

# Rappahannock Times<sup>®</sup>

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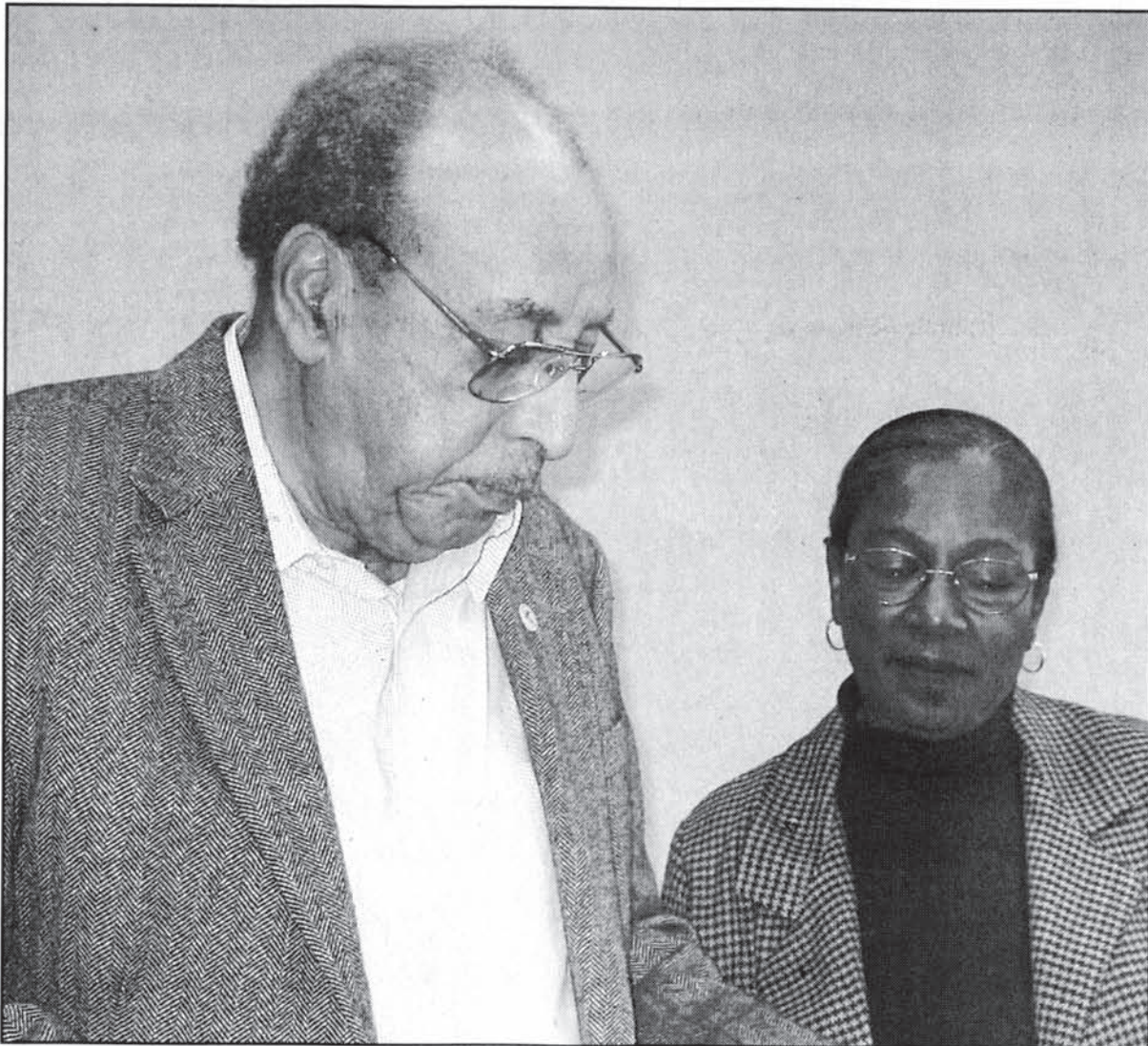
Wednesday, January 9, 2008

"Established 1850"

Four Sections

Monthly Sessions At Essex Public Library

## African-American Genealogy Group Meets Here



Members of the Middle Peninsula African American Genealogical and Historical Society, Thomas Harris and Gloria Waller, share information from genealogical records during one of the group's monthly meetings held at the Essex Public Library.

ERIN KELLEY

The Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society of Virginia was formed in September 2004 "to create and provide opportunities to encourage and enable African Americans to research, document, and publish their family histories and genealogies."

Members of the group meet on the second Saturday of most months to discuss genealogical finds, share resources, convey family stories and encourage each other in their ongoing search for family histories. In just over three years, this small group has formed an extended family of sorts, sharing the common object of uncovering origins.

"There is a need to know," says group member Rev. Ronnie Sydney.

"You would like to know who your ancestors are," agrees Rita Thomas. "There is a desire to have this information, to pass this down to children and grandchildren."

The organization has gained the attention of researchers from outside the immediate region, often looking for research assistance. "We have received queries from all over the United States asking for help in finding information about ancestors," says organization president Bessida White, as she

passes around an email from a librarian in Baltimore looking for research assistance.

The group is currently working to electronically catalog thousands of funeral programs donated by their members. They intend to create a database of scanned programs, which when completed will be made available to the public for research purposes. This nearly unique project highlights one of few genealogical resources available nearly exclusively to those researching African-American ancestry.

The printing of extensive funeral programs, with considerable amounts of biographical information regarding the deceased, is a long standing tradition amongst African-Americans. In addition to personal history, these mini-biographies often include family names and dates which can be enormously helpful to the genealogical researcher.

Past projects of the organization have included creating a surname database in which individuals list the family names they are researching to encourage the exchange of information amongst researchers. In addition, the group has welcomed speakers who have addressed subjects such as proper preservation methods for family

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records and photos and creation of family heirlooms.

Future scheduled speakers include Christina Draper, program director of the African American Heritage Program at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, who is to speak on approaches to collecting oral histories.

The MPAAGHS will hold its next meeting on Saturday, Jan 12, at 11 a.m. at the Essex County Public

Library. Although the focus of the organization is research in areas of the Middle Peninsula, they invite participation from anyone doing African-American genealogical research. For further information visit their website at [www.mpaagenealogicalsociety.org](http://www.mpaagenealogicalsociety.org).