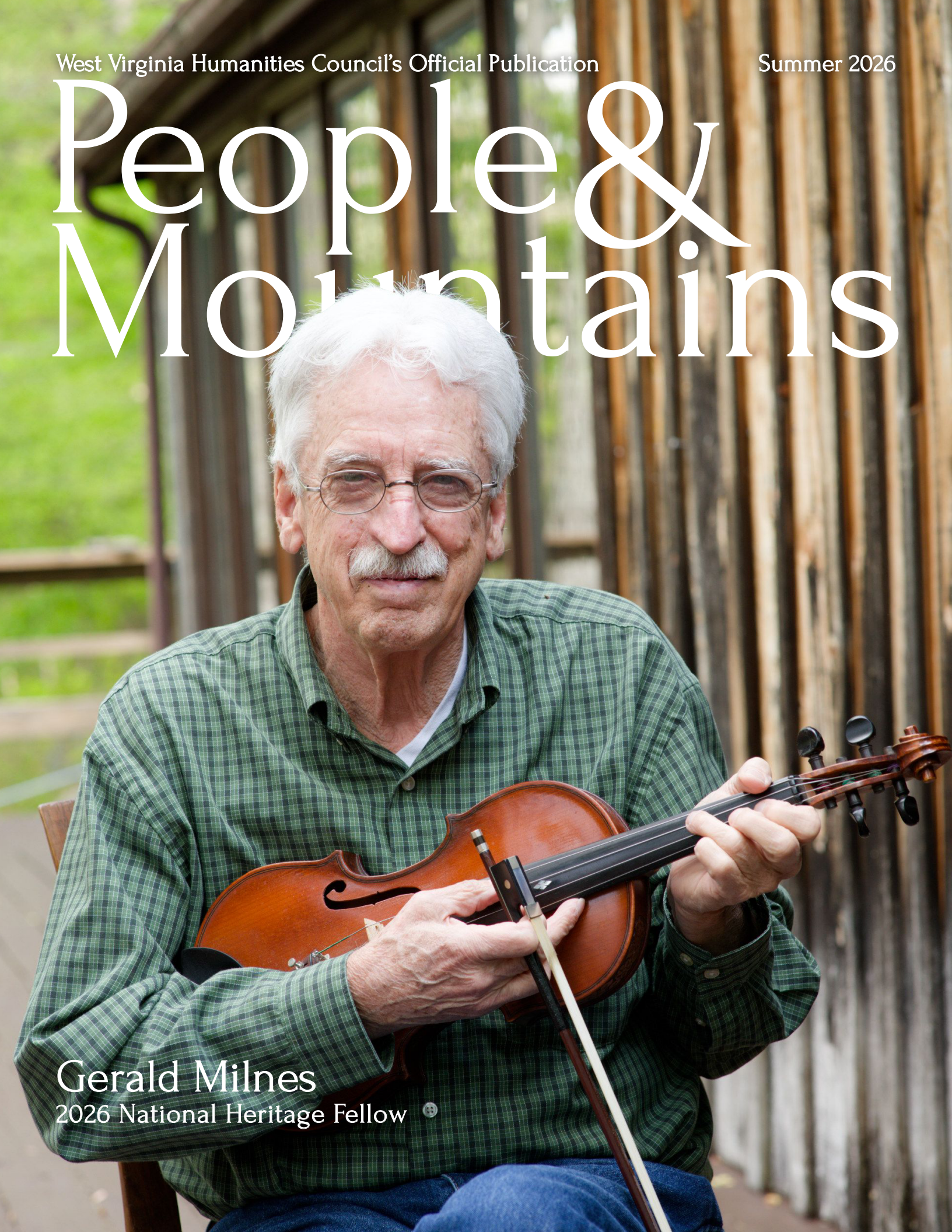


West Virginia Humanities Council's Official Publication

Summer 2026

People & Mountains



Gerald Milnes
2026 National Heritage Fellow



From the Executive Director

One year ago, the West Virginia Humanities Council entered the most challenging period of its history. Today, as we continue to pursue restoration of full federal funding from Congress, we look over the past year and see wonderful developments, and many reasons to celebrate. Your belief in our mission has allowed us to continue to serve statewide through inventive programs and focused grantmaking.

Here in West Virginia, there is much to believe in. As you'll read in this issue of *People & Mountains*, we are proud to celebrate Gerry Milnes, former Board member, traditional musician, folklorist, and filmmaker, who has just been named a 2026 National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Gerry's recordings, fieldwork, and lifelong documentation of West Virginia's traditions have preserved songs and stories that might otherwise have been lost. Gerry's work as an educator and folklife advocate is inextricable from his work as a musician and researcher, reminding us that the best scholarship is deeply embedded in the world, and that even in difficult times the world is endlessly filled with music, stories, and songs. This national award is Gerry's, and is well-earned. But it is also a tribute to the tradition bearers who trusted him to listen and to learn, and a boon to the young folk artists and scholars who will help create and document the next generation of West Virginia's arts and culture.



Gerry Milnes on fiddle and Dave Bing on guitar
Photo by Michael Keller

Gerry's work also reminds us that across our state, the arts are not a single story, but a collection of many. From murder ballads and string bands to modern storytellers, foodways, and material crafters, the range and quality of West Virginia's traditional and contemporary cultural life in 2026 is frankly astonishing. It always has been, really; but anyone paying attention knows that today, a very particular creative energy infuses our state's

“The arts
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*The West Virginia Humanities Council's
Historic Headquarters*

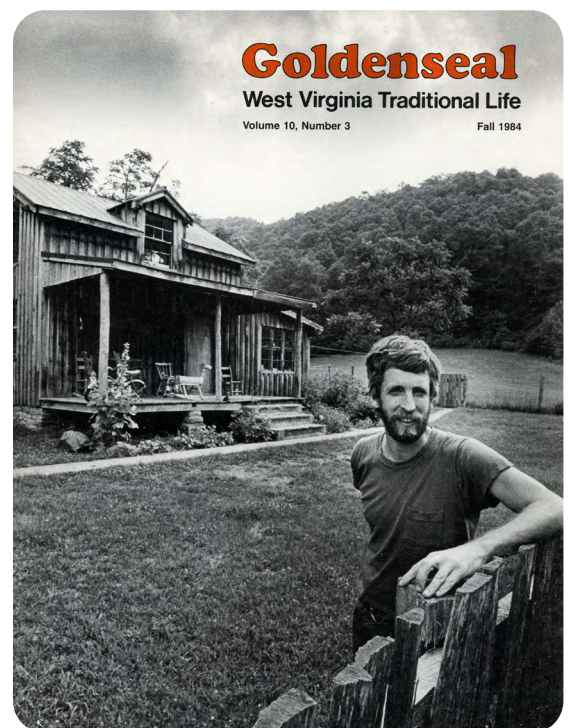
arts and humanities communities. Festivals celebrate and facilitate new collaborations. Small museums host exhibitions that reframe local histories. Young practitioners work with elder artists to steep themselves in the methods and lore of their traditions. Though diverse in form, these initiatives are united in purpose: to ensure that West Virginia's living traditions remain alive.

This important work rewards optimism. In a historically challenging year, our Council has sustained program delivery thanks to our broad network of donors and eager partners. Your flexible support—direct giving, project collaborations, and in-kind partnerships—has allowed us to adapt quickly, prioritize our core initiatives, and preserve resources. This resilience is not accidental. It grows from long-term relationships founded on trust and proven results. It is the product of a fundamental collaborative spirit that, to my mind, defines West Virginia.

As we celebrate Gerry's recognition and the Mountain State's enduring cultural vitality, I want to thank you for making your generosity a part of that story. The West Virginia Humanities Council will continue to invest in programs that make our history, culture, and traditions accessible to all. With your support, our next chapter will be even bolder and more plentiful than the last.

—Dr. Eric Waggoner

Gerry Milnes on the cover of Goldenseal, Fall 1984





Board of Directors

The West Virginia Humanities Council is a nonprofit institution governed by its Board of Directors. The next Board meeting is July 17 in Summersville and is open to the public.

Paul Papadopoulos, President,
Hurricane
Christy Bailey, *Fayetteville*
Bob Bastress, *Morgantown*
Matt Bond, *Charleston*
George "Gib" Brown, *Clarksburg*
Gregory Coble, *Shepherdstown*
Cicero Fain III, *Huntington*
Ann Farr, *Frankford*
Patrick Felton, *Wheeling*
Rita Hedrick-Helmick, *Glenville*
Elliot Hicks, *Charleston*
Charles Ledbetter, *Charleston*
Paula Jo Meyer-Stout, *Morgantown*
Susan Mills, *Shepherdstown*
Burnis Morris, *Huntington*
Michele Moure-Reeves, *Mathias*
Amy Pancake, *Romney*
Jane Peters, *Charles Town*
Katrena Ramsey, *Ravenswood*
Lisa Rose, *Morgantown*
Elizabeth Savage, *Fairmont*
Tim Sweet, *Morgantown*
Pam Tarr, *Charleston*
Lydia Warren, *Fairmont*
Eve West, *Beckley*
Jill Wilson, *Charleston*

New Board Members

The Board of Directors welcomes five new members elected at the April 17 Board meeting: Christy Bailey, Burnis Morris, Elizabeth Savage, Tim Sweet, and Eve West. Katrena Ramsey, Michele Moure-Reeves, and Pam Tarr were re-elected to additional terms. We thank departing Board members Leslie Baker, Tom Sopher, and Bryson VanNostrand for their dedication and years of service.

August 1 Minigrant Deadline

The Humanities Council announces a special minigrant deadline of **August 1, 2026**. Due to continued uncertainty regarding federal funding levels, this will be the *only* grant offering in 2026. Minigrants support humanities projects that request \$2,000 or less, and include small projects, single events, lectures, small museum exhibits, and planning for larger projects.

For more information, contact Grants Administrator Erin Riebe at 304-346-8500 or riebe@wvhumanities.org. Grant guidelines and applications are available at wvhumanities.org/grants

Join Our Monthly Giving Circle

By donating \$5/month, you'll become a Give Every Month (GEM) donor. As a thank you, we'll send you a limited-edition West Virginia cryptid pin designed exclusively for Council supporters by Morgantown artist Liz Pavlovic.



Contribute at bit.ly/donatewvhc
(click "Monthly Recurring" button)
or by mail at 1310 Kanawha Blvd E,
Charleston, WV 25301





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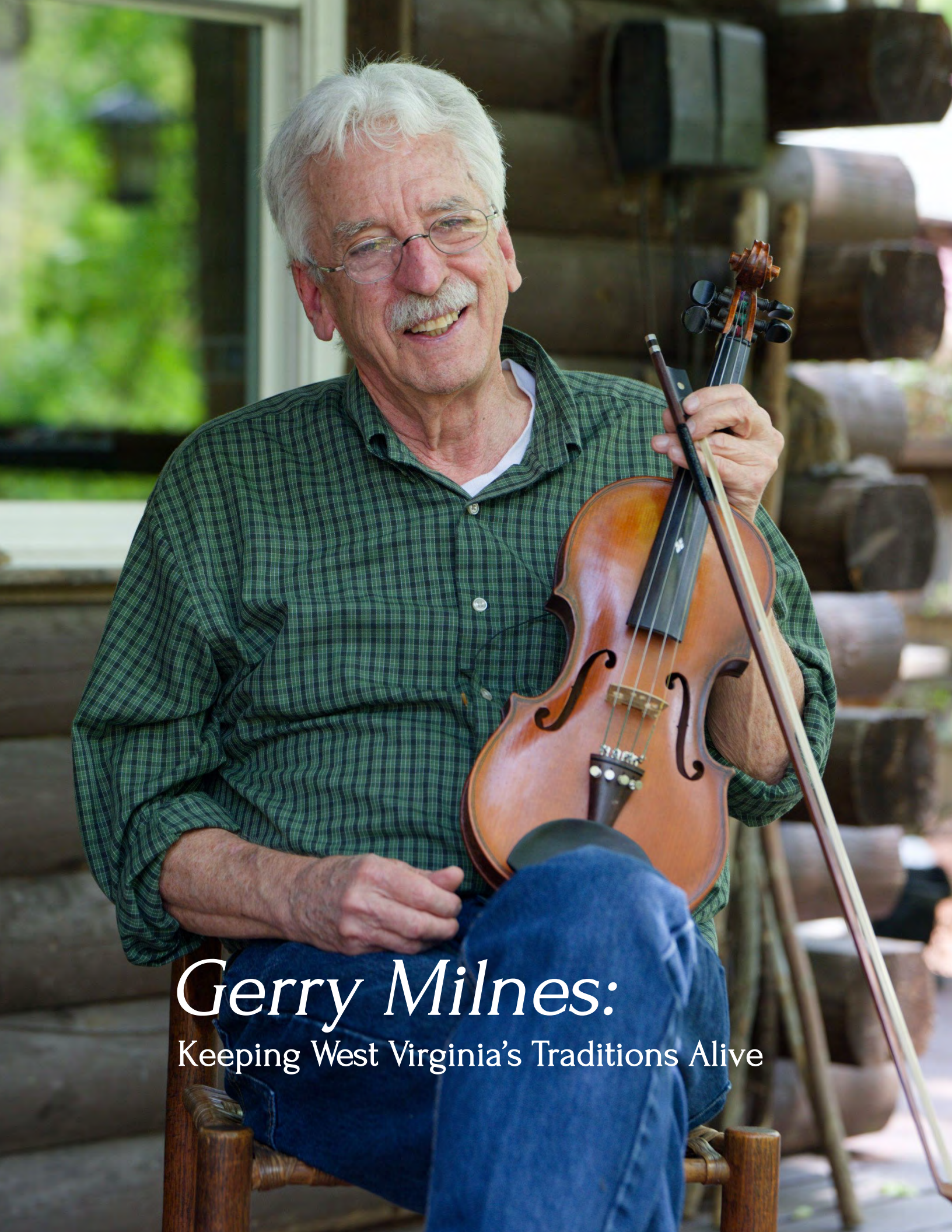
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Cover photo by Michael Keller

Above: Exhibits at the Higgins House in Moorefield



Gerry Milnes:

Keeping West Virginia's Traditions Alive



Gerry Milnes and his son Jesse
Photo by Michael Keller

By Stan Bumgardner and Dr. Jennie S. Williams

Folklorist, author, filmmaker, teacher, and musician Gerald “Gerry” Milnes of Elkins has been named a 2026 National Heritage Fellow, the nation’s highest honor in folk and traditional arts. The announcement was made in April by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), following Gerry’s nomination by the West Virginia Humanities Council.

Gerry’s work stands out among this year’s fellows as he is receiving the Bess Lomax Hawes National Heritage Fellowship. Named after Bess Lomax Hawes, an influential educator and advocate for the folk and traditional arts, this distinction annually recognizes one person nationally who has made significant contributions to the excellence, vitality, and public appreciation of the folk and traditional arts.

This year’s other fellows are Victor G. Pichardo and Juan Díes, Mexican folk musicians of Chicago; Belen Escobedo, Conjunto Tejano fiddler of San Antonio, Texas; Giovanni Hidalgo, Latin percussionist of Ocoee, Florida; Lloyd Kumulā‘au Sing, Jr. and May Haunani Balino-Sing, Hawaiian twined basketry artists of Wahiawā, Hawaii; Patrick Olwell, flutemaker of Athens, Georgia, and Nellysford, Virginia; Frank Rabon, CHamoru dancer and choreographer of Hagåtña, Guam; and Cary Schwarz, saddlemaker and leather artist of Salmon, Idaho. The West Virginia Humanities Council knows Gerry—a former Board member and dear friend of our Council—to be highly deserving of this national honor. He is as comfortable recounting a story he heard half a century ago about holiday traditions in the 1920s as he is discussing dulcimer making in the 1830s, what’s growing in his garden, or how to make maple syrup from freshly tapped trees. Whatever the subject, he tells it with vivid precision and true enjoyment.

All photos provided by Gerald Milnes unless noted otherwise



(L-R) Dave Bing, Gerry and Jesse Milnes, Emily Miller, Edwin McCoy, and Ron Mullenex
Photo by Michael Keller

The fifth of seven children, Gerry was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on August 21, 1946. His family moved frequently during his childhood, and he encountered a wide range of music. Early on, he gravitated toward country and bluegrass, listening to the Hanks—Williams, Snow, and Thompson—along with Reno and Smiley, Flatt and Scruggs, and other greats. He picked up the guitar at age nine and began playing three-finger bluegrass-style banjo at 12. He soon found unpretentious truth at tiny coffeehouses in Philadelphia, in the music of now-legendary performers who were then not widely known, including Mississippi John Hurt, Rev. Gary Davis, Skip James, and Doc Watson.

At a young age, Gerry attended a Maryland bluegrass festival, but spent much of his time in the parking lot, captivated by old-time fiddler Red Hartnett. That pivotal encounter marked his

introduction to traditional Appalachian music. “There was something about meeting this old fiddle player that got me thinking in a whole new direction, musically,” Gerry recalls. Upon returning home, he bought an old red fiddle for \$10.

Gerry traveled to Clay County for the Morris Family Old-Time Music Festivals, influential gatherings cofounded by John Morris (who would later receive the National Heritage Fellowship in 2020) and his brother David. Gerry soon began making regular trips to West Virginia, including the state Folk Festival in Glenville, to interview and record older traditional musicians such as Burl and Sherman Hammons, Oscar Wright, Andy Boarman, Frank George, and Melvin Wine.

Soon enough, Gerry met his future wife, Mary Alice, while playing a square dance in Pennsylvania. The day after their wedding in summer 1975, they packed up their pickup truck and moved to Huttonsville. The couple became artists-in-residence in Randolph County schools. He taught music, and she taught square dance. At the height of the disco era, they introduced students to traditional music by bringing older musicians into the classroom. Decades later, many of those students are musicians themselves.

Like many who participated in the 1970s back-to-the-land movement, they were seeking a simpler, more intentional way of life. Mary Alice got a part-time nursing job in Elkins and later became a women’s nurse practitioner. Gerry, who had trained in a technical high school and worked as a metal machinist and later an apple picker, was still searching for his true calling.



Gerry Milnes with his wife Mary Alice, daughter Lydia, and baby son Jesse, 1981

The Folklorist

Gerry traces his interest in folklore back to childhood outings with his father, exploring abandoned towns and forgotten places. That early curiosity never left him. Today, he remains deeply committed to documenting and preserving traditional culture through recordings, films, books, and photography.

His folklife career took shape during the U.S. Bicentennial, a period that sparked renewed interest in traditional arts. Inspired by pioneering documentarians, Gerry began to see how folklife could be studied, preserved, and shared in ways that were both scholarly and accessible. Without formal academic training, he forged his own path, immersed himself in fieldwork, and compiled a personal library of folklore scholarship.

In 1975, just days after moving to West Virginia, Gerry and Mary Alice had met groundhog hunter and banjo player Arthur D. Johnson while picking berries. Johnson introduced them to Currence and Mintie Hammons, who welcomed them into their home. They played fiddle and banjo tunes and sang mountain ballads until two in the morning, an experience that marked the informal start of Gerry's folklore career.

By 1976, Gerry and Mary Alice had bought a farm on Birch River in Webster County, where they built



Mintie and Currence Hammons hosted Gerry and Mary Alice in 1975 on one of their first evenings as West Virginians

a home and embraced a self-sufficient lifestyle—raising sheep, tending a garden, crafting furniture, and doing timber-frame carpentry. But Gerry's deepest fascination remained with his neighbors and their traditions. "I found myself right on the edge of Braxton, Webster, and Nicholas counties," he recalls, smack dab in the heart of central West Virginia's rich music community.

His research earned fellowships, including support from Berea College and the West Virginia Humanities Council. In Braxton County alone, he documented more than 200 current and historic old-time fiddlers. Gerry's work reshaped the world's understanding of Appalachian music. For instance, he uncovered a long-overlooked dulcimer tradition, demonstrating that dulcimer-building in West Virginia predates the 20th-century folk revival by 150 years.

The Folk Art Coordinator

In the early 1980s, the Augusta Heritage Center—then sponsored by Davis & Elkins College—invited Gerry to coordinate its Old-Time Week, offering workshops in fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin, and singing. Founded in 1973, Augusta has long promoted traditional folklife, folk arts, and crafts. Gerry's guidance helped deepen its impact.

His workshops, often taught by revered "old masters," drew younger generations eager to learn. What stood out most to Gerry was the respect shown to the elders. "If somebody was over 80 years old and played a concert set, they automatically got a standing ovation. That really meant a lot—to them and to me."

In May 1988, Augusta Director Margo Blevin hired Gerry as Folk Art Coordinator, encouraging him to continue the work he had already been doing independently. With professional-grade cameras in hand, he built an extensive visual archive of around 20,000 photos.

His lens captured far more than music. Gerry documented a vast array of traditional practices: barn construction, crop planting by the signs, gravestone carving, weaving and other fiber arts, holiday customs such as Old Christmas, mushroom hunting, herbal remedies, and folk healing.

The Documentarian

Gerry's curiosity extended beyond performance into the stories behind the music. He traced the lore and variations of fiddle tunes, recording Greenbrier County fiddler Mose Coffman playing the only known version of "The Battle of Droop Mountain," named for the 1863 Civil War conflict in Pocahontas County.

He also documented traditions that might otherwise have been lost. Through interviews with people who came of age in the early 20th century, he preserved accounts of German-influenced winter customs such as belsnickling, as well as the revelries of Fasnacht and Shanghai, still observed in Helvetia and Lewisburg.

Gerry's work shed light on the contributions of Black Appalachian musicians, including fiddlers known as "Black Sam" George Bailes and "Black George" Morris, born enslaved in Greenbrier and Braxton counties. Morris had given a fiddle carved with a penknife to the Melvin Wine family before his death in 1919. Gerry's work came full circle when that instrument, passed to Gerry by Melvin, became part of the West Virginia State Museum.

While at Augusta, Gerry produced 25 original albums, mostly featuring old-time musicians, along with music anthologies of regional fiddlers and banjo players, ballad singing, Civil War and dulcimer tunes, and Swiss music from Helvetia. Over 25 years, he amassed more than 2,000 hours of audio and video documenting folklife in West Virginia. He's also produced 15 documentaries and made hundreds of field recordings, photos, and oral histories available through Augusta's online archives and his own YouTube channel.

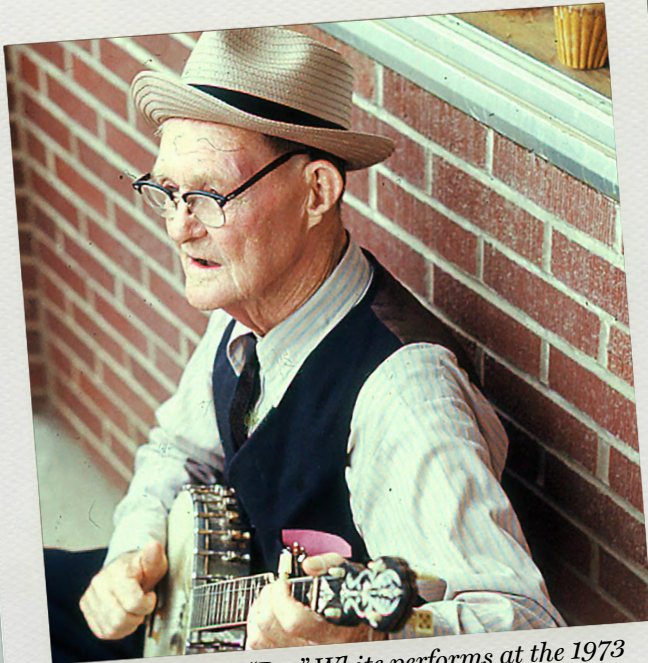
His expertise has extended into independent filmmaking as well. Gerry was a consultant for John Sayles' acclaimed 1986 movie *Matewan*, helping to identify locations and connect Sayles with older musicians from the coal mining world. He even appeared on screen, playing the fiddle in a key scene and on the soundtrack. Gerry also served as a consultant for the 2005 PBS series *The Appalachians*.



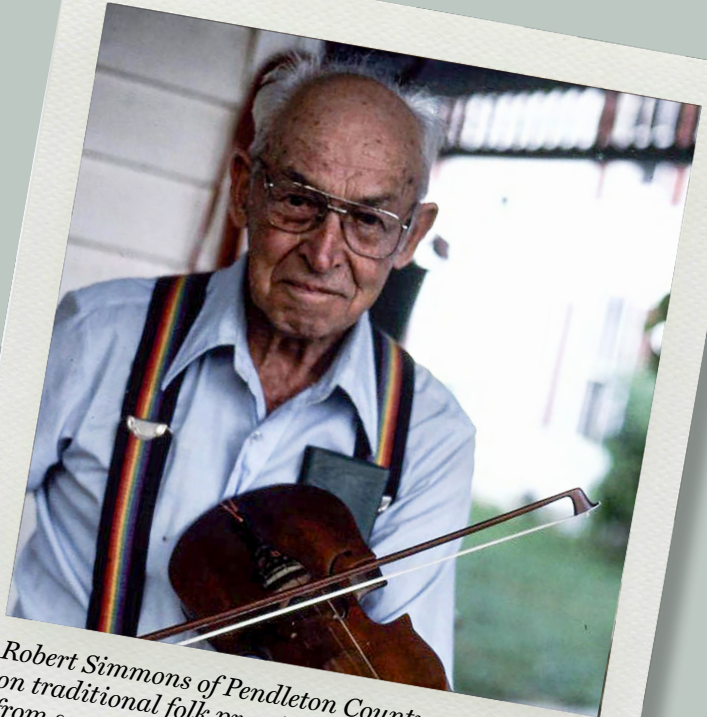
Dena Knicely, shown here playing her old-time dulcimer at her home in Friars Hill, Greenbrier County, 1994. Gerry's research has also documented dulcimers in the Pendleton County region dating to at least the 1830s.



Homer Summers of northern Kanawha County was the last known red-oak basket maker in the United States.



James Franklin "Doc" White performs at the 1973 West Virginia State Folk Festival in Glenville. A self-taught fiddler and practitioner, he served locally as a doctor, dentist, and midwife without formal medical training. He delivered more than 1,800 babies.



Robert Simmons of Pendleton County, an expert on traditional folk practices, carved this fiddle from scratch.



In 2007, Nelson Simmons discussed grinding buckwheat and cornmeal at the Palo Alto Mill, Pendleton-Highland County line, South Fork of the South Branch of the Potomac.



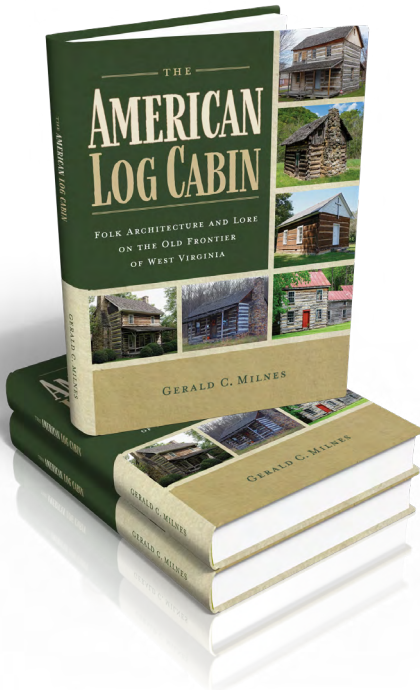
Gerry recorded Mose Coffman of Greenbrier County playing the only known version of the fiddle tune "Battle of Droop Mountain" about the 1863 Civil War battle in Pocahontas County.

The Author

A prolific and influential writer, Gerry has contributed 28 articles to *Goldenseal* magazine, more than a dozen entries to the *West Virginia Encyclopedia (e-WV)*, and essays for the *Appalachian Journal*. His books *Granny Will Your Dog Bite and Other Mountain Rhymes* (1990) and *Passing it On: An Introduction to the Folk Art and Folk Life of West Virginia* (1994) are widely regarded as foundational works in Appalachian folklife.

In *Play of a Fiddle: Traditional Music, Dance, and Folklore in West Virginia* (1999), he examined how musical styles in our state emerged from a blend of Anglo-Celtic, Scots-Irish, English, German, and African influences. *Signs, Cures, and Witchery: German Appalachian Folklore* (2007), along with its companion documentary, challenged the long-held notion that Appalachian culture is exclusively Anglo-Celtic, highlighting instead the deep influence of German traditions on material culture, healing practices, farming, and belief systems. The related documentary has been viewed more than 840,000 times on YouTube.

Gerry continues to research and write. His latest book is *The American Log Cabin: Folk Architecture and Lore on the Old Frontier of West Virginia* (2026).



The Musician

Gerry learned traditional music the old-time way: by ear, observation, and playing alongside tradition bearers. After more than 50 years in West Virginia, Gerry remains deeply engaged with traditional music. He has played alongside musicians born in three different centuries and has won numerous fiddle and banjo contests in both the over- and under-60 age groups. He performed extensively with the group Gandydancer and has recorded several albums, including collaborations with his son Jesse Milnes and daughter-in-law Emily Miller.

Gerry and percussive dancer Becky Hill helped launch the Mountain Dance Trail, promoting community square dance practices from West Virginia's Potomac Highlands to the Ohio River. They also produced a related film, *Reel 'Em Boys, Reel 'Em*. Gerry continually volunteers his time playing for square and circle dances in community centers, theaters, churches, and anywhere else West Virginians gather to kick up their heels.

Beyond West Virginia, Gerry has accompanied and introduced traditional musicians to audiences nationwide and abroad, including appearances at the National Folk Festival, Washington State's Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, the Chicago Folk Festival, and other events from New Mexico to New York to Great Britain. For many of the Mountain State musicians, these trips marked their first time traveling far from home.



Gerry plays with Annick Odom as part of the West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program, 2023
Photo by Michael Keller

The Mentor

In 1989, Gerry helped establish Augusta's West Virginia Folk Art Apprenticeship Program, connecting young artists with master practitioners. This program supported folklife apprenticeship pairs from 1989 to 2009.

After retiring from Augusta in 2013, he joined the Board of the West Virginia Humanities Council and helped launch the West Virginia Folklife Program, along with a new apprenticeship initiative modeled on his earlier work. In 2022-23, he participated as a mentor in the apprenticeship program, working with musician Annick Odom to impart old-time fiddle tunes and techniques.

Known for his humility and generosity, Gerry has inspired and guided countless musicians, scholars, students, and community members. He listens closely, offers thoughtful advice, and consistently emphasizes that the artists and their stories—not himself—are at the center of his work.

A Life's Work

Among Gerry's many previous honors are the Governor's Arts Award for Appalachian Folklife (2008), West Virginia Filmmaker of the Year (2008), an honorary doctorate from Davis & Elkins College (2012), and the Vandalia Award (2013), West Virginia's highest folklife honor. He now joins Nimrod Workman (1984), Melvin Wine (1991), Ellie Mannette (1999), Dorothy Thompson

(2000), Hazel Dickens (2001), and John Morris (2020) as National Heritage Fellows from West Virginia. Notably, Gerry nominated two of these fellows: fiddler Wine and weaver Thompson.

Over a lifetime of fieldwork, teaching, writing, and performance, Gerry has profoundly shaped how West Virginia's culture is documented, preserved, and understood. His influence extends far beyond the Mountain State—from musicians learning tunes like Ernie Carpenter's "Elk River Blues," which Gerry first recorded, to families discovering recordings of their ancestors online.

Through it all, he remains characteristically modest: "I fell into my dream job," he says, "and my job was to just keep doing what I was most interested in for my whole life."

In honoring Gerry Milnes, the nation has recognized not only a lifetime of achievement but a way of seeing, rooted in curiosity and deep respect for the people and traditions that shape a place. His work reminds us that culture is not something preserved behind glass but something lived and passed hand to hand. Thanks to Gerry, those stories—and the voices behind them—will be heard for generations to come. ~

Stan Bumgardner and Dr. Jennie S. Williams are, respectively, the e-WV media editor and the state folklorist for the West Virginia Humanities Council.

Learn about the NEA National Heritage Fellows at arts.gov/honors/heritage.



All photos courtesy of the Robert Higgins House

Early Republic Landmark Finds New Life

By Erin Riebe

As we commemorate the 250th anniversary of American independence, communities across West Virginia are finding new ways to connect past and present. In Moorefield, that connection stands along Winchester Avenue in the form of the Robert Higgins House, a modest log structure named for a Revolutionary War veteran whose life mirrored the nation's founding.

The town of Moorefield, in partnership with the Hardy County Commission, has undertaken a major restoration of the historic building,

transforming it into a combined visitors center and local history museum, with support from grants provided by the West Virginia Humanities Council.

When the building officially opens to the public this year, it will tell two primary stories. One focuses on the structure itself—how it was constructed and how it fits within the region's tradition of log architecture. The other will explore the area's layered history through the life of Robert Higgins (1746-1825) and his experiences during America's struggle for independence.

For Higgins, conflict began early. As a boy living at Fort Pleasant during the French & Indian War, a short walk to fetch water ended in tragedy when his friend was captured by Indians allied with France. Nearly 20 years later, Higgins would enter the Revolutionary War as a lieutenant in Captain Abel Westfall's Hampshire County Company of the 8th Virginia Regiment. In 1777, George Washington personally selected him to recruit and lead his own company. By then, however, enthusiasm for the war had waned, and malaria and smallpox were spreading through the region, making recruitment difficult.

Despite the small number of men under his command, Captain Higgins and his company joined Washington's army near Germantown, Pennsylvania, where Higgins was captured. He remained a prisoner of war for more than three years, held by the British under brutal conditions in New York Harbor.

Following Cornwallis' surrender in 1781, Higgins was released and eventually returned to the South Branch Valley. Like many Revolutionary War veterans, he came back to a frontier still being settled and shaped. In Moorefield, he began building a new life and the home that now bears his name. In 1786, he purchased Lot 33 on Winchester Avenue and constructed a modest home (20 by 18 feet) as required by his deed. The single-story structure was built from local timber, with a prominent stone chimney and exterior German siding, which helped protect the logs from weathering.

Higgins did not remain in the South Branch Valley long. In 1793, he sold the house to George Harness

and moved west, eventually receiving 1,000 acres along the Ohio River in recognition of his service. There, he helped establish a small town now known as Higginsport, Ohio. Though Higgins' time in Moorefield was brief, the house he built has endured and evolved alongside the community over generations.

Today, the restored Higgins House tells not only Higgins' story but also the story of the building and the people who shaped it. Museum panels highlight the structure's architectural evolution and place it within the region's broader tradition of log construction. Studies conducted by architectural historians and dendrochronologists—who use tree rings to date and analyze historic timbers—suggest the building likely began as a one-story log cabin. It was later rebuilt as a two-story dwelling, possibly after a fire, before being incorporated into a Queen Anne-style house in the late 19th century. In the late 20th century, the original log house was rediscovered when the modern dwelling was being razed for a parking lot. Demolition was halted once the logs were uncovered, and, over time, the two-story log building was fully restored.

The restoration reflects a growing recognition of the important role local landmarks play in helping communities understand their larger place in the American story. Projects such as the Higgins House restoration offer a model for how local history can anchor a shared sense of identity and pride. Through its grants program, the Humanities Council supports initiatives across the state that connect past to present.

As the Robert Higgins House opens its doors once again, visitors will encounter more than a museum. The restored log home stands as a reminder of the endurance and perseverance that shaped the early American republic—and the people and communities who continue to preserve that history for future generations.

Erin Riebe is the grants administrator for the West Virginia Humanities Council.



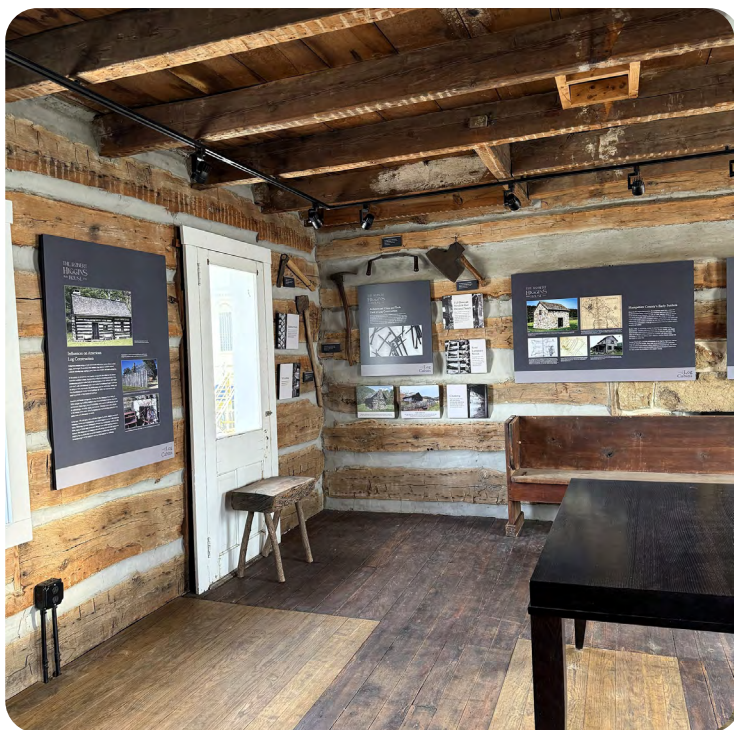
The Attack on Chew's House during the Battle of Germantown, 1777 by Edward Lamson Henry (Art Institute of Chicago)



Visit the Robert Higgins House

Currently, tours of the Robert Higgins House are available by appointment.
For more information, call 304-897-8700 or email visithardy@gmail.com.

Additional details are available at visithardy.com/stories-and-trails/robert-higgins-house-museum/



Little Lecture: Neema Avashia



We wrap up this year's 250th-themed Little Lectures series with Neema Avashia's "Appalachian Boston: A West Virginian Reflects on the Cradle of the Revolution." The Kanawha County native and author of *Another Appalachia* will speak at the Council's headquarters on **June 21 at 2 p.m.** to conclude a lecture season packed with reflections on our nation's values and identity. Don't miss her exploration of Revolutionary War Boston!

Visit our Little Lectures page for more information, and don't forget to RSVP: <https://forms.gle/R87iWM2K7wHTM32q7> or call 304-346-8500.

Neema Avashia

Council Joins *By the People* Initiative



The Humanities Council is taking part in *By the People: Conversations Beyond 250*, a series of community programs developed by the Federation of State Humanities Councils and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. The programs—created by 51 humanities councils across the United States, its territories, and the District of Columbia—explore 250 years of the nation's cultural life and imagine its shared future.

For its part, the West Virginia Folklife Program has filmed demonstrations by practitioners of local music and craft traditions. The digital content will become part of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage's *By the People* archival collection, enhance the Council's *e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia Online*, and be included on the Smithsonian Institution's "Culture of, by, and for the People" storymap link under "Filming Local Traditions." Check future *People & Mountains* for more details.

Filmmaker Clara Haizlett records fiber artist Enrica McMillon of Elkins demonstrating how to use a box loom as part of the West Virginia Humanities Council's By the People initiative

Photo by Michael Keller



Picking Up the Pieces

By Kyle Warmack

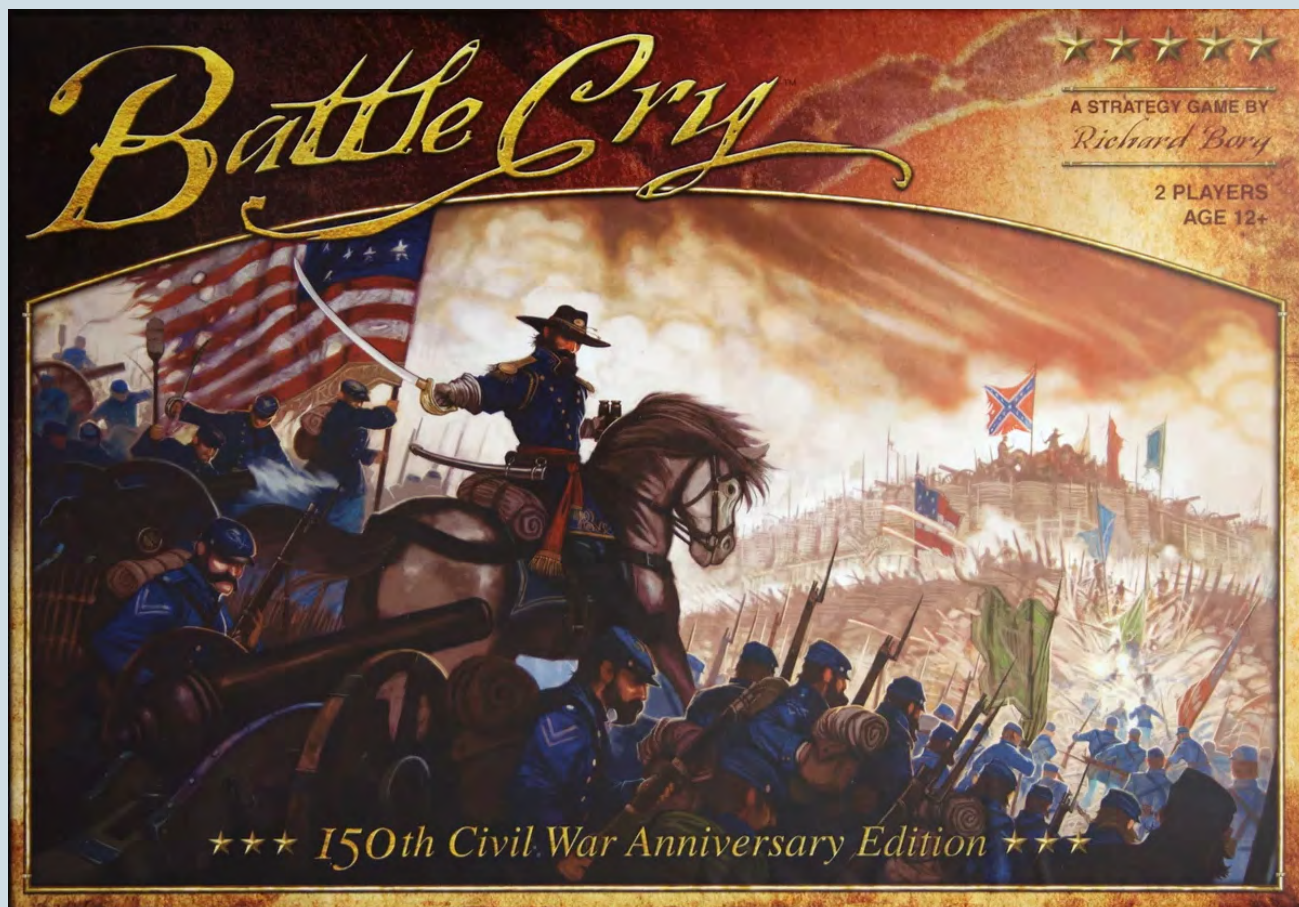
From “doomscrolling” to “loneliness epidemics” and so-called social media “echo chambers,” Americans’ social interactions have acquired some dismal baggage over the past decade or two. Tech giants Meta and YouTube have both recently suffered setbacks in court, losing separate lawsuits alleging these companies knowingly inflicted psychological harm on users through addictive algorithms.

Hope springs eternal, however, in the analog world. Some comfort can be found, for example, in the explosive growth of board games and other forms of social tabletop entertainment. A “golden age” of tabletop gaming that began in the 2010s (according to British newspaper *The Guardian*) has only gained more steam since the COVID-19 pandemic began, with the board game industry continuing to expand year after year. Scholars have documented an upswing in the use of board games in “educational and therapeutic settings for people who are neurodiverse, such as those with autism and ADHD,” as well as a growing trend toward using games “to improve mental health, social interactions, and skills such as reading and numeracy.”

Put another way, board games offer a comfortable, structured environment for developing real-world skills—from social interactions to keeping your math sharp. And whatever your interests, there is likely a game to match. Are you an avid avian observer? The incredibly popular *Wingspan* might be where your proverbial birds flock. Or perhaps *Ticket to Ride* is your preferred route to railway nirvana. Where your grandmother might have had a long bridge club game, you’ve got *Twilight Imperium*, for which you’ll need to clear off a whole weekend!

Where is West Virginia in all of this? New York, Rome, London, and other famous locations frequently appear in tabletop games, but locating the Mountain State on the gaming map is harder to do.

When we do appear, it tends to be in pieces (board game pun intended). The 2022 *Chesapeake & Ohio* version of the game *Age of Steam* includes a single hex space on its board for the city of Beckley—an odd choice, considering Huntington’s prominence as a C&O hub. Similarly, the board for *Brass: Pittsburgh*, an upcoming stand-alone iteration of the industrial strategy blockbuster *Brass*:



Birmingham, prominently displays Clarksburg but omits Morgantown entirely.

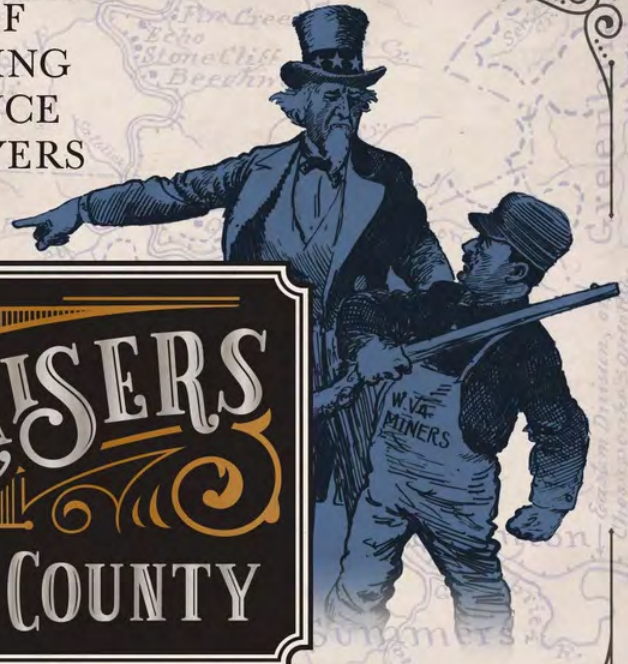
West Virginia also appears in a roundabout way in *Horrid: American Monsters*, a cooperative game in which players race to prevent cryptids from terrorizing a small town. Point Pleasant's Mothman is among its half-dozen mythical opponents, though the state's Flatwoods or Grafton monsters would fit well, too.

Surprisingly, some of West Virginia's best tabletop representation occurs in the Civil War classic *Battle Cry*. "Surprisingly," because designer Richard Borg had thousands of Civil War battles from which to choose, yet players can encounter a wealth of West Virginia sites if they find the right edition. Originally released in 1999, a sesquicentennial reprint by Hasbro in 2010 features 16 new scenarios, including the West Virginia battles of Falling Waters and Greenbrier River (both fought in 1861). The former, which took place just south of the future Antietam battlefield, was one of Thomas J. "Stonewall"

Jackson's early successes as a commander. In fact, *Battle Cry* arguably represents the Mountain State a third time—if somewhat obliquely—with the May 8, 1862, Battle of McDowell. While not occurring on West Virginia soil (McDowell lies in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia), many of the units and commanders had marched there from positions in what would become West Virginia. In fact, Union troops retreated back to Franklin in Pendleton County after their defeat. The 3rd West Virginia Infantry Regiment fought in this brief but intense engagement, and Mountain State Civil War buffs will recognize Confederate General Edward Johnson and Union General Robert Milroy as key figures in this borderland campaign.

A higher tabletop profile for West Virginia is just around the bend. Publisher Wehrlegig Games—now nearly legendary for complex bestsellers such as *Arcs* and *John Company*—has announced the forthcoming *Hell Raisers in Kanawha County*. This strategy title covers the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike of 1912-13, during which martial law was declared and a widely reported visit from Mother

A GAME OF
PROFITEERING
& RESISTANCE
FOR 1-3 PLAYERS



HELL RAISERS IN KANAWHA COUNTY

Design by Matilda Simonsson & Luke Evison

Jones drew national attention. Originally slated for release this year, the designers have indicated that 2027 is a more likely debut target, following the publisher's merger with another company. Still, it is thrilling to see the Mine Wars brought to life by such a highly regarded team.

It is tempting to dismiss these games as mere pastimes. Yet beyond the social, cognitive, and mental health benefits mentioned earlier, board games can also serve as insightful windows into history. As someone who has played *Battle Cry's* Greenbrier River scenario more than once, I can attest that it vividly illustrates why Union troops struggled to dislodge Confederate forces from their entrenchments.

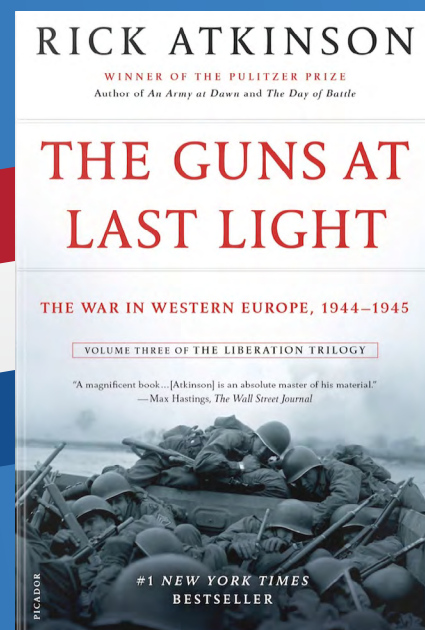
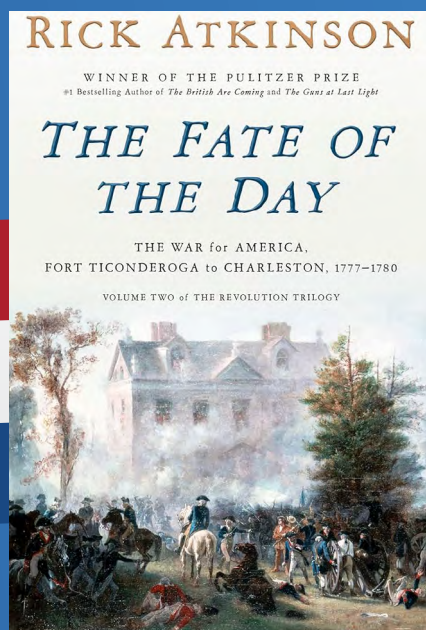
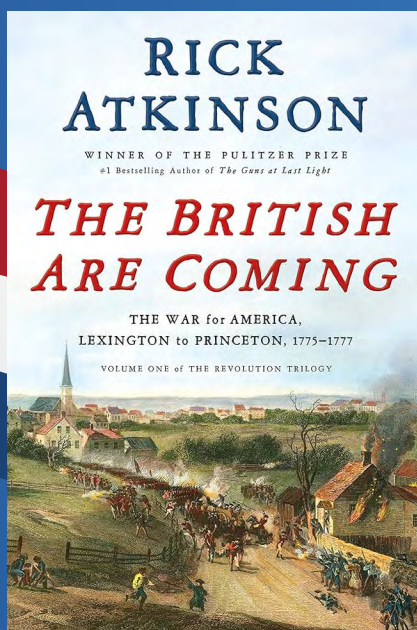
Historian William Kerrigan seems to agree. He adapted his recent book, *West Virginia's War: The Civil War in Documents*, into an as-yet-unpublished game titled *Winning West Virginia*. The "homemade, crudely constructed" prototype described on his blog allows players—through dice rolls and card play—to influence the political, social, and military factors that ultimately shaped the state's borders. In both his writings and public appearances, Kerrigan has emphasized how board games can help audiences grasp the historical

concept of "contingency": the idea that history is not inevitable, but shaped by the actions of individuals and groups who influence broader outcomes.

Board games are a fitting idea to consider in what might be called an age of "digital despair." The means to explore and imagine different possibilities are right there at your fingertips. Deciding the fate of West Virginia might be no further away than your very own tabletop. ~

Kyle Warmack is the program officer for the West Virginia Humanities Council.





McCreight Lecture in the Humanities

To commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the Humanities Council will host distinguished speaker, historian, and author Rick Atkinson on October 15 at the Capitol Theater in Charleston.

Atkinson is a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner and former *Washington Post* journalist. He wrote the *New York Times* best-selling *The British Are Coming*. In 2020, this first volume of his acclaimed Revolution Trilogy earned numerous honors including the George Washington Prize for the year's best work on the American founding era and the New-York Historical Society's Zalaznick Book Prize. His trilogy continues with *The Fate of the Day: The War for America, Fort Ticonderoga to Charleston, 1777-1780*, a sweeping narrative of the Revolution's critical middle years, brought to life through vivid storytelling and deep historical insight. Atkinson also served as a historical advisor for Ken Burns' PBS documentary series *The American Revolution*.



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In Memoriam

The Humanities Council remembers two close collaborators and friends, **Gene Worthington** and **Ancella Bickley**, who passed away earlier this year. We are thankful for their contributions to the Council, the humanities, and the state.



Gene Worthington, August 3, 1948 - January 11, 2026

Gene was an Illinois welder who found his way to Fayette County where he met his wife of 39 years, fellow *History Alive!* presenter Karen Vuranch. His involvement with the Council dated back to the late 1990s, when he began portraying labor leader John L. Lewis for *History Alive!* Over time, he added rich portraits of Babe Ruth and Theodore Roosevelt. A local Boy Scout leader said of one of Gene's last Roosevelt performances, "I believe a bomb could have gone off in the next holler, and those Scouts would still be tuned in to Gene."

His full obituary may be found at

dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/beckley-wv/gene-worthington-12700508.



Ancella Bickley, July 4, 1930 - February 16, 2026

Ancella, born on Independence Day in Huntington, became one of West Virginia's most active and important historians of the late 20th century. She was already well established in this role by the time she served as the Council's Board president in 1983 and was named West Virginia's Woman of the Year in 1984. Well into the 21st century, Ancella applied for Council and other grants to further her prolific work on the Mountain State's Black history. Much of this research made its way into the *West Virginia Encyclopedia* and *e-WV*.

Her full obituary may be found at

ferrell-chambersfuneralhome.com/obituaries/ancella-bickley.

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The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit institution, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. We welcome comments and financial contributions. The West Virginia Humanities Council gratefully acknowledges support from the National Endowment for the Humanities; the West Virginia Department of Tourism; and foundations, corporations, and individuals throughout the Mountain State and beyond.

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Produced and published by Marcus Constantino, Appalachian Visuals.
Layout design and typesetting by Brianna Rose Jarvis.





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