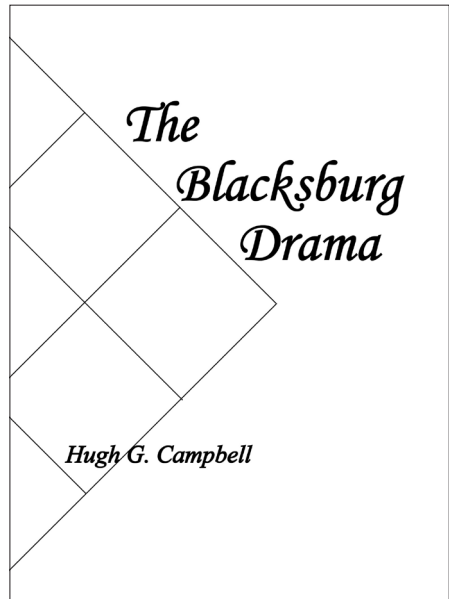

Book Review:

***THE BLACKSBURG DRAMA: A history
of Blacksburg in three acts***

Sharon B. Watkins

Only a few years after concluding two decades as editor and guiding spirit of *The Smithfield Review*, native Floridian Hugh Campbell has distilled his extensive knowledge and obvious affection toward his adopted hometown of Blacksburg, Virginia, into a personal and intriguing view of the town's last three centuries. As he tells his prospective readers at the beginning, his book, *The Blacksburg Drama: A history of Blacksburg in three acts*, is for those "who want to know more about the essential elements of Blacksburg's history but do not want an overdose of historical dates, events, and names" ("A Note from the Author," page v).

Structured as an historical drama in three acts, each divided into numerous scenes with a list of leading characters and events, the work depicts the Blacksburg area as the setting of dynamic human activity in a geographical background that is frequently described and remains a dominant backdrop throughout the epic story, stretching from early native American tribal people through the challenge of the computer age at Virginia Tech, the university that dominates much of Blacksburg today. One who enjoys nature or poring over historical maps soon can visualize the backdrop: a mountain plateau at about two thousand feet elevation, straddling the



The Blacksburg Drama, which relates the history of the town of Blacksburg, Virginia, in a unique way, was written by Hugh C. Campbell, who has lived in the town for decades.

Eastern continental divide and endowed with numerous meadows for grazing or cultivation and with copious sources of fresh water and small streams. And starting with the oldest trails and hand-drawn maps, Campbell provides visual updates of the drama he describes, presenting repeatedly the old maps and property lines with the built geography of new property lines, new roads, and human constructions that altered the appearance but not the essence of the place. This is definitely not a history dominated by the specters of prominent gentlemen in stiff portraiture since only one person is so depicted: William Ballard Preston. On the other hand, some seven-dozen maps or depictions of buildings and their surroundings enliven the pages.

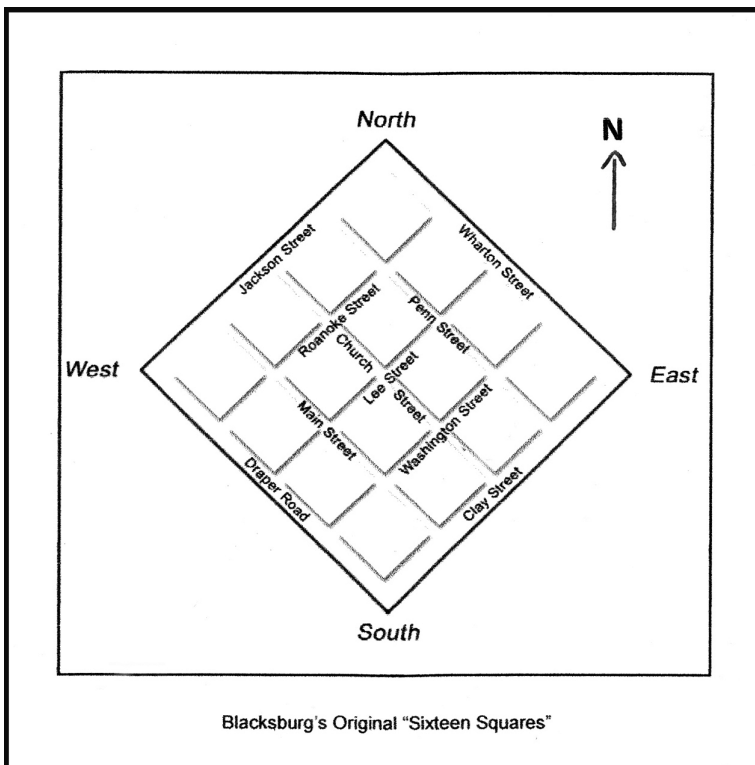
The author divides the principal human movements across this landscape/stage into three acts framed by the timespans of pre-1774, 1774 to 1862, and 1862 and beyond. The fact that the specific years of 1774 and 1862 are not often chosen as the two most pivotal years in U.S. history between the advent of native tribes and the present day re-enforces the author's specifically local focus. Our first thought should be "What happened that affected Blacksburg so strongly in 1774 and 1862?" rather than thinking in terms of nation, region, or state. One response—the establishment in Blacksburg of Smithfield Plantation by William Preston and his family—provides the key both for Act 1, "The Pre-Smithfield Years (before 1774)," and for Act 2, "The Smithfield Years (1774–1862)."

In Act 1, Campbell gives a fairly brief summary of the presence of mostly unidentified Native American tribal people who followed the rivers and the game and made the first trails, which still underlie many major roads today. The advent of European peoples bent principally upon agricultural exploitation ("The First Settlers") comes next, with discussion of land grants and the presentation of the property lines this produced by the 1750s. Next treated are the events that arguably launched Blacksburg into mainstream American and European history, the 1755 killing and abduction of local European settlers at Draper's Meadow (now a part of the Virginia Tech campus) by stressed and dispossessed Shawnee warriors.

This embroiled both Blacksburg and several regional tribal nations in the early stages of the struggle for colonial and global domination waged for many decades between Great Britain and France. This particular installment of that global struggle was called the French and Indian War in North America and the Seven Years War by Europeans; this round of outright combat came to an end with an agreement among Europeans (not Americans) in 1763. Britain proceeded to enact measures to consolidate its control over eastern North America, to repair the damaged royal finances, and to take measures aimed at ending native peoples' hostility and quarrels

with Britain's colonies. New lines were drawn upon maps and the color of regions changed.

Around Blacksburg, the line of European settlement had been pushed back eastward as settlers fled the Indian attacks; the advent of peace unleashed a flood primarily of white settlers, some taking enslaved black people along to new homes in the west. In this rush came two families of Scottish background who left major contributions to Blacksburg's story, the Blacks and the Prestons. The Blacks had purchased land earlier and divided various parcels among multiple generations of the family. A few decades later, two Black brothers carefully surveyed some of their land, neatly drawing sixteen sizeable squares, each bearing four building lots, all laid along a grid composed of five proposed straight roads intersecting five others at right angles. Even today, the imprint of these original sixteen squares are obvious in the roads of old downtown Blacksburg. This early planned community was incorporated by the state as an official town in 1798.



William Black donated land for the creation of the town of Blacksburg. His plan for the proposed town included five streets intersected by five perpendicular streets, creating sixteen squares (source: *Town Architecture* by Donna Dunay).

The Preston household was unlike any other moving to the area since it involved dozens of people, including relatives, indentured servants, trainee employees, and slaves. The *paterfamilias* William Preston was an experienced surveyor; land speculator; plantation owner; and, crucially, an accumulator of royal political offices and administrative posts in newer counties created by the royal government of Virginia. Campbell points out that Preston used his connections further east to dominate local governmental and military affairs and to control the surveys and sales of massive acreages stretching as far away as mid-Kentucky. In 1774, he moved his office and his home to the very edge of European settlement both to fulfill his public duties and to profit more successfully from his land speculations. He ordered construction of a two-story wooden house modeled on the mansions of Williamsburg and laid out a property of several thousand acres as his home base and named it Smithfield.

Within a few years, however, Preston realized that all of his hard-earned rewards were in danger. He had invested his career and fortune in the very lands that the British government, following the outlines of a royal Proclamation in 1763, seriously intended to reserve for use by Native Americans to pacify belligerent tribes. The bulk of Preston's huge land claims were declared permanently off limits to white settlement. Thus was made the leading patriot of the Blacksburg area. Preston soon abandoned his royal superiors and took up the cause of violent revolution and American independence. He died partly as a result of his exertions in battle in the year 1783, just as peace and the freedom of the United States were being negotiated in Europe.

The remaining scenes of Act 2 reveal the dozen Preston children, armed with dazzling amounts of inherited land and the best education privileged people living near the frontier could obtain, making skillful marital, political, and economic alliances with elites across Virginia—and beyond. They became powerful in the state, producing several governors and an array of state legislators, lawyers, and administrators. Politically, the brightest star among the Prestons was the third-generation owner of Smithfield, William Ballard Preston (usually called Ballard). He became a thoughtful and important politician at the national level, joining the new Whig Party and working in Congress (which included Illinois Representative Abraham Lincoln) to ease crises arising over fears that slavery would expand into new states; he served at the federal cabinet level in the 1850s and opposed the secession of Virginia even after the events surrounding Fort Sumter. With President Lincoln's approval, he travelled to Washington to seek some political solution to avert tragedy, or at least to keep Virginia

in the United States. Such efforts proved unsuccessful and Ballard Preston returned home, endorsed secession, and died not long afterwards in 1862. Preston's political failure and death compose one reason author Campbell chose to end Act 2 of the Blacksburg Drama in 1862, in the midst of the Civil War; Ballard's demise signified on the larger scale the death knell of the dominant agrarian aristocracy who had ruled the rural Southern states since American independence. Many members of the extended Preston clan moved away and many sold much of their land; some Prestons remained in the area and made contributions to civic and economic life, but they no longer dominated.



Col. William Preston constructed a home for his family, which he christened Smithfield in honor of his wife, Susanna Smith Preston. Today, the Smithfield-Preston Foundation owns and maintains the restored eighteenth-century home (courtesy of Anne J. Campbell).

The second reason for placing 1862 at the end of Act 2 and the beginning of Act 3 lies in the passage of legislation in the U.S. Congress that year, even as civil war raged. The Morrill Land Grant Act promised to each state a sizeable grant of publicly owned lands; in return for this valuable gift, each state would create college-level studies in agriculture and mechanics (technical subjects and engineering), either at existing public institutions or newly created ones. Thus was born the federally subsidized land-grant universities that originally emphasized a kind of education not often available at the religious and privately funded colleges already in existence.

Virginia's leaders became aware of this legislation and considered various possibilities during the brief period of Reconstruction, and as soon as the rights of statehood were restored, they were prepared to act quickly.

The lawmakers decided to create two land-grant universities, one for African-American students and one for white students. The choice of a site for the white land grant ultimately fell upon Blacksburg after Montgomery Countians agreed to put up twenty thousand dollars and a local boy's academy offered its building and acreage; nearby farmland was sold to the school by Robert Preston, a brother of Ballard, and a campus was quickly created. In 1872, a year after Reconstruction ended, the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College began accepting students. As this small college grew and developed, its importance to the Blacksburg area increasingly grew as well, leading to the present research and teaching institution known as Virginia Tech. This massive publicly funded organization dwarfed what otherwise would be another small town characterized by its rural surroundings and centuries' long history.



Constructed in the mid-nineteenth century, the Preston and Olin Building was used as a dormitory/classroom and a college machine shop for more than five decades before fire destroyed it in 1913 (courtesy of Special Collections, Virginia Tech).

The last portion of Campbell's book interweaves the development of town and campus together and emphasizes the improvement of life for local citizens (especially in the realm of public education for children), the options for freedmen who remained living in the area, and massive changes in the physical appearance of town and campus. New roads and buildings in changing architectural styles transformed not the backdrop of mountains and meadows, but the environment created by modern humans. Campbell

presents a stage spectacle through multiple photographs and maps, revealing a dynamic dance of campus and town. To his credit, the author describes alterations of which, the reader surmises, he does not approve, and he makes a case for preservation of the historic buildings and streets, which remain in the town, for cultural and educational purposes.

The author concludes with an orderly and thoughtful consideration of the goals, difficulties, and achievements of the various leaders of the Virginia Tech administration. Campbell came to Virginia Tech (or Virginia Polytechnic Institute as it was known then) as a relatively young mathematics professor and stayed on the job for more than thirty-five years; thus he has often described events and processes through which he has lived. He deals with larger national and regional issues, including student unrest in the 1960s and 1970s and the transformation of methods of governance and representation for students and faculty alike that resulted. Familiar campus buildings take on new life for the reader as Campbell explains the plans and achievements of their namesakes. Men such as Eggleston, Burruss, Newman, and Cassell all become real people, culminating with President T. Marshall Hahn.

To this reader, the account of an issue almost unique to Virginia Tech was highly enlightening: the controversy over whether to and how to continue to require military training and uniforms of all students for four



Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute President Julian A. Burruss made significant changes at the college, known popularly at the time as Virginia Polytechnic Institute, or VPI (today's Virginia Tech). Two of the more notable ones were reducing the requirement for male students to be members of the corps of cadets from four years to two and the admission of women as full-time students (courtesy of Special Collections, Virginia Tech).

or even two academic years when virtually all other land-grant schools had dispensed with such training. Many alumni of the school lobbied vigorously in favor of retaining the military elements, while administrators pointed out the negative effects and limits on student body composition such retention imposed. Virtually all female students were excluded from the Blacksburg campus student body, and the majority of college-aged young men in the state who had no interest in a military career did not bother to apply. Furthermore, the curriculum and university events were skewed toward the military in a new age that favored wider choices, especially at a publicly funded state university.

In conclusion, Hugh Campbell's book is indeed not an "ordinary" history book and neither is it a "usual" sort of memoir. Its framework as a play, a dramatic presentation of Blacksburg, Virginia, and Virginia Tech, allows for a personal touch and thoughtful meditation about a small town and a large institution from colonial days to computer age. It is worth reading and contemplating, both its text and its many visual stimuli.

Editor's Note: Hugh Campbell's book is available at the Historic Smithfield[©] museum, the Montgomery Museum of Art and History, and the Alexander Black House.

About the Reviewer: A member of *The Smithfield Review* Editorial Board, Sharon B. Watkins currently serves as co-editor of the journal. In addition to this book review, she has written various articles for the journal over the years and has helped compile several indices. She holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with a minor field in economic history and international economics. Dr. Watkins taught at Western Illinois University and Virginia Tech before her retirement.