

GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH

Tracing family lines

What began as a conversation about heritage between Bessida Cauthrone White and Gloria Waller-Scott in the late 1990s has turned into the Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society. The group's goal is to help people who want to research their African-American heritage. "We had been talking for years about our research into our families' heritage on the Middle Peninsula and decided that we needed to expand our conversation beyond the two of us," White said.



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Bessida Cauthrone White, with photos of her grandfather, Libbon Trigg White Sr., left, and her great-great-grandmother, Nannie Monroe White, both of King and Queen County, is president of the Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society of Virginia. PHOTO BY JOE FUDGE/DAILY PRESS

Middle Peninsula is rich in African-American heritage

What began as small talk between two women has turned into a full-fledged genealogical society.

BY SUSAN SMIGIELSKI ACKER
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY PRESS

The Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society began, very simply, with two women talking about their heritage.

Bessida Cauthrone White and Gloria Waller-Scott started the organization about a year ago, and they've been pleasantly surprised by the interest from others in the area. The two women met in the late 1990s at a conference on slavery in Williamsburg.

"We had been talking for years about our research into our families' heritage on the Middle Peninsula and decided that we needed to expand our conversation beyond the two of us," said White, now the group's president.

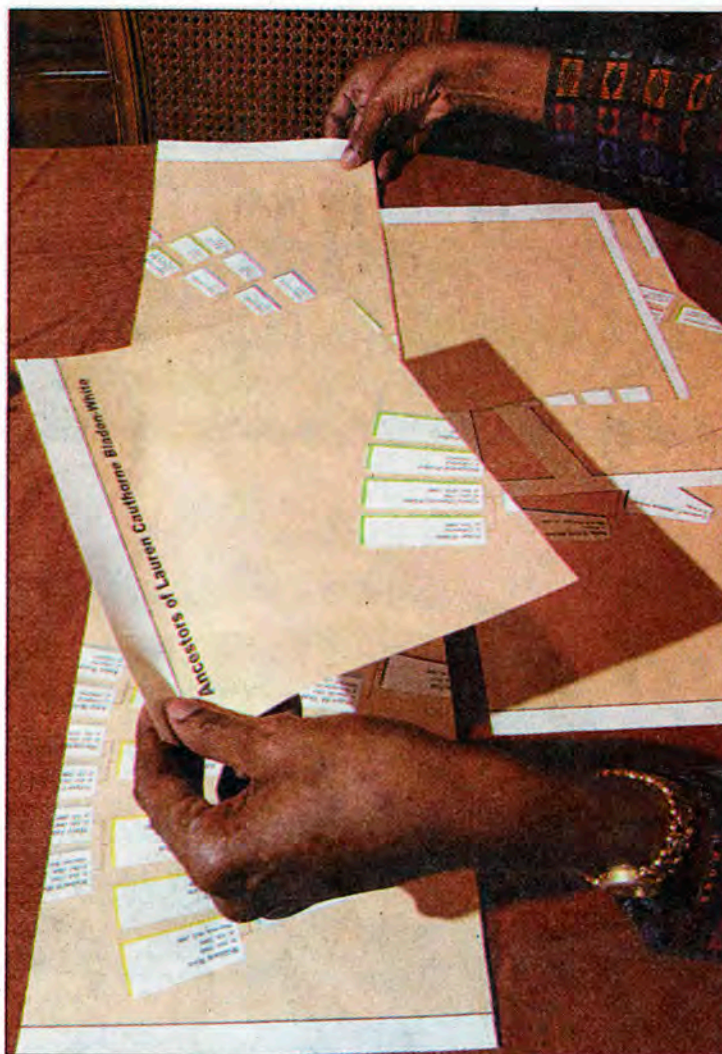
They called a few people they knew who shared their interest and met in September 2004 at the Essex County Public Library in Tappahannock.

"We were amazed and excited at the response," White said. "Our meeting drew about 25 people, with more who could not attend that day but wanted to join."

The group's overall goal is to help people who want to research their African-American heritage. For example, one member lives on the Peninsula, but he is researching family that settled in South Carolina. Most members are researching ancestors who settled in the Middle Peninsula.

White, a veteran genealogical researcher, has traced her mother's family back 16 generations.

"I have traced one line of my family back to 1568 in London," she said. "This line is Cau-



Bessida Cauthrone White, head of the Middle Peninsula African American Genealogical and Historical Society of Virginia, goes over her genealogical chart her home in Middlesex County. PHOTO BY JOE FUDGE/DAILY PRESS

casian. The earliest time that I have for any of my African-American ancestors is 1780."

Waller-Scott has traced her family back to the early 19th century. In her research, she has learned she has American Indian heritage. She has used her experience to help others researching the African-American and Native American unions.

"We enjoy helping people get started and overcoming brick walls in their genealogical research," White said.

times, brothers and sisters are listed," she said.

The September meeting focused on what members learned from summer family reunions.

"Conversations from family reunions are helpful, because in genealogical research, you find brick walls," White said. "One way of bringing them down is to talk to others who are also doing research. Many times you will find a connection with another researcher who has spoken with relatives."

"And we have made connection beyond belief. We have even had members who found they had cousins in common and some could be related."

Carolyn Spencer, deputy clerk for Essex County Circuit Court, spoke on using court records for the group's October meeting.

The Essex County Public Library, in addition to providing meeting space, has a genealogical research room. Recently, a member was having trouble with her research, so other members were able to use the library's public computers to demonstrate genealogical software, White said.

In December, the group, along with the Blues Society of Virginia, they will participate in a ceremony dedicating a historical marker to African-American William Moore. He was a Tappahannock barber who recorded many songs while living in the area. Moore died in 1941. The marker will be placed across the street from the library on Route 17, White said.

At the group's December meeting, members will hear a presentation on how to use Family Tree, a popular genealogy computer application. Another upcoming topic is the role of DNA in genealogical research. They also have plans to work with a similar group in Fredericksburg who have records from 1866. The records are a type of census, White said. ■

To further help genealogical researchers, the group invites experts to speak. A representative from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has visited to explain the cataloging of records from the Freedman's Bank and the Freedman's Bureau. Both organizations were started after the Civil War for released slaves, White said.

"These records are a gold mine, because in those days, a person needed to provide names of family members in order to open an account. So many