

STATE FAIR

OF VIRGINIA AT THE MEADOW

An SFVA event

A BRIEF HISTORIC OVERVIEW

An annual fair in Virginia evolved over time as farmers and tradesmen gathered to sell or exchange their wares down by the James River in Richmond. Over the years, others came – among them tumblers, singers and musicians – who saw the opportunity to entertain for money tossed from the crowds. Competitions arose over who had the best, largest, tastiest, fastest, prettiest – and prizes became an important part of early fairs. Farmers and townspeople challenged each other to horse races, which became an important part of the activities.

1854

The first “organized” fair in Virginia was established in 1854 when a group of forward-thinking Richmonders formed the Virginia State Agricultural Society and established a definite location and date. Places were assigned for each merchant, and rules were set forth to make things orderly. The new society’s main purpose was to inform the public of new manufacturing and agricultural methods and prosperity they could bring. Western Square, today’s Monroe Park, was chosen as the location of the first 1854 event.



1867



The Civil War interrupted the staging of a fair in Virginia, but it resumed in 1867. In 1877 a visit by President Rutherford B. Hayes was the crowning jewel. During this period, fair organizers moved to a new location at West Broad Street near today’s Science Museum.

The Agricultural Society became ambitious over the next 10 years. Extensive building programs and improvements led to heavy debt and, finally by 1896, the general cessation of what had become known by then as the State Fair.

1906

In 1906, another group of citizens organized the Virginia State Fair Association to bring back Virginia’s big annual event. They recognized the benefits such an event had for the Richmond area economy and its potential as a vehicle for educational and promotional dissemination. Richmond’s westward growth made it impractical for the new organization to use the West Broad Street site, so they rented land from the old Bryan Estate bounded by Old Hermitage Road and North



Boulevard, the current location of the Diamond.

Agricultural competition and livestock breeding again became a central feature of the Fair. Horse racing, horse shows and grandstand events remained crowd favorites. Nearly everything grown or manufactured in Virginia could be found on display at the State Fair.

1941



When World War II intervened, the government appropriated the fairgrounds for a military transportation depot. The Association immediately purchased the old Davenport Estate “Strawberry Hill” for a new and permanent home for the State Fair of Virginia, but due to government-imposed restrictions of fairs and

transportation as part of the war effort, no improvements were made to the new site for some time.

Unfortunately, before the war ended, the State Fair Association’s major stockholder died and the future of the State Fair was again in doubt. Public-spirited citizens again came to the rescue. They raised money, bought the stock, and changed the association’s name to Atlantic Rural Exposition, Inc. to give the fair a larger scope. Famed New York architect William Lawrence Bottomley was retained to design new exposition grounds, although little of the original design was built due to financial constraints.

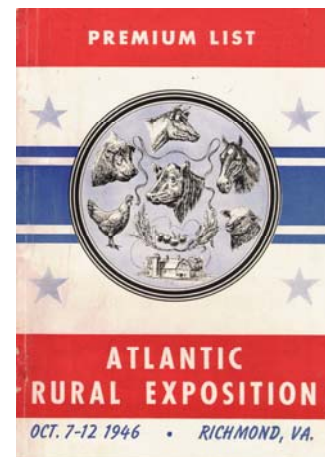
1946

On October 7, 1946 the first exposition on Strawberry Hill was held and the following year the Virginia General Assembly designated the Atlantic Rural Exposition, Inc. as the “Official State Fair of Virginia.”

The Fair continued to grow and reflect the changing times. In 1949, modern television was introduced to mass audiences in Virginia and the South through a demonstration at the Fair. In 1961, due to the cold war nuclear threat, the State Office of Civil Defense constructed a bomb shelter at the Fair; popular DJ Tony Sposa (WRNL) was sealed in the shelter the duration of the event – broadcasting live several times daily.

Also during this period, famous performers included the Rockettes, the Lone Ranger (AKA Clayton Moore), Frank Sinatra and cowboys Gene Autry and Tex Ritter. In 1976, an authentic reproduction of American pioneer lifestyle “Pioneer Farmstead” debuted. This concept continued to evolve into the American Heritage Village.

In 1963, the fledgling Virginia State 4-H Horse Show moved to the State Fair and was held there for 38 continuous years, through 1999. It had grown to 500 exhibitors and their families, the largest State Fair horse show.



1985



A significant new direction came in 1985 when the Board of Directors decided that non-fair activities should be expanded. During the next ten years, the facility grew to include a 70,000 square foot Exhibition Hall, a 10,000 person capacity Classic Amphitheatre, Covered Ring for horse activities, and five million dollars in improvements and renovations.

1989

In 1989, The State Fair Scholarship Program was established. The Program currently awards students with scholarships for their hard work and achievements in 29 competition areas. Since its inception in 1989, the State Fair Scholarship Program has awarded 1,926 scholarships and has dedicated over \$1.7 million to youth education.

In 1994, a vital thrust forward in this effort was realized with a generous merit scholarship endowment from Miss Emmy Lou Thomson honoring her father, Herbert Bruce Thomson, Sr. the first chairman of Atlantic Rural Exposition, Inc. and recognized by many as the “Father of the State Fair of Virginia.”



1999



Atlantic Rural Exposition sold the Fairgrounds on Strawberry Hill to Richmond International Raceway, Inc. in 1999 due to the need to expand both the State Fair and NASCAR events. In July 2003, The State Fair of Virginia, Inc. purchased The Meadow, a 348 acre site in Caroline County and birthplace of famed thoroughbred Secretariat. In February 2004, the Atlantic Rural Exposition name was retired in favor of The State Fair of Virginia, Inc. (SFVA).

SFVA broke ground for The Meadow Event Park in April 2008. SFVA remains committed to its mission to celebrate Virginia’s heritage – to heed its roots in agriculture, advance its youth through scholarships, encourage friendly competition and foster multicultural celebrations in a fun, safe atmosphere.

TODAY

The Meadow Event Park officially opens with the State Fair of Virginia being held September 24 through October 4, 2009.