

RECORDATUR

"MY DEAREST MISS LURA"

LUNENBURG LETTERS ILLUMINATE A LONG AND UNLIKELY LOVE AFFAIR

Lura Royall was a Lunenburg County girl. Her relatives remember her as a pretty woman who never married—a retired school teacher full of life well into old age. But there was a part of her life that remained a secret from her living relatives. It was a secret recently revealed in ninety-seven letters and postcards written to her from her fiancé, a Russian émigré named Vladimir Sournin, across a span of twenty-one years.

These letters, part of several cubic feet of papers left in the old courthouse by former Lunenburg County clerk John L. Yates, were stashed among bills, statements, and personal business correspondence. How the letters ended up in Yates's file cabinets is uncertain, but they reveal an on-again-off-again relationship between the couple that started in 1898 and lasted until at least 1925.

THE INTENSE AND CHARMING RUSSIAN

Vladimir Sournin's life is a little-known historical footnote now, but he was no ordinary man. Ambitious and talented, his career and interests led him to three continents where his path intersected with major world events and some of the most well-known people of his day. His letters reveal him to be supremely confident in his abilities and fearless in attempts to achieve his goals. This same persistence is evident in his effort to woo Lura Royall.

Vladimir was born in 1875 into a military family in Mstislavl, Russia. In St. Petersburg, Russia, he became an expert chess player sharpening his game under a world champion. While studying in Paris he became enamored of the American cause during the

Spanish-American War and volunteered for the U.S. Army infantry. Afterward he stayed in Washington, D.C., and began a career with the U.S. Geological Survey as a cartographer, eventually being recognized as one of the country's best draftsmen. He completed a well-regarded survey of the Panama Canal Zone, then

Undated photograph of Vladimir Sournin at work.

under construction, and was awarded a presidential medal for his work there. Several of Vladimir's letters from 1908 were sent from the Canal Zone.

He toured as a lecturer speaking about the canal across Europe and the United States, but his triumphant tour seemed to hit a dead end in Russia. In a letter dated September 15, 1912, he wrote to Lura asking for money to help buy a ticket back to the United States after an absence of two years. He claimed that a hospital stay after an illness had left him nearly destitute, his lectures were being suppressed, and his motiograph, a hand-cranked picture projector, had been confiscated. He wrote, "O Miss **see Letters, page 3**

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RECORDATUR

“An entry made on record to prevent any alteration of Record”

This newsletter is published twice a year to keep circuit court clerks informed about the court records preservation program for the Commonwealth of Virginia. Reader participation is invited.



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Grant Applications Due October 15, 2009
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DIRECTOR'S CORNER

Here's hoping this message finds you well and that everyone was able to enjoy some well-deserved time off to relax and enjoy the summer! I wanted to take this opportunity to bring you up to date on what has been a very busy period at the Library of Virginia.

Sadly, the state budget continues to dominate the news here and in your offices, I'm sure. On September 8 the Library received news from the governor's office that our general fund budget was being cut by 9.4 percent and directing us to lay off eight members of our staff. However, the actual cut to the Library's operating budget was closer to 19 percent, taking into account that the amount of rent we must pay to the state could not be reduced. Also, money in our budget that is set aside for state aid to libraries received a reduction of only 5 percent, which forced us to absorb the additional cut. Three members of the Library's executive management team elected to retire earlier than planned, resulting in a total of five layoffs within the agency. Among the retirements is that of State Archivist Conley L. Edwards, who will retire on November 1 after 35 years of service to the Library.

In addition to the loss of funding and staff, the Library was informed that one million dollars was supplanted from the Circuit Court Records Preservation Program fund to be used to "permit the Library of Virginia to maintain continuity of service." Essentially, the Library is being directed to use funds set aside for records preservation to replace our general fund operating expenses. This loss is on top of last year's diversion of 1.25 million dollars of CCRP funds to the state's general fund.

Obviously, these decisions put a great strain on the program and our ability to continue the important work of preserving circuit court records. By necessity, we will need to slow our progress in the coming year, especially in the areas of conservation, reformatting, and funding of preservation grants to your offices. Rest assured that we will work hard to maintain our current level of services to your offices. Hopefully, better times are ahead, but I did want to keep you apprised of the cuts we are facing.

Now for some better news! We have completed another successful year for the grant program, approving 94 grants totaling nearly \$1.8 million in preservation funds for records in your offices. Please see the summary of awards in this newsletter for full details on the spring cycle of grants. I again want to thank Rebecca Johnson of Bland County, John Frey of Fairfax County, and Frank Hargrove of Hanover County for serving on the Grants Review Board and providing their valuable input. We look forward to three new clerks joining the board for the fall grant cycle. Make sure to contact Glenn Smith or Rachel Muse if you have any questions about the grant program or need help developing a proposal.

The Local Records Services Branch continues to make great strides in processing and providing access to the circuit court records housed at the Library. Our digital chancery initiative continues to progress nicely, with over 3 million images from 27 localities currently posted to the Chancery Records Index (CRI). The CRI is now the featured collection on the Library's new Virginia Memory Web site. Please take a couple of minutes to investigate this wonderful resource at www.virginiamemory.com.

As always, please let us know if you have any questions or concerns.

—Carl Childs
Local Records Services Director

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL TEACHER

Lura also led an unconventional life, though she was popular with men she never married. Her teaching career in Lunenburg County gave her an income and allowed her to travel during the summer. Her brother Lucius Royall and his wife ran a boarding house in Washington, D.C. A relative remembers Lura as a social butterfly who loved taking part in all that Washington had to offer. Her dancing shoes from those days, surely well used, remain in family hands.

One can glean from Vladimir's letters that the weight of family responsibilities weighed heavily on Lura. She felt responsible for her elderly mother, who died in 1922, and for her sister Betty Sue Royall, whose once pretty face was deformed by an operation. The letters mention her sister pulling through bouts of serious illness.

Lura's independence must have attracted Vladimir, but it also seemed to worry him. He asked her to marry him in a letter dated September 20, 1924. At this point she was 45 years old and Vladimir was 49. Their intermittent relationship began when he was in his early twenties and she was nineteen. After their engagement his letters are riddled with references, joking and otherwise, to the need for her to obey him once they were married and the necessity of her leaving her teaching career to keep house.

It is unclear how Lura's health played into this period of her life. She died in 1980 at 101 in a nursing home in Blackstone. In her obituary a nephew stated that she contracted tuberculosis in 1924 and was forced to retire from teaching **see Letters, page 5**

Lura Royall (second from right) poses with her family in an undated photograph.

Letters... Lura... I can tell you... Russia is not the place for an ambitious man." It was not the last time he would ask her for money.

It is unclear whether he left Russia in 1912, but there is a second letter to Lura from Vladimir in Russia dated March 1915, when World War I was raging across Europe. He wrote, "Now, Miss Lura, in the most bitter moment in my life—I pray [sic] you help me! The condition of this horrible war is indescribable... it's awful..." In this letter he again asks her for money for the fare back to the United States, adding that he had sustained minor wounds. Given his family background, Vladimir most likely served as an officer in the Russian army in some capacity. The circumstances of his escape from Russia are unclear. Did he desert the Russian Army? Was he in Russia during the Russian Revolution of 1917? The next correspondence to Lura in the collection from Vladimir was, of all things, a postcard from Hawaii dated January 24, 1918. Later, in March of that year, he wrote to express his joy at being back in the United States and promised to repay the \$10 he owed her as soon as he got a new federal mapmaking job.

After World War I Vladimir collaborated with General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, leader of the American Expeditionary Force in the Great War, to create a map identifying Native Americans' contributions to the war effort. The famed American Indian photographer Joseph K. Dixon personally supervised the map project and the department store magnate Rodman Wannamaker, the Sam Walton of his day, funded the effort. Vladimir proudly sent Lura some of his own correspondence with Dixon, which remains in the collection.

Also during this time, Vladimir made his mark in the American chess community. Considered to be a near-master player, he defeated a reigning world champion in 1908 and was a five-time Washington, D.C., Capital City Chess Club champion in the 1920s and 1930s. He often wrote to Lura between matches and several letters in the collection bear the letterhead of hotels where he played in tournaments.

In a letter to Royall, Sournin imagines her response to the command to "obey" her husband at their wedding.

“The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.”

—President Barack Obama
in his inaugural address

Archives Month in Virginia celebrates those institutions and individuals that help preserve and make accessible the important records of our actions as citizens, businesses, religious groups, government, and society. Far from focusing only on past accomplishments, those who care for our archives and special collections help provide us with a foundation for discussing the things that matter most in our communities today. By preserving historical records and making them available to researchers,

archivists play a unique and valuable role in building communities, inspiring change, and connecting ge

Letters... after a twenty-one-year career. Two letters from Vladimir in that year are addressed to Lura at the Catawba Sanatorium near Roanoke, including the one in which he proposes marriage. Was Lura more likely to accept Vladimir's proposal after losing her career and livelihood? She regained her health but the disease seemed to have little effect on her relationship with Vladimir.

Given his flair for the dramatic, it is not surprising that Vladimir began a singing career in the 1920s as "Vladimir Sournin, The Russian Baritone"—the title that adorned the letterhead of most of his correspondence in those years. He wrote

DO YOU HAVE OVERDUE GRANT REPORTS? OUTSTANDING GRANT REPORTS COULD PREVENT THE AWARD OF FUTURE GRANT FUNDING!

If you have questions about grant applications or concerning grant reports, contact Rachel Muse at rachel.muse@lva.virginia.gov or 804.786.6356 or Glenn Smith at glenn.smith@lva.virginia.gov or 804.692.3604.

to Lura with a detailed business plan showing how his singing would fund their eventual marriage.

What may be the last letter between the two had to be literally pieced together. In it, Vladimir asks her for \$50 immediately while promising to pay other debts he owes her, writing that it will be the last time he borrows money from her "till we marry." Then, after professing his love for her, he writes in uncharacteristically poor English, "You see Dear, your sister (Betty Sue) is ill, look not well, for she is OLD Maide, and that will be same thing with you, my dear, so you better be my wife [sic]." After this he drew a picture of a sock with an arrow pointing to it and intimated that she, like all old maids, had money hidden away and should not be stingy. Lura ripped the letter to shreds.

This cruelty was probably the last straw for Lura. Though the letter was undated, it was similar in physical form to others written in 1925. It seems certain from a few of the letters that at least some of Lura's brothers, including Lucius Royall, did not like Vladimir. The intense and charming Russian was probably popular with women, and he included in many of his letters to Lura correspondence from another woman still pursuing him, Virginia Kennedy, a

widow from St. Mary's County, Maryland.

Lura asked Vladimir to keep their engagement a secret from her family and even asked him to burn her letters, most likely because Vladimir would not have had complete privacy in his boarding house room.

Neither Vladimir nor Lura ever married. He died in 1942 in Baltimore and is buried in Baltimore National Cemetery. His skills are still known in chess circles and his matches are still studied. Lura is buried in the Tussekiah Baptist Church Cemetery in Lunenburg County and is fondly remembered by relatives who knew her. Without these letters the memory of Lura Royall's relationship with Vladimir Sournin would have died with her in 1980. How they ended up in the courthouse is a mystery. Did she or a relative consider a breach-of-promise lawsuit against Vladimir and deposit the letters there? Or did Lura, who may have worked briefly for the clerk, put the letters where she thought they would be safe from prying eyes? Whatever the answer may be, it is fortunate that this intensely personal glimpse into two lives survives.

—Dale Dulaney
Archival Assistant

LATEST ROUND OF PRESERVATION GRANTS AWARDED

In the 2009-B grant cycle, there were fifty applications submitted from forty localities totaling \$1,081,454.21. The Court Records Preservation Program Grants Review Board met to discuss the applications on May 11; they awarded forty-nine projects. With one request declined, and line-item adjustments to three projects, the total amount awarded was \$1,110,709.40.

Circuit Court Records Program staff members would like to extend thanks to Rebecca Johnson, Bland County; John Frey, Fairfax County; and Frank Hargrove, Hanover County, for their diligence in evaluating the applications in each grant cycle, and for their experience and wisdom in helping to direct the program.

To date, 920 projects have been awarded to all but two of the 120 clerks' offices in the amount of \$14,629,574.62.

| Project Type | Amount Awarded | Amount % | # Awarded | # % |
|-------------------|-----------------|----------|-----------|-------|
| Item Conservation | 2,071,098.06 | 14.2% | 313 | 34.0% |
| Preservation | 389,277.60 | 2.7% | 57 | 6.2% |
| Processing | 2,393,117.58 | 16.4% | 142 | 15.4% |
| Reader/Printer | 859,964.89 | 5.9% | 73 | 7.9% |
| Reformatting | 7,813,582.43 | 53.4% | 212 | 23.0% |
| Security System | 1,102,534.06 | 7.5% | 123 | 13.4% |
| | \$14,629,574.62 | 100% | 920 | 100% |

**Virginia Circuit Court Records Preservation Grant Program
Awards for 2009-B Cycle**

| Locality | Project Type | Awarded |
|-----------------------------|--|----------------|
| Accomack County | Security System - Camera | 24,726.00 |
| Augusta County | Security System - Camera | 31,137.00 |
| Dinwiddie County | Security System - Camera | 11,790.00 |
| Henrico County | Security System - Camera | 17,376.00 |
| Charlotte County | Processing - Judgments | 53,307.11 |
| Halifax County | Processing - Judgments | 48,860.00 |
| Rockingham County | Processing - Loose Papers | 8,965.00 |
| Shenandoah County | Reformatting - Addendum | 13,231.88 |
| Charlotte County | Reformatting - Chancery to Digital | 137,418.00 |
| Culpeper County | Reformatting - Chancery to Digital | 118,061.00 |
| Loudoun County | Reformatting - Chancery to Digital | 226,172.00 |
| Wise County | Reformatting - Chancery to Digital | 132,246.00 |
| Washington County | Reformatting - Paper to Digital | 3,500.00 |
| Wise County | Reformatting - Paper to Digital | 4,342.50 |
| City of Danville | Reformatting - Plats to Digital | 5,729.00 |
| Grayson County | Reformatting - Plats to Digital | 8,910.00 |
| Isle of Wight County | Reformatting - Plats to Digital | 14,298.65 |
| Montgomery County | Reformatting - Plats to Digital | 25,856.25 |
| Augusta County | Preservation - Indexing | 2,634.00 |
| Lee County | Preservation - Plat Cabinet | 5,282.00 |
| Nelson County | Preservation - Plat Cabinet | 5,247.00 |
| Giles County | Preservation - Storage | 4,999.00 |
| Halifax County | Preservation - Storage | 1,982.06 |
| Lunenburg County | Reader/Printer | 11,214.19 |
| City of Portsmouth | Reader/Printer | 7,033.76 |
| Prince William County | Reader/Printer | 2,000.00 |
| Albemarle County | Item Conservation - Book | 8,741.00 |
| Amelia County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,999.00 |
| City of Chesapeake | Item Conservation - Book | 1,190.00 |
| Cumberland County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,080.00 |
| Fauquier County | Item Conservation - Book | 3,358.00 |
| Fluvanna County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,987.00 |
| Franklin County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,720.00 |
| Halifax County | Item Conservation - Book | 7,169.00 |
| Highland County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,718.00 |
| Loudoun County | Item Conservation - Book | 11,712.00 |
| Mecklenburg County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,879.00 |
| Montgomery County | Item Conservation - Book | 9,137.00 |
| Rockbridge County | Item Conservation - Book | 8,126.00 |
| Rockingham County | Item Conservation - Book | 8,186.00 |
| Scott County | Item Conservation - Book | 59,275.00 |
| Shenandoah County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,345.00 |
| Smyth County | Item Conservation - Book | 6,761.00 |
| Stafford County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,329.00 |
| Surry County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,997.00 |
| Warren County | Item Conservation - Book | 3,968.00 |
| City of Williamsburg | Item Conservation - Book | 4,986.00 |
| Wise County | Item Conservation - Book | 4,853.00 |
| Sussex County | Item Conservation - Paper | 4,875.00 |
| | | \$1,110,709.40 |