The annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival brings together exemplary practitioners of diverse traditions from communities across the United States and around the world. The goal of the Festival is to encourage the vitality of these traditions by presenting them on the National Mall so that tradition-bearers and the public can learn from one another and understand cultural differences in a respectful way.

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The 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Mekong River: Connecting Cultures
Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian
Roots of Virginia Culture
Produced by the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

Co-sponsored by the National Park Service

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The 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival

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The Mekong Region: Diverse Heritage, Shared Future
   - Pots and Jars Along the Mekong
   - Naxi Culture
   - Textiles Along the Mekong
   - Khmer Music Along the Mekong
   - The Mekong Flows into America

Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian
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   - Food and Food Culture in Northern Ireland

Roots of Virginia Culture: The Past is Present
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   - The Garden of England: Kent, Yesterday and Today
   - Africans, African Americans, and the Roots of Virginia Culture
   - Blue Ridge Folklife: Thirty Years of Fried Pies and Other Delights
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Now in its forty-first year, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival continues an important tradition by featuring Roots of Virginia Culture, Mekong River: Connecting Cultures, and Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian.

The Roots of Virginia Culture program helps mark the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown. The founding was a seminal event, although not for the reasons thought at the time. For the nation that subsequently emerged, Jamestown set in motion relationships among Native Americans, English, and Africans. They interacted through war, slavery, and strife, as well as through a growing economy and an unfolding democracy to define, in large measure, American culture and traditions. Musicians, artisans, cooks, boat builders, farmers, archaeologists, and genealogists from Virginia, England (mainly Kent County), West Africa, and Native communities throughout Virginia will demonstrate root traditions, cultural parallels, and the ways their expressions and those of later immigrants formed a dynamic American heritage. We are grateful for the work of many scholars and colleagues on three continents who enabled us to tell the story, and we thank our partners, including Jamestown 2007, the Kent County Council, and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, who supported and guided the program.

Among early immigrants to Virginia were Scots and Irish from Ireland—people who contributed mightly to the new nation. Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian, focuses on the cultural life of those “back home.” The Festival program comes at a very important time in the history of the island region. In just the last few months, leaders of the two major parties, Unionist (Protestant) and Republican (Catholic) have agreed to form a self-government to help surmount “The Troubles” that plagued the region. Music, crafts, occupational traditions, and culinary arts are flourishing. Cultural expressions, often means of resistance and conflict, increasingly foster understanding, reconciliation, and the economy. This is particularly evident in a massive arts effort, “Rediscover Northern Ireland,” which seeks to acquaint Americans with the region. Numerous scholars, cultural organizations (led by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Northern Ireland Arts Council), and civic-minded corporate sponsors came together to design and fund the program. Such public-private partnerships, increased American tourism, and economic investment will help guarantee reconciliation and stability.

Similar sensibilities have inspired Mekong River: Connecting Cultures, which brings together musicians, artisans, cooks, and other cultural exemplars from Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The program follows the 3,000-mile river from its highland origins on the Tibetan Plateau through the Yunnan Province of China to the delta of southern Vietnam. Many Americans are familiar with the region because of war. But beyond the conflicts are rich, interrelated cultures.
Although national identities are important and persistent, ethnic communities are distributed across national boundaries. Occupational and artisanal traditions, such as fishing, farming, and weaving, transcend citizenship. Religious beliefs have inspired a wide variety of performance and celebratory expressions. This is a politically, economically, and culturally dynamic area whose future is increasingly tied to global concerns. Millions of Americans from the region now make their home in the United States—in the nation’s capital, in Virginia, in Maryland, and in many other states. Americans and other visitors to the Festival will learn more about this important region thanks to the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan Province, China; the Rockefeller, Ford, Luce, and McKnight foundations; and institutional colleagues such as Thailand’s Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, Vietnam’s Museum of Ethnology, Cambodia’s Amrita Performing Arts, China Yunnan International Culture Exchange Center, and Connecticut College.

Roland L. Freeman is very pleased to work on the Roots of Virginia Culture program because his Freeman roots go back to Hanover and Caroline counties in Virginia. This year marks the 35th anniversary of his relationship with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as research associate and cultural documentary photographer. In his forty-year career as a visual researcher, he has created iconic photographs of African American cultural life including arabbers in Baltimore, communities in Philadelphia, and quilters and their collectors. Out of this body of work, he has published six books and exhibited all over the world. In 1991, he helped form The Group for Cultural Documentation, Inc. (www.tgcd.org) of which he is president and through which he continues his documentation of the African Diaspora.
With all three programs, the Festival continues an institutional practice of the Smithsonian and an expected part of summer life in the nation’s capital. At its inception over forty years ago, the Festival was conceived as an act of cultural democracy, a vehicle for cultural conversation, and a means of cultural conservation. Held on the National Mall around the Fourth of July, it provided an important forum where Americans and others could explain, express, demonstrate, and perform their cultural traditions. “Back home,” the Festival would encourage traditions within practitioners’ communities; stimulate cultural research and documentation efforts; boost sales of crafts, music, and food; lead to public recognition by government leaders and the media; increase tourism and economic development; and inspire educational programs in schools. Survey after survey has demonstrated that Festival participants believe Festival programs play a key role in preserving cultural traditions in their own lives and in the lives of their communities.

The Festival model—the research and public presentation of cultural heritage with the close collaboration of those represented—has inspired university departments, programs, festivals, heritage centers, and activities within the Smithsonian, across the United States, and around the world. The Festival provided the template for and produced several presidential inaugural programs, cultural programs for various Olympics, the Black Family Reunion, the Smithsonian’s own 150th anniversary celebration, the dedication of the National World War II Memorial, and the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian. It also inspired other ongoing festivals in Michigan and Kentucky and in Romania and India.

The Festival itself is the “tip of the iceberg,” the most visible part of a larger effort by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage to safeguard cultural traditions—in an ethical and professional manner consistent with human rights—so they can flourish in a contemporary world. The Center’s practice has been incorporated into the work of other Smithsonian units, including the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture,

The Mekong Delta is one of the most densely populated regions along the entire river. This photograph, taken in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam, shows a lively scene of workers, boats, and commerce. Photo by Nguyen Xuan Hoanh, Smithsonian Institution.
the Smithsonian Latino Center, the Asian Pacific American Program, and the National Museum of American History.

The Festival, the Center, and its staff have played a key role in the development of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which was ratified in 2006. The treaty has now been accepted by seventy-eight member states but not, ironically, by the United States, a world leader in recognizing and promoting “cultural democracy.” While I have my own questions about the treaty, its application, efficacy, and some of its technical details, it nonetheless reflects, in part, the impact of the Festival on encouraging respect for cultural diversity around the planet.

Each August, Northern Irish crowd the streets of Ballycastle, County Antrim, to celebrate the traditional Lammas Fair. Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board
This year’s Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert will be a tribute to Bess Lomax Hawes. She is one of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage’s “Legacy Honorees.” The honorees’ portraits hang in our office suite with a brief description of their lifework. They are a group of twelve people who have been fundamental in shaping our mission and practice and who keep us grounded and ever aware of the importance of what we do.

In 1975, Bess came to the Festival to be the research coordinator for *Regional America’s* California program (although she had contributed to many Festival programs before). At that time, she was a professor of anthropology at San Fernando Valley State, now California State University–Northridge. She left her academic position in 1976 to become deputy director for presentation during the gargantuan 1976 Bicentennial Festival, which showcased the best of American and world traditional cultures for three solid months.

One would think that after having no days off (not a weekend, not a holiday, not a sick day) for nearly a year, Bess would have liked a break. But there was too much still to do for such self-indulgence. In 1977, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) chairman Nancy Hanks hired Bess to oversee a fledgling folk arts–funding category, which was embedded in other agency funding programs. By February of 1978, Bess had established the stand-alone Folk Arts Program, which had a dedicated budget. Her work over the next few years helped build a network of folk arts specialists around the country; develop folk arts–master apprentice programs in a number of states; and fund individual projects, such as festivals, tours, exhibitions, media documentation, and fieldwork.

Bess recalls that in her first conversation with Chairman Hanks, she was asked why the United States could not develop a means of recognizing folk and traditional artists similar to the Japanese Living National Treasures program. Twenty-five years ago, in 1982, the NEA National Heritage Fellowship program was established. It became the highest form of federal recognition for folk and traditional artists and one of Bess’s legacies. To date, more than 300 artists have received NEA National Heritage Fellowships. The Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert will feature recipients of this honor.
Bess has said of the Heritage Fellowships:

*Of all the activities assisted by the Folk Arts Program, these fellowships are among the most appreciated and applauded, perhaps because they present to Americans a vision of themselves and of their country, a vision somewhat idealized but profoundly longed for and so, in significant ways, profoundly true. It is a vision of a confident and open-hearted nation, where differences can be seen as exciting instead of fear-laden, where men of good will, across all manner of racial, linguistic, and historical barriers, can find common ground in understanding solid craftsmanship, virtuoso techniques, and deeply felt expression.*

Bess has enjoyed many professional lives, and much could be written about each of them. As a college professor, she was a model to many. As a performer, with Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and the renowned Almanac Singers, she influenced legions. As a mentor, she contributed to hundreds of careers. Her careful work at the Smithsonian shapes our practice to this day. Her films are still sought by scholars. And, of course, her labors at the National Endowment for the recognition of traditional artists will affect generations to come.

Although never shy about standing up for important issues, Bess works in a quiet, unassuming way. The National Endowment for the Arts named one of its most prestigious awards for her, and in 1992 she received the National Medal of Arts, the highest award our nation bestows on artists and those who nurture them. The Festival is pleased to add its voice to the many that thank her for her singular contributions to American life.
The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), the newest of the nineteen museums of the Smithsonian Institution, is quite pleased and honored to continue its collaboration with the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Our partnership began with the 2006 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, when we crafted *Been in the Storm So Long*, a well-received concert series that highlighted musical traditions of regions in the American South that were devastated by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. By encouraging audiences on the Mall to tap their toes to New Orleans jazz, gospel music, and the sounds of southern rhythm and blues, we hoped to bring alive the culture that was nearly lost when the floodwaters rose.

As we launch the Museum, collaboration with the Folklife Festival is quite appropriate. For more than forty years, the Festival—a Washington institution—has helped millions of visitors remember and celebrate diverse cultures and traditions. I recall very clearly being moved and edified as a graduate student when I attended the Festival during its commemoration of the American Bicentennial. I was amazed and felt embraced by what would soon be called “multiculturalism.” The Festival has long illuminated all corners of American culture. Now, the NMAAHC joins the Festival in holding dear a commitment to remembering and understanding the fullness of the American experience. NMAAHC believes that part of its mandate is specifically to help people remember and revel in the rich culture that is the African American experience. In essence, the Museum seeks to present African American culture to help us better understand what it means to be an American and how much our national identity is shaped by Black America. Our collaboration is marked by a dedication to research, which leads to a firm understanding of how international connections affect our common history and culture.

Our shared purpose inspires this year’s Festival. NMAAHC is honored to support and be part of the *Roots of Virginia Culture* program, which will help acknowledge the anniversary of the English settlement in Virginia 400 years ago. The program will explore the changing culture of Virginia and its history, which has been informed by English, Native, and African cultures. Building on the work of scholars like Rex Ellis, this portion of the Festival will show how cultural accommodation and cultural conflict have played out during the past 400 years, from agricultural traditions to musical styles. The Museum is also fortunate that Dr. Ellis is a member of its scholarly advisory committee, which is chaired by John Hope Franklin.
While an ongoing presence at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is central to our partnership, it is only part of the relationship that we have built with the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. We also have a strong partnership with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Through the African American Legacy Series, we will support a number of reissues and new releases that will sweep the African American musical heritage. Our first recording is a wonderful reissue of the music of Paul Robeson, a true Renaissance man of the twentieth century. Robeson’s musical and artistic talents always served the struggle for fairness and equality in the United States, so we are honored to help make his music more accessible. We will also issue a new recording of the Paschall Brothers, an a cappella gospel group with deep Virginia roots, who will perform at this year’s Festival.

Ultimately, the collaboration between the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage will allow us to make the African American experience and culture available and meaningful to a broad audience. Our work together will also fulfill another important, mutual goal: through our partnership, the Museum will be visible before its construction and will contribute to programs, exhibitions, and Web-based activities. By remembering and making African American culture more accessible, we will, together, help reconcile and heal American society.