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Keeper of the Flame

by Robert Nelson

Finding fact from folklore in the art of historical cartographer Eugene Scheel.

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Eugene Scheel.

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Eugene Scheel.



Photos by Roger Foley

To a new acquaintance 30 years his junior, Eugene Scheel seems like the quintessential northern Virginia “old-timer.”

He knows the Purcellville Family Restaurant in which we eat breakfast “has the best sausage and is widely known by locals to have had the best breakfasts for years.” He can peel back the layers of history in this town from the trendy new brew pub across the street to the ancient Great Road in between. And among countless other historical discoveries, he was the first to document the location of the barn just north of here in which the notorious Confederate guerilla John Mobberly met his demise late in the Civil War.

But Scheel, who became an octogenarian this winter, considers “old-timers” to be the folks he interviews to inform his meticulously detailed hand drawn maps, which appear much more from the age of Mobberly than Google. “Old-timer” isn’t so much a designation of age to Scheel. An “old-timer,” he says, is a repository of local fact and folklore that—let’s put this gently—won’t be around forever.

“Most of the people I contact—hundreds for each county map—are people of great age: farmers, woodsmen, hunters, people who worked the roads, carried the rural mail,” says Scheel. “They don’t have great memories, except for the countryside where they grew up and lived, often the range of the one-roomer they attended. There are a couple people in their 90s up in northern Loudoun County who I need to talk to pretty soon here,” Scheel says as the unassuming café bustles around him.

His is the soul of a historian: For the mostly reserved and laconic Scheel, who grows gregarious and animated when talking about his journeys and discoveries, the idea of the past being lost to oblivion is heartbreaking.

Scheel has lived in the historic village of Waterford outside Leesburg since 1965 and is a member of the Loudoun County Planning Commission. He has written nine books on Virginia history, and penned a history column for a local edition of the Washington Post from 1999 to 2010. He has long been a go-to source for other researchers—including National Park Service historians—seeking to find fact amid folklore regarding some of the biggest (or most obscure) moments in northern Virginia history.

But it is Scheel’s hand-drawn maps that make him such a rare breed among America’s historians. Each of his more than 50 works are hybrid marvels of dogged shoe-leather reporting, the artist’s hand, multiple-source-vetted history and precision cartography.

And for the residents of the regions of Virginia he has documented, his detailed maps serve as wise tour

documented, his detailed maps serve as wise tour guides during Sunday drives through local landscapes they likely never knew held so much history.

Subjects have included Clarke, Fauquier, Loudoun, Rappahannock, Prince William and Culpeper Counties (which, he notes, to this recent Midwestern transplant, “is pronounced Culpepah. You really need to pop the p’s to sound like a native”). He ventures beyond county lines with maps detailing the Virginia Hunt Country, stretches of the Potomac River, and what he describes as “Mosby’s Confederacy” (a fellow historian called him a modern-day version of famed Civil War mapmaker Jed Hotchkiss). Scheel even tackled a map of Bermuda once, in 1983, where his work was influential in the development of several of the archipelago’s national parks.

“I don’t think people fully appreciate the extreme patience and devotion Eugene must put into those maps,” says Julie Bushong, a library associate in the Culpeper County Library who assisted Scheel with his Culpeper map project. “And they may not appreciate how important his work is. From now on for generations, his work will be the go-to source for much of the history in this area.”

The Library of Congress holds 31 of Scheel’s handmade maps. According to Ed Redmond, curator of vault collections for the geography and maps division of the Library of Congress, Scheel’s works are “great cartographic contributions to Virginia history.

“They are visually attractive—at the same time they are extremely well researched and chock full of information,” adds Redmond.

Scheel seemed destined for mapmaking from his earliest years—his father was a cartoonist and caricaturist. Growing up in the Bronx, he drew and made maps of imaginary countries and faraway islands.

“Just doodles,” he calls them.

After receiving his undergraduate degree in geography from Clark University in Massachusetts, Scheel landed a job with the granddaddy of mapmaking, Rand McNally & Co. in Chicago. Following that, he served for eight years as a corporal in the U.S. Marine Reserves. Even while training some of the nation’s toughest men to fight and survive, he seemed destined for the bookish pursuit of map-making. When leading night training missions through desert or forest, he was known for his uncanny sense of direction. “Everybody loved to be in my platoon,” he says, because he was known to get his team home quickly and without incident.

Scheel later interviewed for a job with the CIA, but, he says, “They just wanted me to draw coordinates.” He eventually joined the staff of the National Geographic Society’s famed magazine. His job, though, was not quite as glamorous as one might expect. For nine years, he was charged with developing the magazine’s “nonphotographics,” all those graphs, maps, and illustrations that help readers understand the context of stories. After nine years there, Scheel decided his interests reached beyond the graphs of a magazine page. He became interested in urban planning, which led to him pursuing a master’s degree in urban and environmental planning from the University of

environmental planning from the University of Virginia. His voracious hunger for knowledge also led him to get a master of arts from Georgetown University in American literature. By the early 1970s, he had started his own map-making business.

So who is willing to pay for a Gene Scheel map, which can take up to three years to make and cost from a few hundred dollars to \$15,000?

“Banks have been my biggest customers over the years,” he says. His Bermuda map, for example, was funded by Butterfield Bank in Bermuda. Many of the local projects he has done were also funded by small, traditional banks in the county in which the banks’ customers lived.

The deal: The bank gets an engrossing piece of art for its lobby, which can highlight its role in the heritage of the community, says Scheel. It can even get people to frequent the bank. “If the bank is the only place you can get the map,” he says simply, “that makes people go to the bank.”

Landowners wanting a unique chronicle of their property have also been customers. He has made maps for farms as big as 55,000 acres and as small as 50 acres. A few of his clients have also been very famous, such as the woman who called some 35 years ago asking Scheel to make a map that she could give to her husband for Christmas.

The woman was Elizabeth Taylor, who commissioned Scheel in the late 1970s to make a map of Atoka Farm near Middleburg to give to her husband at the time, U.S. Sen. John Warner. Scheel visited the property

several times to do field checks before Taylor asked him to present the map to Warner as a surprise gift.

Warner, Scheel says, “was ecstatic” as Scheel presented him the gift at the couple’s house at Atoka Farm. Scheel himself, though, was distracted. One of Taylor’s shelter-rescued mutts (she was very fond of animals) was chewing on his pants as he handed the map to Warner.

In addition to paying \$2,000 for the map, Taylor reimbursed Scheel for the ruined trousers.

Scheel seems far from slowing down as he enters his 80s. He continues to drive back roads in his 12-year-old green Ford Ranger searching for landmarks and people to interview for upcoming maps. And he continues to serve on the Loudoun County Planning Commission, which, ironically, is tasked with ensuring smart growth amid a whirlwind of development that threatens to further bury the landmarks that Scheel has labored to document.

“My maps are a labor of love, but I also feel it’s important work,” he says as he finishes his breakfast. “I’d like to think I’m saving pieces of history that would otherwise be lost.” 703-727-2946

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by **Robert Nelson**

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