

# **“We Took Cotton and Made Silk:” African American Railroad Workers in Roanoke, Virginia**

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**Abstract:** Since 2011, the Norfolk Southern Archives has worked with a group of retired African American railroad workers to tell their stories. The Norfolk and Western African American Railroad Heritage Group meets monthly at the Virginia Museum of Transportation in Roanoke, Virginia, and is composed of employees (both men and women) who retired prior to 1970.

African American workers—among them brakemen, firemen, porters, chefs, mechanics, and laborers—made significant contributions to the building, maintenance, and operation of the railroad. The Norfolk Southern Archives is working to document their stories, past and present.

The Virginia Museum of Transportation (VMT) is housed in the former Norfolk and Western freight station, where the Norfolk Southern Archives participates in an annual celebration to honor African-American heritage on the railroad.

In 2013, the group undertook an oral history project, with the goal of publishing a book documenting their experiences. It is illustrated with photographs from the Norfolk Southern Archives.

Partnering with the VMT and the heritage group are the Historical Society of Western Virginia and Norfolk Southern Corporation. A grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities provided the funds for an oral historian. A redesigned exhibit at the Virginia Museum of Transportation features items and photographs from the Norfolk Southern Archives, from the VMT collections, and from personal collections. The book debuted in June 2014, at the group’s sixteenth annual celebration. An online exhibit at the Historical Society of Western Virginia also highlights the project, and the oral histories were deposited in all three repositories.

Cooperation and community outreach, paired with archival resources, has preserved the stories of these railroad workers, and made them available for future generations.

**About the author:**

*Jennifer Davis McDaid* is the Historical Archivist for Norfolk Southern Corporation. The historical collection includes the business records of nearly 400 predecessor railroads and related companies, dating to the 1820s. The collection houses more than 200,000 photographs—along with artifacts, blueprints, and bridge drawings—in two locations, Norfolk and Roanoke, Virginia. She also manages the Norfolk Southern Museum.