

Roanoke preservation group unveils cemetery plaque, announces endangered sites

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Virginia Trinkle Vinyard, a Persinger relative, shows family artifacts and documents to Ginny West during the Roanoke Historic Preservation Society event at the family cemetery. A new sign gives context to the prominent Roanoke family's early history.

Robert Freis, The Roanoke Times

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Members of the Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation held an event Tuesday afternoon to announce its annual Endangered Sites list and unveil a new interpretive sign.

Friends and supporters joined foundation members on the open, grassy swath of land at the corner of Memorial Avenue and Edgewood Street Southwest in Roanoke for the combined presentation, which was held next to the old Persinger Cemetery — a small family plot on land once owned by a branch of Roanoke's prominent Persinger family.

The new sign, installed on the cemetery's iron fence, was made possible through a matching grant from the Roanoke Committee of the National Society of Colonial Dames. Several members of that group were on hand for the unveiling.

Inside the cemetery are tombstones of two Confederate soldiers. One was William Persinger Jr., who died at home from wounds suffered at the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. His younger brother Adolphus died at a Northern prison camp the following year.

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Interred with them are their parents, William and Esther Persinger, and other family members.

Long before Roanoke became a city in 1882, John Persinger acquired land around the Roanoke River in the vicinity of what is now Norwich. His son, William, born in 1800, built a big brick house on the site in 1825 that stood for more than 100 years, according to a 1959 newspaper article by the late Roanoke historian Raymond Barnes.

The Persingers owned a gristmill, Barnes wrote. In addition, "The fertile soil of the river bottom lent itself to profitable agriculture and was peculiarly adapted to raising bumper crops of corn." William Persinger and his wife, Esther, had at least nine children, according to 1850 census records, including William, then 14, and Adolphus, who was 4.

The old Persinger property was broken up in the late 1890s, when developers acquired the land and began to lay out lots and streets that eventually became the Virginia Heights neighborhood, according to Barnes.

Attending Tuesday's event were Doris Neal and her daughter Karen Crouch. Doris's husband Jim, who died in 2015, took it upon himself to become caretaker of the Persinger plot after the Neals moved to a house nearby. He looked after the site for more than 40 years.

When they first moved in, Doris said, the plot was so overgrown you could hardly tell there was a cemetery there. In addition to keeping it mowed, they placed flowers, bought the concrete benches that give visitors a place to sit, and helped repair the fence when an errant driver plowed through it. One day soon, they hope to clean the headstones.

"We knew it needed to be respected," Neal said of the family's labor of love.

Following the unveiling of the sign, Rob Logan, a member of the Endangered Sites nominating committee, announced this year's entries. The list has been a project of the preservation foundation since 1996, with the goal of raising awareness about some of the valley's historic resources.

The four main sites include:

The circa-1900 **Rader-Muse Bank Barn**, located at 6325 Lee Highway near Troutville, a rare surviving example of the German-style bank barn once found throughout the Shenandoah Valley;

The **Peck-Figgatt House** (also known as Aspen Hill), located at 322 E. Main St. in Fincastle, which dates to 1822 and occupies a prominent corner in the town's Historic District;

The **Rader House** at 102 Darby Road in Troutville, also known as Maple Grove, which was constructed around 1830 by the Rader family, well-known brick masons and builders in Botetourt County; and

Old churches, which are often one of the first structures to be built in a city or town, but as a congregation grows their original buildings tend to be left behind, sometimes to their ultimate demise.

Also mentioned were three historic properties which have made the Endangered Sites list in previous years, and continue to face an uncertain future: the Evans House in Washington Park, the Blackwell Cottage in Fishburn Park, and the old Huntingdon mansion in Northeast Roanoke.

"They are architecturally and historically significant as tangible evidence of the lives of Roanoke's earliest settlers and should not be lost," a portion of the Endangered Sites narrative reads.

Those in attendance had a chance to view the small cemetery, read the sign, and view several Persinger family artifacts, provided by former foundation board member Virginia Trinkle Vinyard.

Although neither Doris Neal nor Karen Crouch are as directly involved in looking after the cemetery as they used to be (municipal entities have assumed responsibility of late) they still feel a connection to the souls that rest near their longtime residence.

"They're not kin," Crouch said, "but you would think they were."



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