, Beuick asserted, because “man cannot satisfy his desire for association with others of whom he is conscious of being the same kind” merely through the solitary act of listening. For this reason, he concluded, radio would never provide

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particular, Yu sees sociologists as measurers of racial and cultural difference. The supposedly objective measurements then worked to hierarchically rank types of people in the national imagination. Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Exoticism, and Contact in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).


78 Ibid., 620.

79 Ibid., 621.
entertainment for anyone other than those individuals physically unable to join the “herds” of socialized humans.

Intrigued by Beuick’s findings, fellow sociologist George Lundberg began testing the theory. Would people use radio programs primarily as a pragmatic means of communicating otherwise inaccessible information (weather reports for farmers, Bible lessons for those unable to attend church)? Or would radio programs survive as a tool of entertainment, despite Beuick’s analysis based on sociological theories? Lundberg looked for empirical evidence in the radio logs of New York City newspapers. In the city with the largest population of radio listeners in the country, Lundberg found that educational, religious, children’s, sports, and other miscellaneous programming only accounted for twenty-five percent of all broadcasting time in a given month; the other three-fourths was dedicated solely to music.

At the very least, then, radio listeners did not seem to resist broadcast entertainment, though it remained to be determined whether and how much they actually enjoyed or preferred it. After all, having a local musical group fill time on the air was a favorite strategy of broadcasters: it was one of the simplest and most cost-effective ways of producing a program. Not all commentators agreed with Beuick that entertainment programs would only appeal to those individuals incapable of seeking out human company in another form. For many, radio’s ability to make music accessible could be a valuable asset for the alleged good of the country, whether or not it was the reason people tuned in.

Musical numbers issuing forth from New York City’s radio stations were primarily of the classical variety. In Lundberg’s findings, about one-half of all

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airtime was devoted to music other than the “dance” music closely associated with jazz. Though Lundberg did not further classify the programs, a quick glance through *The New York Times* gives a clear indication of precisely which sorts of music fell into the non-dance category: large orchestral pieces, chamber music, and operatic solo performances. It was no accident that folk ballads and ethnically diverse musical strains did not make the program schedule. Many of those involved with the formation of radio broadcasting believed that the medium could be used as a tool of assimilation and acculturation, because “the diminishment of physical distance and penetration into private spaces [was] directly linked to the spread of culture – and cultural hierarchies.”

Put more simply, broadcasters’ cherished orchestral pieces and concertos would result in the general uplift of the nation’s population by incorporating all American residents into the cosmopolitan, northeastern, white, middle-class culture of the early twentieth century.

If Beuick was not correct in assuming that listening to a radio broadcast was an isolating experience, many others agreed with him that the socially and physically isolated would enjoy radio programming the most. Having studied the first decade or so of radio, Michelle Hilmes concludes, “isolation was the condition that broadcasting promised to alleviate, not create.” Whether a city- or country-dweller, the radio set’s owner could look forward to free entertainment in his or her living room “when the day’s work is done, and the evening meal is over.” “Americans are a home-loving people,” one journalist wrote, their “natural desire is to remain at home,” a condition for which the “secret of radio” is a

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perfect solution for the individual who desires both company and comfort.\textsuperscript{65} No matter how interested observers might debate the civic duties of radio, the nature of programming, or the social consequences of listening, no one denied that radio was enjoying a surge in popularity, or that a widespread movement was well underfoot across the country to obtain sets and tune in.\textsuperscript{66} Whether listeners preferred classical music and “culturally uplifting” programs was another matter — and one on which the producers of WRVA and the broadcasters from New York City disagreed.

When WRVA first went on the air in November of 1925, radio department manager Calvin T. Lucy would have snorted if someone had requested a program listing for the month. In essence, every night of broadcast was one big “program,” with no consistent format, time allotments, plots, or characters. Furthermore, WRVA only broadcast twice a week initially, and did not even broadcast during the daytime until June 9, 1926.\textsuperscript{67} The station only gradually worked its way up to eighteen hours a day, five days a week before broadcasting around-the-clock in 1929. It did not make sense to run highly regimented fifteen- or thirty-minute programs when time was so limited. For another thing, WRVA personnel did not yet know what would be popular. The station manager and studio director had decided before the station went on the air that they would make every effort to discern public opinion regarding their


\textsuperscript{66} To give some indication of radio’s meteoric rise in popularity, consider the following statistics gathered by the Federal Radio Commission. A survey conducted by “Radio Retailing,” in compliance with a request of the FRC, found that 7,500,300 American homes had radio sets as of January 1, 1928. A survey conducted and completed in May 1928 found nearly 12,000,000 radio receives sets were in use in the United States, serving an audience of approximately 40,000,000 persons. These figures are conservative, given the fact that the survey did not count crystal or one-tube receivers — the most common type of radio found in rural areas. \textit{Supplement to Annual Report of the Radio Commission to the Congress of the United States, 1928} (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1928), appendix 1.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{WRVA: Serving You for 50 Golden Years} ([Richmond, VA]: n. pub., 1975).
programming, in order to better attract listeners. Whether for commercial concerns (selling more Edgeworth tobacco) or genuine civic interest (uniting Virginians under a regional banner of pride and advancement), WRVA employees took their audience very seriously.

Within hours of broadcasting for the first time, the studio director had put his "Applause Memo" system into practice. Unlike other venues of entertainment, the radio performer could not immediately gauge his or her reception from facial expressions, cheering, booing, or clapping. The microphone silenced the peanut gallery, and station employees had to rely on telephone calls and fan letters to glean the program's reception somewhat belatedly. In an effort to turn the sporadic responses into some form of useful data, clerks condensed the calls and letters into "Applause Memos," detailing the name of the sender, city, state, and a brief summary of the comment. They then sent the memos on to the artists, but presumably not before taking inventory.

In a booklet detailing the short history of WRVA, no doubt issued to coincide with the beginning of WRVA's affiliation with NBC in 1929, program director Walter R. Bishop made a personal appeal to listeners on behalf of the artists who could not intuit the audience's reaction at the end of a performance:

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88 Several artists debated the unprecedented consequences of producing art for an unseen audience. One musician plainly stated the problem as being that "no applause, no sound comes to the performer as he faces his wireless audience of thirty or forty thousand." As a performing artist, one realizes "the magnitude of the experience which you are having. Your mind may glimpse the hundreds of miles of open country lying quiet under star-lit skies, with here and there a lone auditor to your music...As you sit in this big, silent room playing for your invisible audience you begin to appreciate the wonder of this scientific achievement, beside which all other human methods of communication are rendered insignificant...The conditions are trying to an instrumentalist; for a vocalist they are doubly so. The lack of resonance is merely annoying to one playing upon an instrument, but to the singer it is a serious matter. Doubtless some way will eventually be found to overcome this difficulty as the methods of transmission are perfected." Gordon Balch Nevin, "Making Music for an Invisible Audience," The Musician 27 (March 1992): 3.

89 "Last Night and To-Day's Radio," Richmond Times-Dispatch, Nov. 4, 1925.
“All the artist has is the memory of [your] letters, the comments, the praise that comes after each broadcast to help them achieve their best for you. Remember that, Friend Listener, and don’t fail to write when a program or artist especially pleases you. Nothing will do so much to stimulate the artists and your station’s directors to give you better and still better programs.”

Collating feedback was WRVA’s only method for quantifying audience satisfaction, which is why Bishop made the appeal to the public. By paying attention to which performances received praise and which did not, station employees could draw general conclusions about listeners’ demands and desires.

One of WRVA’s first and most successful forays into programming was the *Edgeworth Frolic Night*. Conceived of and produced by studio director and announcer Elmer G. Hoelzle, the show was first broadcast on Friday, February 26, 1926. *Frolic Night* featured a variety of informal performers: fiddlers, a Hawaiian guitar orchestra, comedians, harmonic exponents, a washboard orchestra, a handsaw soloist, and the “Edgeworth Negro Chorus.” The show received sufficient “applause” to warrant a sequel a month later. The second *Edgeworth Frolic Night* showcased different local talent, including a harmony team lead by Pat Binford, a silver-tongued musician who eventually became one of WRVA’s most well-known performers.

Encouraged by the response to the second program, station personnel elected to continue broadcasting *Frolic Night* at irregular intervals over the next year as they experimented with various sorts of programming. On December 2, 1926, thirteen months after WRVA first went on the air, a variety show of local talent that sounded suspiciously like the old *Frolic Night* premiered as *The Down*

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90 *The Edgeworth Tobacco Station WRVA Richmond, Virginia: “Down Where the South Begins”* ([Richmond, VA]: n. pub., 1929?).

Town Meeting of the Corn Cob Pipe Club. An immediate hit, the Corn Cob Pipe Club put WRVA on the map, as amateur receivers all over the country tuned in as well as local listeners. The show was a product of careful advertising and entertaining strategies on the part of the station's tobacco benefactor. And unlike the free-for-all rumpus of the Frolic Night, the new Corn Cob Pipe Club offered something beyond casual entertainment from local performers: membership.

Prior to 1928, the WRVA radio department of Larus & Brother employed only a handful of individuals. Unsurprisingly, then, even managerial personnel involved themselves in the practical business of broadcasting the Corn Cob Pipe Club. All white and all former employees in the tobacco branch of Larus & Brother Company's tobacco firm, the program's coordinators were the very core of WRVA. They were the policy-setters, decision-makers, and producers who controlled WRVA's image, content, and purpose. When the afternoon announcer welcomed listeners to WRVA, the "Voice of Virginia," he could easily have footnoted the salutation as really being the voice of William T. Reed, Pleasant Larus Reed, Elmer Hoelzle, Bertha Hewlett, Walter Bishop, Calvin T. Lucy, J. Robert Beadles, and Pat Binford, all of whom were intimately involved in the production of the Corn Cob Pipe Club.

If the station managers drafted the script, though, it was the performers who courted the listeners. Instead of urban orchestral pieces performed by some of the best-educated musicians of the day, Corn Cob Pipe Club broadcasts featured local talent with decidedly non-cosmopolitan names to suit their non-cosmopolitan musical selections. The performers were both black and white, from Richmond and beyond, singing and playing on accordions, banjos,

92 Ibid.
guitars, pianos, mouth harps, basses, clarinets, and cornets, just to name a few.\(^{93}\) That a white group called "Old-Time Fiddlers" garnered widespread praise and Applause Memos from 1926 – possibly from the first *Corn Cob Pipe Club* broadcast – indicates that people as far away as Canada, Cuba, and New England enjoyed listening. Studio Director and *Corn Cob Pipe Club* organizer Elmer Hoelzle wrote the group, praising them for “showing the country that we have lots of things in Richmond and Virginia to brag about.”\(^{94}\)

Though audiences are notorious for not always “hearing” what the performer intends, WRVA's listeners could not fail to hear the rural, folk-like tones of a supposedly authentic southern culture. The station's managers were making an unmistakable statement about the ways in which they would use radio broadcasting. Eschewing the classical numbers of orchestras and operas, WRVA attracted a large audience through a folk show featuring old-time music, hillbilly culture, blackface, and African American spirituals.

By the time WRVA produced the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, “old-time” shows were well established in the fledgling world of radio. Radio station owners had discovered in the mid-1920s that old-time fiddling programs appealed to a wide variety of audiences, and several stations were experimenting with regular broadcasts of “old-timers” and their bands.\(^{95}\) The show that ultimately developed into the popular *Grand Ole Opry* originated as a Saturday-evening country program featuring a solitary, old, white man playing a fiddle.\(^{96}\)

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\(^{94}\) "Applause Memos, 1926," *WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000*, LOV.


\(^{96}\) Interestingly, the seventy-seven-year-old fiddler, a performer who went by "Uncle Jimmy Thompson," debuted on WSM from Nashville the same month that the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* debuted on WRVA. He claimed to have learned music during the Civil War, and fit well into the "climate of the mid-1920s quest for authenticity in old-time music and quixotic characters." Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 69-70.
time" music's popularity seemed to stem from the audience's perception of it as "authentic" cultural expression. Entertainment industry entrepreneurs scoured the United States looking for the so-called distinctive sounds of the preindustrial landscape. "The performances of the old-timers, even if historically and aesthetically accurate, were, for the most part, taken by the radio audiences and record buyers as bemusing novelties."97

Hillbilly performers shared the stage with the old-time fiddlers, complicating the notion that the authentic must necessarily not be modern. Both the term and the image of the hillbilly were products of the mid-1920s, created primarily by the new radio medium. The hillbilly was a self-reliant, uneducated man, usually white, who felt at home in natural surroundings, and seemed to preserve an American ethos many Americans of the 1920s felt had vanished. Unlike the wizened men who performed old-time music, however, the hillbilly was in tune with the modern world, if he was not entirely comfortable in it. Audiences enjoyed both laughing at and feeling affection for the hillbilly, whose "humor, aggression, and love laments" were "set off against and often triggered by the intrusion of urban ways."98 The hillbilly was both a relic of an American past and a connection to the unfolding present.

According to literature published by the station several decades later on the occasion of WRVA's anniversary, the African American men who sang in a choir, referred to as both the "Edgeworth Negro Chorus" and the "Dixie Spiritual Singers," were the show's most popular performers.99 The choir was composed entirely of black employees from a Larus & Brother Company plant, and WRVA managers were self-congratulatory about their choice to air the black singers. A

97 Ibid., 5.
98 Peterson, Creating Country Music, 70-80, quote on 70.
history of the broadcast written several years later bragged that “WRVA pioneered” the practice of “present[ing]...the genuine Negro of Virginia,” instead of permitting white singers to sing songs associated with African Americans.100

Like the hillbillies and old-timers, the African American performers represented something “authentic” for the audience. WRVA was attracting listeners by commercializing precisely those sounds that were supposed to be beyond commercialization. The show was more than a random parade of the “folk,” though. The format, though seemingly flexible and improvised, provided a highly structured cultural space in which comedy sketches confronted zones of discomfort in American culture, and musical numbers became conversations of adjustment, negotiation, and resistance.

The Corn Cob Pipe Club’s format was little more than a series of entertainers presenting themselves as down-home folk from the South. After the guest musicians played “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” an announcer “hosted” the evening, providing direction and commentary for the various performers he seemed to select at random from the “audience,” as though he were at an informal gathering of musically gifted individuals. When musicians, with names like “Harmonica George” and “Hill Billy,” came to the microphone to perform, both the announcer and the audience made a big show of clapping, stomping, and whistling along. To break up the music, the announcer would either “call up” a volunteer to do a sketch, or he would do one himself. Sketches included satirical literary recitations, blackface comedy routines from white Corn Cob Pipe Club regulars “Saw Dust” and “Moonshine,” or simply banter between the

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100 “Corn Cob Pipe Club Sound Recording 1933,” WRVA-1, WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000, LOV (CD recording); “History of Corn Cob Pipe Club,” file 4, WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000, LOV.
announcer, the audience, and the musicians. After a dozen or more songs, the show ended with one more chuckle from the host and the sign-off, "From Dixie. Up and Out."101

Though the performers offered varied repertoires, a few songs became standards across the genres: "Oh, Susanna," "Hand Me Down My Walking Cane," "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers," "Turkey in the Straw," "Old Kitchen Kettle," "Ain't Gonna Rain No Mo."102 The show's songs were not the same ones that bands played in the urban dance halls of the Jazz Age, but rather harkened back to a preindustrial society that was far removed from urban, industrial, modern America.103 While most of the soon-to-be network stations of the Northeast would never have played this folk music because it was not in keeping with their vision of cosmopolitan — and in their eyes, better — culture, folk music was fast gaining popularity and currency among many people in the United States.

Susan Smulyan has asserted that people living in rural sections of the country enjoyed little of what they heard on big city radio stations; they much preferred broadcasts featuring "'hillbilly music' — what we now call country music — rooted in rural white and African American folk traditions."104 WRVA's hillbilly music proved popular for both city and country folk, however, and eventually found its largest audience in the highly industrialized Northeast. Considering the degree to which northeastern pundits and journalists touted the cosmopolitan

102 The Corn Cob Pipe Club "secretary" (WRVA Station Secretary Bertha Hewlett) recorded every act that performed on the Corn Cob Pipe Club between 1925 and 1935. She put red checks next to the ones that were well received, and a scan through her notebook reveals that the same songs received the distinguishing mark when played by different bands. "Corn Cob Pipe Club — Playlist, ca. 1925-1935, kept by Bertha Hewlett," WRVA Radio Collections, 1925-2000, LOV.
103 Many observers, particularly middle-class whites, worried about what they saw as a racially and socially transgressive dance hall culture that developed during the 1920s. For a contemporary "study" of the effects of dance hall music and practices on gender relations, please see LeRoy E. Bowman and Maria Ward Lambin, "Evidences of Social Relations as Seen in Types of New York City's Dance Halls," Journal of Social Forces 3 (January 1925): 286-291.
104 Smulyan, Selling Radio, 23.
“gift” of music that radio provided to northeastern residents as well as isolated farmers in the rest of the United States, this phenomenon is worth exploring.

European movements of nationalism in the nineteenth century prompted efforts to recover a “folk,” or organic, culture in the hope of providing a foundation for newly imagined nationalities.\footnote{Though several scholars have expanded on or altered the notion of an imagined nationality, Benedict Anderson must receive the credit for coining the term and being the first scholar to explore the creation and function of an “imagined community.” Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism} (London: Verso, 1991).} Music in particular was a central source of distinctive national, popular identities, and people searching for (or creating) a national culture eagerly sought out and redistributed it for mass consumption.\footnote{Michael Rogin, \textit{Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 45-47.} Though American nationalism had a different method and trajectory from European nationalism in some ways, the movement nonetheless spawned an interest in an American “folk” culture, especially in the first decades of the twentieth century. The perceived “rootlessness” of white Americans made identification of an organic culture more difficult, however, and through a complicated negotiation between urban middle-class whites, urban working-class whites, and urban and rural blacks, blackface minstrelsy emerged as the common “folk” culture upon which national culture would be built. When the white working class mimicked the subjugated African Americans, they claimed membership in the privileged world of whiteness. In a tragic paradox, then, American national culture to some extent was rooted in the “nationally dispossessed”\footnote{Rogin, \textit{Blackface, White Noise}, 47.} — that is, African Americans.

The music of the \textit{Corn Cob Pipe Club} thus provided a common ground on which diverse American residents could stand. Significantly, the music was a Creole mix of old-time, contemporary, white, and black sounds that came

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\item[107] Rogin, \textit{Blackface, White Noise}, 47.
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together to form a folk culture. For generations, black and white inhabitants of the South had been living in close proximity, acquainting themselves more intimately with one another through cultural and social practices than many contemporary observers – or historians – may have thought. Just as the broadcast scripts indicate the inclusion of both black and white performers sometimes singing the same songs, so-called southern culture incorporated “black” and “white” traditions that were so intertwined as to be nearly indistinguishable at some levels.\textsuperscript{108}

The folk culture that WRVA broadcast was one of timelessness, outdoor­ness, bucolic simplicity, and racial harmony; the performances harkened back to an antebellum period when everything was simpler and better, in the opinion of whites, largely because of the privileges guaranteed to them as members of the top caste in a slave society. No matter whether that conception of the antebellum period was accurate, the \textit{Corn Cob Pipe Club’s} popularity indicated that certain listeners wanted to hear about it anyway. Perhaps the jokes and musical chords that belonged to a preindustrial landscape attracted audiences weary of the rapid changes in early-twentieth-century America that had destabilized their hegemony over American social, political, and economic life, though such a theory must only be a historian’s educated conjecture in the absence of records.

While the previous speculation may seem far-fetched, consider for a moment that Larus & Brother Company sold primarily pipe tobacco through its Edgeworth branch. When Edgeworth executives built the radio station, they intended to use it as an advertising channel for their pipe tobacco, a product that

was quickly losing ground to the increasingly popular cigarette.\textsuperscript{109} For decades prior to the 1920s, prescriptive literature had condemned the use of cigarettes as base, un-American, and even effeminate.\textsuperscript{110} Opponents marshaled a wealth of "evidence" to support their case against cigarettes, but almost every argument revolved around one issue: the threat of modernization. Many Americans, especially middle-class whites, were distressed at the rate of change and their lack of control over it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With immigrants altering the demographic and cultural composition of city populations, and single, young people everywhere challenging their parents' boundaries, especially after the First World War, many middle-class Americans felt that their very way of life was under assault, and cigarettes were part of that offensive. They represented the new fast pace of life, sexuality, and danger.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{109} "Explanation of the growing popularity [of cigarettes] under such circumstances is to be found in their cheapness and convenience in comparison with cigars and pipes, as well as the enormous advertising campaigns sponsored by the [American Tobacco Company] trust." Nannie May Tilley, \textit{The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 1860-1929} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 608-9.

\textsuperscript{110} Some people regarded cigarettes as base and unrefined, and just more evidence of already alarming rates of change in the late nineteenth century. Many middle-class Americans felt their cultural system was under assault. See, for example, "Cigarettes in France," \textit{New York Times}, Oct. 7, 1877, 5; \textit{New York Times}, July 18, 1880, 2; Tate, \textit{Cigarette Wars}, 18.

\textsuperscript{111} By the turn of the century, many newspaper writers equated the smoking of cigarettes with sex or sexual impurity, especially among women. One reporter "faithfully reported" an anecdote related to him, "One night last week, about 12, I was slowly sauntering homeward, and, passing a swell apartment hotel, happened to glance in the windows of the first floor. The d\textsuperscript{ash} curtains were a trifle open, and there, in a soft white wrapper, sat a very pretty young woman, cigarette in mouth, her head thrown back lazily on her easy chair. She was evidently just going to bed, for her hair was loose – magnificent hair that almost swept to the floor. She did look comfortable and sweet enough to eat." Not only does the woman "in a soft white wrapper" become the object of a voyeur's gaze, but her very action of smoking a cigarette seems curiously akin to masturbation. At the very least, her smoking makes her sexually available to the passersby. An article in the \textit{Washington Post} eight years earlier made a similar point, "But the naughty girl soon learns that practice brings endurance, and that instead of half a cigarette three and often four are reduced to v\textsuperscript{aporous} rings before the reveile [sic] reaches a climax." The suggestive language in the account signifies that the female smoker was both immoral and engaged in sexual activity. "What Are We Coming To? Here are the Irreproachable Boston Girls Succumbing to Cigarettes," \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, 15 Nov. 1890, 16; "Girls Who Smoke Cigarettes: How Charming Society Ladies Indulge in the Luxury," \textit{The Washington Post}, Oct. 22, 1882, 2. H. Burke, "Women Cigarette Fiends," \textit{Ladies' Home Journal} 39 (June 1922): 19.
Cigarettes made southerners – and Richmonders in particular – exceedingly wealthy by the end of the First World War. Indeed, because of the astounding success of the cigarette manufacturers, pipe tobacco manufacturers like the Edgeworth Tobacco Company owned by Larus & Brother had to scramble to maintain consumer loyalties. The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* therefore chose to sell pipe tobacco in the 1920s by recalling pre-modern days in which white men (never women) had the time to sit on porches, listen to old-time and "traditional" African American music, and lazily draw away on pipes – not cigarettes – made of the humblest of all materials: a corn cob. That such a time may have never existed was obscured by a need to believe that it had in the face of drastic change. Hillbilly music and "traditional" black music provided an excellent bridge between the present and the perceived past because many of the songs were handed down from one generation to another, with few uncomfortable challenges to the white audience's suspended disbelief. The Edgeworth Station did its best through the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* program to prove that bygones did not have to be bygones, and that certain nostalgic memories were only a pipeful of tobacco away. But perceived leisure was only one small component of the preindustrial society WRVA's program depicted. If white men had the time to sit peacefully and smoke their pipes in the "old days," it was because other enslaved men and women were toiling for them.

At a deeper level, however, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*’s music provided white audiences the means of reimagining the present even as they were reimagining the past in two important ways. In his social history of the popular radio program *Amos 'n' Andy*, Melvin Ely suggests that white audiences enjoyed listening to black performances – particularly when those performances lent some dignity to the black performers – in part because they needed to feel that they were not categorically oppressing African Americans. Many white
Americans, Ely asserts, were neither ignorant of nor wholly uncaring about the state of American race relations, past and present. This collective conscience manifested itself in two general ways for white Americans: they could either work "for justice and decency," or – far more frequently – find ways of "see[ing] [themselves] as just and decent while still behaving in the old, comfortable manner." For precisely this reason, white listeners were keen to hear reports of the black community's satisfaction with the show, despite some evidence to the contrary; doing so laid their consciences at rest without substantially altering the status quo.

The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* provided another means of "soothing" white consciences. Part of the power of radio in the 1920s lay in its ability to reach into the homes of millions of Americans and expose listeners to a common experience. As the assortment of journalists, columnists, and casual observers pointed out in the previous section, radio was thought to be an extremely powerful tool of acculturation in the 1920s. Indeed, some Americans thought radio could be the solution to white anxieties about immigration and changing social values. Those involved in the radio industry were well aware of the "responsibility" they bore for the listening public; namely, they believed that their broadcasting choices could somehow improve Americans and American life. That is, they believed radio could breed "familiarity" with certain sets of social and cultural values (selected by the broadcasters, of course) that would then translate into a stronger citizenship: "familiarity causes interest; developed interest creates desire; desire leads to action, and action will make a positive 100 per cent American citizen." The *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, then, with its heavy

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113 Ibid., 155-157.
reliance on imagining a different, utopian era without the burden of modern problems, acted as a tool of control for the broadcasters, who were mostly white men. By denying racial and social tension between races or social groups on the airwaves, they were by extension denying those tensions in reality. The depictions of race provided the most glaring examples of this denial on the program.

The musical and comedic routines presented by white *Corn Cob Pipe Club* performers relied heavily on blackface, where white actors painted their faces black and mimicked or parodied white perceptions of black culture before a primarily white audience. The blackface performers in WRVA's studios mimicked a very specific black culture, though. Just as WRVA's signature opening and closing song invoked the myth of the happy, grateful slave, so too did WRVA's first popular program.

The list of songs performed for the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* that station secretary Bertha Hewlett compiled is a testimony to the pervasiveness of mimicry in the program's format. To take one example, white singer "Aunt Sarah," also known as Mrs. Lawson Turner of Lynchburg, Virginia, sang a good many songs that received Hewlett's distinguished red marks of merit. The titles of the songs alone called up images of blackness through use of dialect or explicit black imagery: "I'ce Goin' Back to Dixie," "Shortenin' Bread," "Mighty Lak a Rose," "Mammy's Little Cold Black Rose," "I'm Goin' To Ole Virginny," and "Plantation Lullaby." A scan of the playlist book will reveal that the

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115 Station secretary Bertha Hewlett kept meticulous records of WRVA in-house programs, particularly in the first five years of broadcasting. She seemed to have had a special interest in the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, as she kept a detailed "program log" of every song and every performer to visit the show. She would type a listing of all songs performed by a given performer, and then assign checkmarks to the most popular ones – according to studio audience response – with a red pencil.

instruments used, for the most part, were the instruments of the slave communities that white masters could overhear from their houses at night. Slaves often had to make their own instruments or do without, and fiddles, banjos, gourd guitars, and percussion implements were testimony to their industry and ingenuity.\footnote{Eugene D. Genovese, \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made} (New York: Vintage, 1976), 572.} \textit{Corn Cob Pipe Club} performers also preferred these instruments, with very few exceptions. When performers combined these instruments with the songs commonly associated with blackness and slavery, listeners could not help but \textit{hear} the blackface even when they could not see it.

Listeners could also hear blackface in the sketches or acts between musical numbers. In a transcript of a broadcast from 1933, Calvin T. Lucy, the manager of the Edgeworth Radio Department and WRVA's General Manager, performed the following piece in affected African American dialect under the name “Jes' Plain Sam”:

\begin{quote}
Mister Edgar Allan Poe had a raven bird, just a plain ol' crow. 
The crow was a pet and he used to set above the do' of Mister Poe and kept on quoting "nevermo', nevermo.'"

Co'se that was long time ago, and co'se I ain't Mister Poe 
I ain't got no crow and ain't got no do', but here's one thing I do know: 
If dat ol' crow with his nevermo' had been through what I have I'm sho 
He would quote much mo' than nevermo' 
Law, he'd quote nevermo' and then some mo.'

Seems like Mister Poe was in love with Miss Leono', but she done died long time ago. 
Co'se I don't – I don't know if Mister Poe knowed Miss Leono' was dead for sho or no, 
But if he \textit{did} know and still cried to go, well, a-a-as I said, I ain't Mister Poe and that was long time ago.

My-my wife's name ain't Leono', it's, uh, Flora. 
For short, we jest called her plain Flo' 
She ain't dade, and what's mo' [where?] she lives is just a block or so. 
But do you hear me cryin' to get back to Flo'? Naw, sir! 
Nevermo'! Nevermo!'\footnote{"Corn Cob Pipe Club Sound Recording 1933," WRVA-1, \textit{WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000}, LOV (CD recording).} 
\end{quote}
In this case, Lucy mimicked a black man mimicking a white man. The poem is a parody of Edgar Allen Poe's romantic and haunting work, “The Raven,” about a lovesick young man grieving the untimely death of his life’s love.

The Corn Cob Pipe Club’s audience would have been well aware of Lucy’s joke in turning “The Raven” into “The Crow.” Since the 1830s and 1840s, Jim Crow had been a stock character of blackface minstrelsy. He was supposed to “epitomize the plantation slave,” and minstrels portrayed him as a “blissfully ignorant, emotionally childlike, fun-loving creature endowed with an innate musical and rhythmic sense.” Though he might boast of exceptional skill and accomplishments, his ratty clothing, exaggerated African features, and perpetual grin marked him as a fool and a simpleton, thereby minimizing any claims of ability he might make. Moreover, the term “Jim Crow” had gained widespread currency in the decades following Reconstruction as Southern states passed restrictive laws to segregate and subordinate African Americans. Many if not most of the Corn Cob Pipe Club’s audience, whether from the South or elsewhere, would have been familiar with the “Jim Crow” laws, as this legislation was commonly called. Lucy’s performance would have reinforced certain aspects of the Jim Crow stereotype of infantilism, as well as the institutional structure of discrimination that governed Southern social relations. As Lucy delivered the punchline, the studio audience broke into applause and laughter.

A closer reading of the performance, however, suggests an entirely different message. For one thing, the “black” narrator was performing an intellectually sophisticated exercise: satire. As frustrated high school English teachers everywhere tell disaffected teenagers, one cannot be cynical or judgmental about something with which one is unfamiliar. The parody of Poe’s

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famous work betrayed both a deep understanding both of the content and form of mid-nineteenth-century Romanticism and an ability to generate witty original work.

In addition, the act of parodying the poem was, to some extent, an act of reclaiming and reforming the so-called American canon. The narrator depicted Poe's narrator (whom he conflated with Poe himself) with less reverence, perhaps, than other critics. Poe’s “raven bird” is “just a plain ol’ crow.” If the raven was “plain,” so was Poe’s mournful lover. “The Raven” provokes emotions of sympathy, pity, and mourning from the reader. “Jes’ Plain Sam’s” poem identified a different set of themes, however, as the ostensibly black narrator preferred to question either the depth of Poe’s emotion or the legitimacy of the mourning, or possibly both. The narrator wondered whether Poe knew “Miss Leono’” had died, and asserted that “if he did know and still cried to go, well, a-a-as I said, I ain’t Mister Poe and that was long time ago.” Though he stopped short of direct criticism, his words and tone implied that “Mister Poe” might have found better ways to spend his time. The “black” narrator thus examined a celebrated white American poet and one of his most famous poems and offered a witty, African American perspective as an alternative. In doing so, he not only poked fun at the solemnity of the Romantic-era poem, but also offered an implied criticism of the white literary canon in general.

The Corn Cob Pipe Club script did not limit its treatment of African Americans to blackface performances. As previously mentioned, African American male singers were regular guests on the show. The “Edgeworth Negro Chorus,” or “Dixie Spiritual Singers,” was composed of black employees from the Edgeworth tobacco plant. Unlike the blackface performances that presented a caricature of African American culture, the singers of the “Edgeworth Negro Chorus” were considered to be “genuine” and “authentic” by
members of the audiences and the show’s producers. Much of their supposed “authenticity” stemmed from a perceived connection between their music in the 1920s and the music of their enslaved ancestors.

It was in the employer’s best interest to have singing black workers, or so the common knowledge went. For much of the tobacco industry’s history, most of the labor in the factories had to be done by hand without the regulating motion of machinery to set the pace. Even before the Civil War, black slaves had been hired to the tobacco plants of Richmond to perform the necessary tasks deemed too menial and demanding (or expensive) for free white laborers. Foremen quickly found that coercion could not maintain a steady pace, and they “wisely left their cat-o’-nine-tails hanging on the wall” and instead encouraged their tobacco laborers to sing. The rhythm of the songs tied workers to a consistent, coordinated pace even as it provided some psychological relief from the drudgery and difficulty of the job.

In the years after emancipation, factory owners of the 1860s and 1870s continued to endeavor to fill out work forces with black laborers, and did. And as before emancipation, employers encouraged their black employees to sing. We can speculate that the singing brought as much or more “psychological relief” to the white foremen and owners as it did to the tired black laborers. The singing of traditional black songs and spirituals might have reminded the white overseers powerfully of slavery. Amid the tremendous social anxiety that emancipation and black political activity caused whites in the post-Reconstruction South, white factory managers and workers could quiet their paranoia as they peered authoritatively up and down the rows of tables and leaf-

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stemmers, watching poorly-paid and even more poorly-treated African Americans sing while they worked for a new kind of “master”: industry.

At the same time, however, those white owners and overseers could have soothed their “white consciences,” believing that their African American workers were singing because they were happy. An owner could easily tell himself that the underpaid workers were singing because they were content, and not because their overseers encouraged singing to maintain an efficient industrial rhythm. This is precisely the tragedy of the “white conscience” that Melvin Ely identifies when he concludes, “conscience can serve evil when it leads people to ignore or excuse evil rather than grapple with it, or to prettify their perceptions of reality rather than improve reality itself.”121

Of course, we can only speculate as to what the black radio singers must have been thinking as they rolled off versions of “Bound for Canaan,” “King Jesus is Listening,” “I’m So Glad Trouble Don’t Last Always,” “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” and “Roll Jordan Roll.”122 The songs they sang were traditional songs of resistance and survival in the face of unimaginable oppression. Maybe the singers felt a sense of pride when they thought of the listeners – black and white – who would finally hear authentic black voices over airwaves that had been the exclusive domain of white Americans for the most part.

We also cannot underestimate the social power of those black voices, as they reached into the intimate living spaces of blacks and whites alike. In white houses where black people would never be allowed to use the front door, much less to fraternize with the white family, the radio broadcast brought black men into living rooms and bedrooms, literally permeating the space with blackness in

a way that no one would have believed possible a decade before. How could we ever quantify the impact of that?

Despite the many ways in which these vocal performances were a potential source of pride for the black workers, the irony still must have been bitter for the “Dixie Spiritual Singers.” They worked long hours for low pay at industrial jobs, and then became models of white visions of plantation blackness at night on the air. They were in the studio because of their relationship to southern industry, but also because of their “usefulness” for white audiences who wanted to hear authentic, preindustrial rhythms and verses. The black musicians were culturally suspended between the antebellum Jim Crow character and the post-Civil War Jim Crow institution. In that suspension, they both soothed the anxieties and consciences of southern whites and resisted the restrictions of a dominant ruling class through the very act of being heard. They were simultaneously whites’ images of servility, and agents of de facto desegregation over the airwaves – black performers whom white broadcasters attempted to fit into a carefully prescribed and scripted “place,” and African American men whose voices reached the ears of African American as well as white listeners from a medium that was owned and operated by white men. They became bridges between segregated worlds, simultaneously affirming and resisting white oppression.
CHAPTER IV
RADIO RECEPTION: A NATIONAL AUDIENCE

Presentations and negotiations of the American South underlay most if not all of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*'s broadcasts. From the twangy chords of the hillbilly music to the affected dialect of white performers in blackface sketches and African American singers, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* created and recreated images of both an antebellum and a contemporary South. From the supervisor to the secretary, almost all of WRVA’s personnel had a hand in the creation and recreation of the program. The broadcasts they aired were products of their own cultural biases, social and racial prejudices, and impressions of what listeners would like. Of course, they were not broadcasting into actual silence; nor could they control the message once it had been delivered. The program changed and developed as WRVA received fan mail and telephone calls from listeners eager to comment on the show. A salient question might then be: if blackness and an “authentic” rural South were themes, did they only intrigue southerners whose lives were structured by notions of race and regional history, or did they have wider appeal?

WRVA staff always fretted over their audience, especially in the early years before the desire to sell commercial space on the air prompted the development of formal listenership statistics. Through the use of voluntary responses from listeners via telephone calls and letters and the cherished Applause Memos, WRVA station officials did their best to interpret public opinion regarding their programming. When *Frolic Night* garnered a favorable reaction from listeners from November 1925 to November 1926, WRVA personnel suspected they would be successful if they could find a way to “regularize” both
the program format and the audience—meaning that they wanted a recognizable pattern for the show so people would know what to expect, and that they wanted a large and loyal audience to tune in. The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was the perfect solution.

The genius of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was its emphasis on membership, inclusion, and subscription. On December 2, 1926, one week after the last *Edgeworth Frolic Night* aired, WRVA director and announcer Elmer G. Hoelzle reassembled the same performers with a familiar script and broadcast a new version of the *Frolic Night* he billed as *The Down Town Meeting of the Corn Cob Pipe Club*. Hoelzle started the program as if starting a town meeting from a location about ten miles south of Richmond in a community called Dutch Gap. Elections were held for club officers, and popular performer Anthony Ende became the club’s first president. The announcer spoke to the audience as if they were part of the town meeting as well, encouraging listeners to become intimately acquainted with the club’s “members” (performers) and officers (program directors).\(^\text{123}\) Despite the physical distance separating the audience from the act, performer and listener were joined together through a common interest in southern folk culture….and, WRVA’s employees hoped, through their simultaneous, cheerful consumption of Edgeworth smoking tobacco.

The *Corn Cob Pipe Club of Dutch Gap* “met” five times over the next two years, drawing an ever-increasing volume of fan mail from both Virginians and listeners from great distances. Encouraged by the loyal and expanding fan base, WRVA managers began making plans to broadcast the program even more regularly. Because both listeners and WRVA personnel seemed to consider the show to be “typical of traditional Virginia hospitality and

friendliness,” the program’s title changed to the *Corn Cob Pipe Club of Virginia*, and the show became a weekly feature on December 1, 1928.\(^{124}\) Hopeful that the program would do well, station personnel worried nonetheless that the southern variety show would not be able to sustain a loyal audience with such frequent broadcasts. To ensure the continued support of their fans, program directors capitalized on one of their existing strategies, and virtual membership became real membership.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the program directors began referring to the *listeners* as the true members of the club, instead of the performers. To reinforce that line, WRVA began offering actual membership benefits to fans who wrote their names and addresses on the back of Edgeworth smoking tin labels and mailed them to the station. Upon receiving the labels, WRVA secretary Bertha Hewlett put together a package including a corn cob pipe, a formal “Membership Certificate,” printed in color with a raised seal and Hewlett’s signature, and a letter of welcome.\(^{125}\) To formalize the theme of membership, the announcer followed up the first musical act of the broadcast with a solemn swearing-in of sorts. He divulged the number of membership applications since the last program and then asked the audience whether they would receive the applicants or not. The answer was a boisterous “aye!”, and any aspiring member listening to the radio at home must have felt part of a larger community that was as eager to include as it was to entertain.\(^{126}\)

The show continued to increase in popularity, and in the summer of 1931 the Edgeworth station sponsored the first coast-to-coast broadcast of the *Corn

\(^{124}\) Ibid.
Cob Pipe Club of Virginia through station WNBC, New York City. WRVA had become an affiliate of NBC in January of 1928, and the station had been both a producer and a receiver of radio programs since. At least three-quarters of the material WRVA broadcast originated from the WRVA studios, but the station also broadcast popular regular features from the Northeast like Amos ‘n’ Andy. Despite WRVA’s continued success in developing a large, national audience for its supposedly local programming after becoming an affiliate in 1929, WNBC had shown little interest in broadcasting a WRVA-produced show until early 1932. Finally convinced that the show would make money for their advertisers (most likely because they were impressed by the volume of voluntary club “members”), NBC station officials decided to pay WRVA for the Corn Cob Pipe Club so they could broadcast it nationally. For the next several years, the Corn Cob Pipe Club of Virginia ran on NBC as a weekly feature on Wednesday nights. Overwhelmed and emboldened by the dramatically increased fan mail and requests for membership, WRVA studio managers took membership and subscription to new levels.

WRVA’s new emphasis on group membership rather than individual membership must have changed the way some people listened. The program’s announcer routinely encouraged eager listeners to identify other listeners in the community and gather to listen to broadcasts together. Listeners seemed responsive to the entreaties, and requests for materials to start local Corn Cob Pipe Club “clubs” poured in. In one neat motion WRVA employees had

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128 In an official publication of the Corn Cob Pipe Club, an un-named WRVA manager wrote, “You will note that we have combined the May and June issues of ‘Smoke.’ This became necessary on account of the tremendous amount of work, piled on each and every member of the publication staff, in connection with our International Membership Campaign. Mail has poured in on us. Applications for C.C.P.C. memberships by the thousands, and letters about this, that, and the other, each item requiring individual handling...we have practically been in the ‘pipe-shipping’ business for the past few weeks...It is indeed gratifying to know that we have so many friends and patrons throughout the land, and when we think about the thousands and
proven that radio was not the isolating and antisocial instrument that sociologist Marshall Beuick had predicted. Where Beuick assumed that the act of listening would necessarily be solitary and unfulfilling because it defied the “innate” human need to herd, the response to WRVA’s invitation seems to indicate that listeners of the first decade or so of radio felt precisely the opposite.129 If Beuick was right that “it require[d] tremendous exertion with the imagination to feel one’s self a part of a broadcast audience,” it would be safe to say that thousands if not hundreds of thousands and even millions of Americans were ready to exert themselves.130 And they not only “exerted” themselves to be part of a radio audience; they talked to other people who enjoyed the same program, created a kind of community, and began to “herd” through a shared experience of imagination.

In addition to the new push for group membership, WRVA began circulating a bimonthly magazine called Smoke to Corn Cob Pipe Club members in 1934, free of charge.131 The magazine provided visual images of the performers whom listeners had come to know only through voice and character, as well as biographies, history lessons about Virginia, plugs for Virginia tourism, and an extensive report of club statistics, including a feature introducing one club each issue to the rest of the subscribers. The featured club reports reveal

thousands of pipes that will be ‘packed’ with Edgeworth we are happy to be the makers of this famous blend...” Smoke magazine, published May-June 1935, folder “Corn Cob Pipe Club (1926-1936),” C. T. Lucy Papers, VCU.

129 Benedict Anderson reasoned that residents of modern nations relied upon imagined connections between them as a fundamental component of collective identity-building. “[Community] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” Anderson, Imagined Communities, 6. If anything, listeners’ formation of Corn Cob Pipe Club clubs demonstrated that an imagined community could become an actual community under certain circumstances.


131 Though I have not found any Smoke magazines published earlier than 1935, I have concluded from the volume numbers that 1934 must have been the first year of circulation.
the mechanisms of club organization and the function of meetings. Speaking for club no. 778 from Atlantic City, N.J. Mace Cooper wrote:

Gentlemen – I have been an Edgeworth tobacco smoker for the last eight or nine years, and when I purchased the billiard parlor at 9½ S. South Carolina Avenue, in Atlantic City, I naturally stocked Edgeworth. The boys gathered around me began to sniff pleasantly at the smoke clouds emitting from your truly [sic]. When they asked me where I got the good tobacco and what do you call it, I just pointed to the familiar blue tins. 'Nuff sed.

Today the club boasts of a membership of twenty-five enthusiastic pipe smokers, more than half of whom smoked nothing but cigarettes heretofore. Listening to your broadcast one night we decided there and then to organize a local branch of the Corn Cob Club.

The members get a great kick out of the display of membership certificates plastered on the wall, not forgetting the log rack holding the good old corn cobs. Our meetings are informal – oh, very informal. Our main business consisted of arguing and discussing any subject that leaves itself open to attack. A cook keg of ye olde brew keeps things moving smoothly no little [sic]...

The men of club no. 778 – all “business men and executives,” Cooper assures us – gathered together to enjoy a smoke and a radio show, as well as lively social interaction. If we cut through the sycophantic applause for Edgeworth tobacco, we can see that one of the primary reasons these men met seems to have been simply to share a relaxed moment, away from the bustle of everyday life. The formation of a club to enjoy the “benefits” of pipe-smoking was a tribute to many people’s desire to escape their contemporary world in favor of a world perceived to be older, purer, and somehow more enjoyable.

We do not have definitive listenership statistics from the first years of the Corn Cob Pipe Club’s network broadcasts, but an analysis of club membership by state gives us a good indication. All official documentation of the clubs indicates that membership was limited to white men. Club officials frequently mailed photographs of new clubs to the station, many of which made their way into the permanent files. Whether African American and female listeners chose to send photographs that were not archived, did not choose to send photographs

\[132\] Smoke magazine, published May-June 1935, folder “Corn Cob Pipe Club (1926-1936),” C. T. Lucy Papers, VCU.
at all, or did not create clubs is unclear. What is clear is that, by the spring of 1935, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* had attracted a growing membership that was national in scope. Thirty-eight states, the District of Columbia, and an undisclosed number of foreign countries laid claim to at least one club; twenty-five cities could claim at least four. In all, 778 groups of listeners had requested and received membership by mid-1935. Significantly, the vast majority of the clubs were in industrial centers of the Northeast and northern mid-west. New York (112 clubs), Pennsylvania (80), Massachusetts (56), and Ohio (56) led the way, with southern states like Louisiana (1), Arkansas (1), Alabama (3), and even Virginia (7), bringing up the rear. Of the twenty-five cities that could claim at least four clubs, only Washington, D.C. could be considered geographically southern.

This is perhaps not surprising when we consider that major urban centers were ripe for clubs of this nature. For one thing, the large numbers of people living in a small area made identification of other listeners more likely and the logistics of meeting more practical. One could also argue that industrialism and urbanization had affected the people living in those great metropoles to a much greater extent than people living in the rest of the country, giving them the incentive to seek out correctives and companionship. But there was more to the urban interest in the program than might be readily apparent. When northern listeners gathered in Mace Cooper’s billiard parlor, they were involved in an act of cultural sharing with white southerners. Their purpose was not to ridicule the antics of “backwoods” white or African Americans, but to embrace a culture through the practice of leisurely smoking pre-industrial pipes while listening to acts of blackface, hillbilly music, and black spiritual singers. They were effectively and energetically imagining themselves part of the southern climate of supposedly carefree living and hierarchy.
The Corn Cob Pipe Club of Virginia made a point of pretending to exist in a time far removed from the anxieties and uncertainties of the present. WRVA staff achieved this effect by repackaging the New South’s mythologizing of an antebellum white utopia. Though they never said so explicitly, everything from the station’s signature song played at the beginning of each program (“Carry Me Back to Old Virginny”) to the race of the performers and the material of the performances articulated WRVA’s dependence on this trope. While it is difficult to prove that it was this trope more than anything else that appealed to a national audience, a few key pieces of evidence point in that direction.

A month prior to the Corn Cob Pipe Club’s premiere as a regular network program in 1932, WRVA sponsored its first “network” show ever, calling it The Dixie Spiritual Singers after the same black tobacco workers who had made and continued to make the Corn Cob Pipe Club popular. It is significant that the black voices of Edgeworth’s tobacco employees were the conduit for WRVA’s national debut through one of the new coast-to-coast networks. Singing spirituals associated with antebellum slavery as much as contemporary Christian faith, the “Dixie Spiritual Singers” presented a very specific image of the station and the state to listeners across the country.

Despite the Corn Cob Pipe Club’s pretensions of being more of a “white” hillbilly program than a half-hour of “Negro” gospel, radio reviewers were more likely to remember and recommend the portions of the program involving African American performers than the hillbilly segments. One columnist in Los Angeles ignored the hillbillies completely in the first few months of network broadcasting, declaring simply, “these Negro harmonists are a delight ” who offer “real colored harmony and fun.”133 In his enthusiasm for the program, Doug Douglas of the

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Los Angeles Times promised readers the pleasure of “The Dixie Spiritual Singers” if they tuned in to the new Corn Cob Pipe Club program, presuming they were already familiar with them and would want to hear them again.\textsuperscript{134}

Another radio reviewer delightedly informed his readers that the “Tobacco Boys,” the name WRVA’s announcer sometimes gave to the African American singers, “whose spirituals each week form a feature of the Corn Cob Pipe Club,” were actual tobacco workers. Though their music could have been closely associated with industrial working conditions, the columnists – and, indeed, WRVA staff as well – preferred to associate the songs with the music of the workers’ enslaved ancestors. The reporter assured his readers that the “Tobacco Boys” frequently “rehearse their songs while working,” and “it’s not an uncommon occurrence for one of them to break into a song while stemming tobacco and within a few minutes all of them are singing at the top of their voices.”\textsuperscript{135} The African American tobacco workers who sang into the microphone once a week seemed to be a key selling point for the program’s popularity to the nation.

Reviewers did not seize upon the African American performances simply because the songs were unfamiliar to ears unaccustomed to the accent and style. They quickly and perhaps unconsciously accepted the program’s association of African American singing with antebellum slavery, just as the “old-time” music suggested a bygone era and the hillbilly expressed discomfort with modern values. The songs and acts of the Corn Cob Pipe Club presented non-southern audiences with a carefully crafted image of the Old South. The “breath of the old plantation” that one heard between the performances on the program was supposed to refresh or relax the listener. “Music redolent of the South and

\textsuperscript{134} Doug Douglas, “Tuning In,” Los Angeles Times, June 22, 1932.
of the plantations of Virginia" overcame any racial or social tension among the hierarchically organized peoples of the South in the early twentieth century, and it temporarily eased tension for white Americans in other regions during a period of social uncertainty — an era punctuated by the Great Migration of African Americans into the North and West, to the chagrin of more than a few whites. Listeners found balm for contemporary turmoil in the voices of black singers, whom white listeners could imagine as “Negro harmonists loll[ing] on cabin porches and fill[ing] the night with music.”

Newspaper columnists were not the only ones to explicitly identify and enjoy the plantation mythology of WRVA’s broadcasts. Guy Williams from Seattle, Washington, wrote the station in 1934 begging for more of the “Negro” songs. “Old plantation songs make a big impression. You can work them in two or three times in the same evenin’ and it will improve your program.” Many of the “letters to the editor” included in the bimonthly Smoke magazines made similar requests. Listeners praised the “Tobacco Boys” and requested to hear more of them. One listener from Cincinnati, Ohio, thanked the station for allowing him temporarily to enter the New South’s dream world of the Old South through the black voices: “your ‘Carry Me Back to Old Virginia’ is beautifully rendered, and as the last strains fade away, I will take another smoke with the old companion of leisure, and I’ll be seeing you all under the old oak tree with WRVA.”

Non-Virginian and even non-southern listeners relished both the music and the myth, reengaging it each Wednesday night they tuned in to the broadcast, or every time they met a fellow club member in the billiard parlor. No

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137 “Corn Cob Pipe Club – Letter, 2 March 1934,” file 5, WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000, LOV.
138 Smoke Magazine, May-June 1935, C.T. Lucy Papers, VCU.
doubt the white listeners enjoyed the aspect of time travel that the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* offered. But even more importantly, they seemed to covet the image of stable racial and social hierarchies that the program’s content offered. As ever-enthusiastic *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Doug Douglas put it, “for a visit to the Old South...these Southern colored boys and girls broadcasting from Richmond, Va., do put a real moon of music in the southern sky.”\(^{139}\) The “moon” that the national audience identified and contemplated was not constructed only of harmonies and lyrical rhythms, but of master-slave relationships, preindustrial myths of white empowerment, and a suggestion of what the world could have been without emancipation and industrialization.

CONCLUSION
RADIO AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

When widespread radio broadcasting burst on the scene in the 1920s, observers had a difficult time deciding whether it belonged to the elite, the folk, or the government. The white elites who had relentlessly demarcated, defined, and delineated cultural productions over the past several decades were unsure about what to do with radio. One thing, however, had become quite clear by the middle of the decade: radio could and would become an instrument whites could use to control the “differences” they perceived as a threat to America’s future.140

Most of the people in control of the airwaves came from urban centers. The vast majority of American radio stations broadcast from the Northeast or Chicago, with only a sprinkling of low-power stations throughout the rest of the country. Beginning in July 1927, radio stations had to apply for broadcasting licenses from the newly created Federal Radio Commission (FRC) in the federal government’s first large-scale attempt to regulate the airwaves. The FRC granted licenses to a total of 682 stations in 1927; 450 of the stations were located in states adjacent to or containing large industrial cities. Most of those stations broadcast from cities in and around Chicago, St. Louis, New York, Detroit, Cleveland, and Philadelphia. States without large industrial centers,

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140 Not all radio stations became instruments of white control, though the vast majority of them did. A small but significant number of local stations were owned and operated by non-English-speaking peoples, people of color, or people who consciously represented the working class. For further reading in this area, please see Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Barbara Dianne Savage, Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Nathan Godfried, WCFL: Chicago’s Voice of Labor, 1926-78 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). The fact that operators of minority-owned stations received so much resistance is testimony to the determination with which many white Americans tried to seize control of the airwaves.
mostly from the Southwest, the Pacific Northwest, the Rocky Mountains, and the South, had a mere 232 licensed stations, 54 of which were in California alone, to account for only 34 percent of all American stations. Perhaps even more telling, the stations in non-industrial regions broadcast at significantly lower wattages, accounting for only 22.6 percent of the national total amplitude output.\textsuperscript{141}

Though radio was in theory a tool for everyone – country- and city-dweller alike – the stations from the Northeast and Chicago were the most numerous and the most powerful. If one wanted to tune in, one would most likely be tuning in the voice of the city.

As listenership expanded rapidly in the middle and late 1920s, so did the power of the radio broadcasters from the large cities. Radio’s “personalities and experiences became more real than those of the neighbors down the block, more real, perhaps than the listener’s own.”\textsuperscript{142} As networks and local stations standardized their programming formats and FRC regulation reduced static and interference, listeners became accustomed to “listening in” to their favorite shows with their favorite characters and announcers. In time, radio’s intimacy – its ability to reach people in their private living spaces – fostered the creation of a large imagined community of the air. The broadcasts “presented opportunities for cultural expression and national self-definition never before available, not only in the United States but in countries around the world.”\textsuperscript{143} Radio broadcasts generated far more than consumer interest in the products advertised; they presented, mediated among, and made familiar many of the confusing and sometimes troubling aspects of everyday life in modern America. The result was a presentation, controlled mainly by white men living in urban centers, of America

\textsuperscript{141} Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission to the Congress of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1929, “Table Showing Number of Broadcasting Stations in Each Zone, with Total Power in Each Zone as of July 1, 1927, and as of June 20, 1928.”

\textsuperscript{142} Hilmes, Radio Voices, 73.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 6.
and American-ness. The “America” that radio created included some while excluding others, and defined what sorts of activities and values made one American. In short, the imagined community of the air began defining citizenship.

The same year that Pleasant Reed decided to build WRVA in Virginia, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, severely limiting immigration into the United States for the first time in the history of the country. Almost half a century of mass immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Russia, and East Asia had left many Americans of Anglo-Saxon heritage feeling threatened. The white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants worried they would lose control over political and social order if the immigrants failed to assimilate into roles defined by the native whites. In response, the Immigration Act of 1924 “comprised a constellation of reconstructed racial categories, in which race and nationality – concepts that had been loosely conflated since the nineteenth century – disaggregated and realigned in new and uneven ways.”\textsuperscript{144} The law differentiated Europeans, Asians, and Africans according to nationality and ranked them in a hierarchy of desirability that translated into biased immigration quotas.

In creating a codified hierarchy based on race and ethnicity, the law also constructed a white American race. Immigrants from Central or Northern Europe and Great Britain shared a common whiteness that set them apart from (and above) peoples from other areas of the world. The Act gave all immigrants a nationality-based identity that was conflated with a supposed racial and/or ethnic identity. Where some European-Americans could presumably assimilate into American life because of their shared whiteness, people labeled as non-white were categorically excluded from citizenship. The racialization of national origins

“rendered [non-white immigrants] unalterably foreign and unassimilable to the nation.”

Gary Gerstle has proposed that Americans struggled to resolve a dialectic over race and nation throughout the twentieth century. Even as most white Americans believed that America’s fundamental identity rested in a core body of civic beliefs, their particular ideological inheritance also conceived of America in “ethnoracial terms, as a people held together by common blood and skin color and by an inherited fitness for self-government.” The competing interests of civic and racial nationalism marked the politics and everyday life of twentieth-century Americans. In the 1920s, racial nationalism asserted itself to the exclusion of civic nationalism, and groups of racialized others were excluded from membership in the Republic and from citizenship itself. Legal definitions of exclusion only constituted one portion of the movement to establish whiteness as politically and culturally superior. Many Americans in the 1920s also hoped certain cultural products would create a stronger white community, reaffirming the “common knowledge” that America could only thrive if a unified white elite established the country’s social norms.

Magazine contributor J. M. McKibbin lamented that “as a nation, we are at fault” for “shower[ing] the blessings of liberty upon all – gratis,” while permitting immigrants to “secretly cherish and adhere to the traditions and customs of their mother country.” In McKibbin’s opinion, radio, if used wisely, could solve these problems:

If properly employed, radio will cause the indifferent or antagonistic American unconsciously to become familiar with our government, its people, and their ideals. Now, familiarity causes

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145 Ibid.
When northeastern broadcasters and observers spoke of the uplifting power of radio, they referred to a dual “Americanization” process: they wished to bring non-cosmopolitan (rural) Americans into the cosmopolitan sphere, an accomplishment that they presumed would strengthen the position of urban white culture and thereby create a more “polished” America, and they also wished to literally “make” Americans out of the diverse peoples who had immigrated to the country over the past fifty years. Many observers hoped radio would force immigrants into a particular conception of American citizenship, an objective that decades of local and federal initiatives had failed to achieve. Or at the very least, if various institutions and initiatives could not forcibly assimilate the immigrants, radio could expose them to a common experience. If radio could create “America” over the airwaves – if it could establish a national culture that tacitly made identifications of “us” and “them” more obvious – perhaps whites could reassert their authority and control over the bewildering diversity and social “chaos” of 1920s America.

African Americans joined the stream of immigrants into cities of the Northeast and Chicago, fleeing the Jim Crow South and the resurgence of organized white violence and terror. Blacks began leaving the South by the tens of thousands during and after World War I, though a pattern of out-migration was well established before then. In the decade between 1900 and 1910 black migrants outnumbered white migrants leaving the South, significantly shifting the racial balance of the population in states of the Deep South such as Mississippi.

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and Alabama. Emigration was heaviest during periods of war when industrial expansion peaked in the cities and African American men and women could find wage-labor positions. Even in periods of economic stagnation or depression, however, significant numbers of African Americans left the South in search of something – anything – else. Though the immediate causes of black migration seem to have been economic when quantified in tables and charts, the fact that African Americans continued to migrate even when job opportunities were limited or nonexistent indicates that the migration was at least as much a folk movement as an economic response, “destined to transform not only the face of the South and the texture of Afro-American life but the very character of American institutions and values.” The growing presence of African Americans in northern cities thus joined immigration as a source of elite white nativist anxiety.

Chicago and New York absorbed the majority of the migrants, and large African American ghettos formed in those cities. The migration of large numbers of African Americans forced white city-dwellers to confront or create a new set of cultural, social, and labor relationships with their African American neighbors. Melvin Ely has theorized that radio programs like Amos ’n’ Andy helped whites and blacks think through the demographic transformation. That program, which caricatured the confusion and antics of two African American men who had moved to a big city for the first time, helped satisfy white curiosity about their new black fellow townspeople, and maybe even put some anxieties to rest.

The Corn Cob Pipe Club performed a related, if somewhat more complicated, function. When a white listener from the Northeast became a

149 Ibid., 261. By 1940, white Mississippians outnumbered black Mississippians for the first time since 1840.
150 McMillen, Dark Journey, 263.
“member” of WRVA’s club, he became a member of a conversation that addressed many of the dilemmas of 1920s America that have already been discussed: the demographic shift toward massive urbanization, cultural shifts toward cosmopolitanism, the backlash of people supporting “traditional” and/or rural values, native white people’s desire to locate a common American “heritage” for the various peoples moving to the United States from other countries, social confusion related to the Great Migration, and general anxiety over the emergence of a modern America. The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* offered white male listeners a particular type of citizenship, and, as the records demonstrate, thousands if not tens of thousands decided to “invest” in it.

The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* developed an image of blackness that cast African Americans as racial others and temporal others – relics of an earlier period. When blackface minstrelsy emerged as a popular form of entertainment during the Jacksonian period, it was largely because a growing number of working-class Americans were starting to identify themselves with whiteness, which necessitated a correlative identification of blackness. Supporters of Andrew Jackson in the mid-nineteenth century had an opinion of citizenship that the Industrial Revolution severely complicated. Rather than defer to a “natural aristocracy” for the sake of unity, Jacksonian Democrats championed a popular government where [enfranchised] people were truly sovereign and would decide what was in the country’s best interest. Non-aristocratic white men claimed the right to own their own land and to build fortunes through hard work, and only self-made [white] men deserved the respect of their peers and leadership positions, or so Jacksonian Democrats would have voters believe.152

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Industrialization, which necessitated a massive reorganization of labor, severely threatened Jacksonian citizenship. Wage-earners did not control their labor and did not own land. Nonetheless, the Jacksonian spirit of democracy had entrenched itself deeply in American culture; so deeply, in fact, that people living in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries still tried to find ways of making it "fit" into American life, even if massive urbanization and the rise of Big Business had changed the rules of the game dramatically, particularly in the Northeast. Most white men could no longer prove their worth as citizens by hewing a prosperous farm out of unimproved land, or rising through the workshop from an apprentice to a master.\textsuperscript{153}

The Jacksonian blackface minstrelsy shows provided a space in which white-earners could cling to traditional ideals of American citizenship. Though they owned neither their labor nor their land – almost the very definition of a Jacksonian citizen – they could easily conceive of themselves as free and even fortunate when they compared themselves to their enslaved neighbors in the South. Blackface therefore became a vehicle for working-class whites to claim citizenship by default; they did not own their labor, but neither did any man own them. The working-class whites had found the great contradiction in the legal, social, and economic definitions of freedom in America, and had used it to their advantage.

The Corn Cob Pipe Club performances also emphasized slavery, but from a post-emancipation perspective. Jacksonian-era anxieties about maintaining citizenship in an industrializing nation had transformed by the 1920s. The white men smoking their corn cob pipes and listening to broadcasts together were not

\textsuperscript{153} Men and women found a variety of means of resisting this transition, meeting with greater or lesser success. Over time, however, industrial capitalists succeeded in reorganizing most of the labor in the urban centers into factories where only white men who had received the proper education had the opportunity for upward mobility; laborers had no hope for advancement.
interested in making themselves “white” by demonstrating, celebrating, or denigrating enslaved blacks and their culture. Instead, they were trying to attach themselves to the past in some way — an American past. As immigration legislation made abundantly clear in the 1920s, being an immigrant meant not being a citizen in the fullest sense. To be an “American,” one had to achieve political and cultural inclusion. One had to embody the native Americans’ notion of what an American should do, think, and feel. For first- or second-generation white men living in the Northeast who wanted to be citizens, whether or not they wanted to dissociate themselves from their ethnic heritage, the Corn Cob Pipe Club offered a chance to recover something “lost.” Because many white northeasterners could not claim a place in the nation’s narrative, they effectively created one. Though their families may not have been in the United States before the Civil War, they could still build their identity on the history of the antebellum South through a shared sense of whiteness. In becoming members of a constructed past, white urban men retroactively became part of [white] American history. In a period when racial nationalism defined the country’s politics and social life, white members of the Corn Cob Pipe Club, as consumers of a cultural product, laid claim to a cultural version of the citizenship that would be denied to many would-be immigrants after 1924.

Not only did the Corn Cob Pipe Club defuse contemporary white anxieties over transformations in the African American community by pretending that the present was built on controllable racial hierarchies of the past; the program’s offerings also challenged the increasingly pervasive cosmopolitan culture that many Americans, white and black, found disturbing in the 1920s. The Corn Cob Pipe Club’s celebration of hillbilly and antebellum slave music was in many ways a direct response to the growing popularity of jazz and dance hall music, which many Americans worried would corrupt the nation’s youth.
New types of music were among the most prominent innovations of cosmopolitan culture. African Americans had brought a new kind of music to New York and Chicago when they migrated out of the South: jazz. After the First World War, jazz received substantial attention in printed publications and from the new phonograph industry. While many city-dwellers, both black and white, delighted in the new music, many middle-class moralists – generally nativist Anglo-Saxons – attacked jazz and the blues as primitive, alien, and potentially corrosive of their version of American values. The rise of a jazz culture, with its connotations of sexuality that many white Americans translated as miscegenation, coming in the wake of four decades of immigration from southern and eastern European countries, led some nativist whites to fear that Anglo-Saxon culture – or “American” culture – would somehow be damaged. “To many moralists, jazz corrupted the individual’s mind and body, representing both a cause and a symptom of the larger disorders of the body politic.”

Ironically, both white northeasterners with nativist sentiments and those who worried about becoming targets of nativist sentiment would therefore be likely to enjoy listening to music that pretended as though jazz had never happened. The “Negro Spiritual Singers” must have soothed the troubled minds of whites worried about the “Negro invasion” of both “their” cities and American culture. Even more generally, the presence of hillbilly and African American gospel music on the airwaves – airwaves that reached across the nation, after all – refuted the notion that America was heading irreversibly toward modernization and cosmopolitanism. And even for listeners who did not actively

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154 Nicholas M. Evans, Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s (New York: Garland, 2000), 93-95.
155 Ibid., 101-102.
entertain such fears, the thought that America was not becoming utterly divorced from its "roots" must have been comforting.\footnote{Peterson, \textit{Creating Country Music} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 67-80.}

That a white audience wanted to believe the \textit{Corn Cob Pipe Club} was an authentic cultural production points to the crux of the matter. While audiences wanted to believe they were listening to "authentic" old-time performers and performances, they were actually consumers of a commercial product. "Hillbillies" were simultaneously commodified and constructed as non-commercial (and therefore authentic) performers in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, one music scholar asserts, "the term \textit{hillbilly music} was born out of the marriage of a commercial industry – phonograph records and some units of show business – with traditional Appalachian folksong."\footnote{Archie Green, \textit{Torching the Fink Books, and Other Essays on Vernacular Culture} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 11.} The hillbilly is a myth, trope, and cultural artifact all in one. Usually male, his self-worth stems from his "oneness with nature and its creatures," and he is "at a loss in an urban environment, not only unschooled in its appropriate ways of behavior, but also unrefined in dress, speech, and manners."\footnote{Peterson, \textit{Creating Country Music}, 67.} The hillbilly was an object of ridicule and satire, and also of nostalgia. Though observers and consumers both employed "hillbilly" as a pejorative word in many cases, they liked it enough to buy the records that kept hillbilly stars popular. Even as urban culture rejected the backwardness and primitiveness that a hillbilly supposedly represented, people sentimentalized the image as well in order to keep faith with a world they thought they were leaving behind. As Archie Green puts it succinctly, "we flee the eroded land with its rotting cabin; at the same time we cover it in rose vines of memory."\footnote{Green, \textit{Torching the Fink Books}, 36.}
But as consumers, radio listeners became citizens. The long and controversial debate about nationhood, race, and citizenship in the 1920s seemed to turn on the issue of consumption: if a white man could not prove his citizenship through property ownership or control over his own labor, how else could he achieve it? If immigrants and African Americans assaulted Anglo-Saxon economic, cultural, and demographic hegemony in northeastern centers – which were coming more and more to represent America as a whole – how could whites protect themselves and regain control? Members of the white middle class increasingly associated democracy with the ability and desire to purchase certain goods that made one American.161

Radio offered inclusion through collective consumption. By listening to programs sponsored by corporations and manufacturers, people voluntarily became part of an imagined community of consumers. When the white members of Corn Cob Pipe Club chapters all over the country gathered in billiards parlors and store rooms to smoke their pipes and listen to the hillbillies, blackface performers, and African American singers, they consumed a series of cultural symbols and experiences that affirmed their privileged status as white American men. Paradoxically, then, these white northeasterners had to buy into images of the “Old South” – a specific, racialized version of the American past – in order to become modern citizens of the city and of the market.

The executives of Larus & Brother Company invested in a radio station because they believed broadcasting was an exciting medium with multiple purposes. First and most straightforward, the tobacco men hoped to sell tobacco, both to a regional audience and – more importantly for the bottom line

– to a national audience. They also hoped the station would “boost” Richmond with its broadcasts, providing important information simultaneously and publicly, and promoting certain interests and values that station managers thought would build a stronger community. Furthermore, the station itself would serve to strengthen the community merely by connecting Richmond with a rapidly modernizing nation. Six decades after the city’s destruction at the end of the Civil War, city residents – especially those involved in business and politics – hoped to forge close alliances with the financial centers of the Northeast. As Virginia governor E. Lee Trinkle said on the station’s opening night, WRVA sent “greetings to her sister States of the Union, as well as to the nations of the world,” waiting to usher “all such as would enter within the paradise of [Virginia’s] natural loveliness.”162 Naturally, station officials hoped they would be ushering in wealthy investors, clients, and trading partners along with everyone else.

When WRVA entered homes and businesses around the country, however, the broadcasts did more than mimic experiments from the Northeast. Though a handful of powerful stations in New York and Philadelphia had begun the debate about the cultural and social potential of national radio broadcasting, they did not own it or control it as other stations vied for space on the airwaves. Radio represented much that was new and exciting, uncertain and frightening about 1920s America: would it showcase modern cosmopolitan culture? Would it be an instrument of homogenization or diversification? Could people living outside of the urban centers of the Northeast hope to join the conversation, or were they merely along for the ride? The first decade or so of radio broadcasting quickly became a conversation of nationhood, with nothing less than the meaning of “America” at stake.

When WRVA joined that debate, as a self-identified southern voice selling southern products (cultural and physical) to Americans, it introduced a way for Americans of diverse backgrounds to challenge the emerging national culture. By choosing to be consumers of a program demonstrating nostalgia for a rural way of life and a bygone era where relationships between men and women, blacks and whites, were hierarchically organized and maintained, white listeners redefined the terms of their citizenship in 1920s America. Neither accepting nor rejecting cosmopolitanism, they were reasserting “tradition” by effectively creating a past that they could all share. Thus even as America became thoroughly “modern,” Americans clung to the ghosts of the past, which were configured and reconfigured to fit the changing needs of a rapidly growing country.
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