

The Czechs of Southside Virginia

An international search of the landscape and the literature

Author: Joyce Pritchard, Southside Virginia Czech/Slovak Heritage Society

ABSTRACT	1
INTRODUCTION	1
HISTORY	3
<i>Settlement</i>	3
<i>Assimilation</i>	4
PHYSICAL DISPERSION	6
<i>The Farms</i>	6
<i>The Churches</i>	7
MEDIA PRESENCE	9
THE FUTURE	10

Abstract

Between 1885 and 1915, an estimated 3,500 immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Balkans settled in southeastern Virginia. Most came to Virginia because great battles of the American Civil War were fought in this area and the subsequent collapse of slavery made local farmland available at a low price. The immigrants formed their own communities around their churches as their foreign ways were not always understood by the native Virginians. About 30 families came to Virginia from the same Czech village located in the Banat region of the Austria-Hungarian Empire and settled in a farming community surrounding a church they had built as a replica of the one they had left behind in their village, which is now named Girnic (Gernik, Garnic), Romania. The Southside Virginia Czech/Slovak Heritage Society has researched and documented the available public records, publications and oral or written family histories of the Slavic settlement communities in southeastern Virginia. This paper presents the research findings, with a focus on the Romanian Czechs who settled in Virginia as a case study of a unique sub-community whose oral and documented history was recently verified during a trip of fourteen of their descendants to Girnic, Romania.

Introduction

A “cultural footprint” has been described as being made up of “its historical roots, the physical territory it occupies and its diffusion through the media.”¹ These three elements (history, physical dispersion and media presence) can also apply to the cultural footprint of the Czech/Slovak immigrants who came to Virginia between 1885 and 1915. An estimated 3,500 immigrants arrived in the counties of Prince George, Dinwiddie, and Chesterfield Virginia during these peak immigration years. Yet today their descendants, numbering in the tens of thousands, sometimes don’t know some of the basics about their great-grandparents’ family

¹ Wang, Wilfried, “Sustainability is a Cultural Problem,” Harvard Design Magazine, Spring/Summer 2003, Number 18, <<http://www.gad.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

history, such as the village of origin of their family in Europe, the names of relatives that stayed in the “old country,” nor the location of the original family farms in Virginia.

Because so much specific knowledge has been lost, the Southside Virginia Czech/Slovak Heritage Society was formed in 2003 with the mission to “Discover, Document and Promote Our Czech/Slovak Heritage.” This is done by sponsoring seasonal ethnic events, presenting information about the area’s early Slavic settlers to local historical societies, and collecting every available reference to the Slavic immigrants in the area’s courthouse records, newspapers, and church and family histories. Two cross-referenced databases have been developed:

- 1) A list of family surnames, documenting each family’s village of origin, farm location and other family-specific information. There are currently over 400 families documented in this database.
- 2) A bibliography of publications and other printed material, including books, pamphlets, newspaper articles, websites and pictures, all relating to the area’s Czech/Slovaks. There are currently 170 entries on this list, dating from 1851² to the present.

Additionally, the Society has located two studies published prior to 1940, one funded by the Rockefeller Foundation³ and the other a dissertation for the University of Virginia.⁴ Because both were conducted by trained sociologists, they have proved invaluable in re-constructing the early life of the Virginia Czech/Slovak community. Finally, in the summer of 2005, 15 Czech/Slovak descendants were able to confirm with certainty their own family origins and see firsthand the life that their great-grandparents lived on a visit to their ancestor’s Czech village of Gernic (Gernik, Garnic), in what is now Romania. This village, because it is so isolated and remained 96% Czech as late as 1991, retains much of the culture that existed when the emigrants left the village for America, including the folkdress, language and religious traditions from the 1800's.

The organization of this paper describes the “cultural footprint” of the Czech/Slovaks in both Virginia and Romania, as confirmed by the research completed to date by the Heritage Society and also confirmed by family documentation, particularly that which was obtained by the descendants of the Czechs during the group’s trip to the Czech Republic and Romania in 2005.

² 1851 census of Gernik, Romania, listing the Virginia ancestors’ house numbers and villages of birth.

³ Anderson, Nels, “Petersburg: A Study of the Colony of Czechoslovakian Farmers in Virginia,” *Immigrant Farmers and Their Children*,” Edmund deS. Brunner, ed., Garden City, NY, Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929. This study and publication was sponsored by Institute of Social and Religious Research , a Rockerfeller supported organization.

⁴ Kovacs, Sandor Bodonsky, “Czechoslovaks in Virginia,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 1939.

History

Settlement

The earliest Slavic immigrants in Virginia, arriving in the late 1880's, originally had settled earlier in other areas of the United States where they found the living conditions to be too harsh.⁵ Families who eventually came to settle in Virginia after having lived first in the American West have in their history stories of severe weather, droughts, and grass hopper plagues so intense that the only thing left in the fields was a single cabbage, saved because the mother of the family had turned a washtub over the top of it to save it from the munching insects.⁶

As early as 1866, the State of Virginia began to “promote and encourage immigration.”⁷ But the Southern part of the United States was not a typical destination for European immigrants during the late 19th century. Indeed, in 1906 the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Immigration reported: “For twenty years, the Western railroads and Canadian agents have been warning the home-seekers abroad ‘not to go South;’ that the country was very unhealthy and very hot...the people died rapidly with fever.”⁸ Faced with 10 million acres of idle farmland, the Virginia State Legislature authorized \$10,000 in 1906 to be used to “induce farm labor, farm tenants and homeseekers to come to Virginia” but added that only those from Great Britain and Northern Europe would be welcomed as only the “best class of foreign labor” was desired.⁹ By 1907, the Department of Immigration asserted: “Immigrants for the State of Virginia have come from England, Scotland, Ireland and Scandinavia. No other countries in Europe have been or will be solicited.”¹⁰ This statement was not quite true, because by 1907 at least 80 Slavic families had arrived and settled on farms in Southside Virginia. However, the next year, the Department announced it had extended the search home seekers in “broader fields” and was providing instructions on how to make immigrants feel welcome in Virginia. Again, by this date the Southside Czech/Slovaks had already formed their own churches and fraternal organizations as a refuge to the discrimination they had faced as the largest concentrated population of early Slavic immigrants to Virginia.

Besides the State of Virginia, commercial enterprises with economic interests that would be enhanced by immigration wanted to capture a share of the wave of immigration from Europe. And so they advertised in Czech and Slovak language publications, both within the United States and in Europe. Railroads on both sides of the Atlantic wanted to increase passenger revenues. The Norfolk and Western Railroad published an article in their 1915 Guide about the prosperous

⁵ Czech/Slovaks re-emigrated to Virginia from: the Dakotas, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

⁶ Anderson, p. 187.

⁷ Wells, John, “The Czech Communities in Virginia,” Virginia Department of Transportation, Richmond, Virginia, 2004, p. 3.

⁸ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Immigration, Richmond, Virginia, 1906, page 76.

⁹ Ibid, page 10-11.

¹⁰ Ibid, 1907, p. 198

“Slavonic Colony” in New Bohemia, Virginia¹¹. The Bohemian Land Company of Petersburg, Virginia also published a pamphlet in 1915 that advertised the advantages of the area. This pamphlet contains pictures and letters, written in Czech, of 35 Czech settlers around Petersburg, VA describing their settlement into the area, and how prosperous they had become.¹² But because they were published just as immigration from Europe was coming to a standstill due to World War I, these advertising efforts had little effect on an increase in the numbers of settlers. However, they provide a detailed look at the early experiences of the most successful of the early Southside Virginia immigrants.

In 1939, Kovacs reported “More Czechoslovaks probably came to Virginia through friends and relatives than through any other effort.”¹³ Once the Slavs had settled in Virginia and discovered the cheap land, mild climate and, with hard work, hospitable farming conditions, their letters home encouraged relatives and neighbors from the old country who came to join them. The immigration pattern of those from Girnic, Romania confirms this chain migration. An estimated 25 Roman Catholic families came from Girnic to Virginia. One of the later arrivals from Romania, the Vinsh family in 1910, stayed with Mrs. Vinsh’s relatives, the Mizera family, who had arrived from Romania just 5 years earlier, and had purchased their own farm by then. The Romanian Czechs were not the only example of group migration to Southside Virginia. An earlier colonization effort, originating in Pennsylvania in 1897, brought twenty families to Virginia who organized the Czech Congregational Church in Prince George County.

Assimilation

The first settlers to Virginia in the 1880’s were on their own, but at least they had experience with American ways in the Western states. When the latter immigrants arrived in Virginia, it was common for them to first be housed by relatives who had arrived in the area earlier. From the first immigrant to Virginia from Girnic in 1888 (Joseph Blaha, who came through North Dakota) until the last family arrived prior to 1915, earlier settlers took in their relatives and former neighbors until they could find and/or afford their own farms. After settling on their own farm, the immigrant family’s social contacts were largely limited to neighbors on adjoining farms and members of their church.

The Southside Virginia Slavic immigrants faced both discrimination and grudging admiration on the local level. Anderson reported in 1929 that the immigrants were not extended credit for their farming activities, so they formed their own credit and insurance societies.¹⁴ Additionally individual members of the Czech/Slovak community acted as “bankers” for the newcomers because they could not get credit from traditional sources available to the dominant culture.

¹¹ LaBaume, F.H., “Prosperous Settlement in Virginia; Slavonic Colony at New Bohemia,” Norfolk and Western Guide, 1915.

¹² “History of the Bohemians in the vicinity of Petersburg, Virginia”, published by the Bohemian Land Company, Petersburg, Virginia, 1915.

¹³ Kovacs, p. 36

¹⁴ Anderson, p. 192 and p. 202. The Bohemian-Slavonic Farmer's Mutual Benefit Insurance Society of VA was formed in 1900 with sixteen charter members. In 1939 Kovacs reported that the Society had 150 members and carried insurance on farm property worth \$250,000.

Early reports document the following local reactions to the Slavs:

“The Virginians...were always being shocked at the things the Bohemians did, at the way they lived.... ‘I would see Sorak and his wife in the field. He would plough or grub stumps and she would pick up roots, or maybe she would be in the garden’.”¹⁵

“...the sight of white women laboring in the fields was distasteful to the Prince George natives.”¹⁶

“...old Virginia families have been disposed of their once famous estates; yet 90% of the farms of the Czecho-Slovaks are conceded to be free from debt.”¹⁷

“ Petersburg physician: “They are a good pay and that is saying a whole lot around here.”¹⁸

Kovacs, author of the 1939 University of Virginia dissertation on the Czechoslovaks in Virginia concluded:

“Taking into consideration the difficulties that the language of the community presented – most of these people spoke little or no English – the social ostracism, the lack of knowledge of the proper methods of local farming, the success of these farmers is more remarkable.”¹⁹

Assimilation came with acceptance by the dominant culture. But the tide that pulled the children away from their parent’s Slavic culture was not always welcomed by the original settlers. Kovacs also reported on the mixed feelings of the older generation regarding Americanization of their children:

“Every year we use more English language in our work... Since immigration was so restricted we have very little addition from Europe. Our young people are Americanized and many marry with Americans. We feel we are just filling the gap between (the) old country and this better country.

‘It makes me sad to see my children leave their father and mother and go out into the world, for that is all I have. This land and property is worthless to me without my children.’

Kovacs commented, “These children are over twenty-five years old.”²⁰

After assimilation, the Czech/Slovak names and stories began appearing in newspaper articles more frequently and their children eventually intermarried with Virginians. Now, five

¹⁵ Anderson, p. 190.

¹⁶ Lutz, Francis Earle, The Prince George-Hopewell Story, The William Byrd Press, Inc., Richmond, Virginia, 1957, p. 210.

¹⁷ Anderson, p. 184.

¹⁸ Anderson, p. 192.

¹⁹ Kovacs, p. 40.

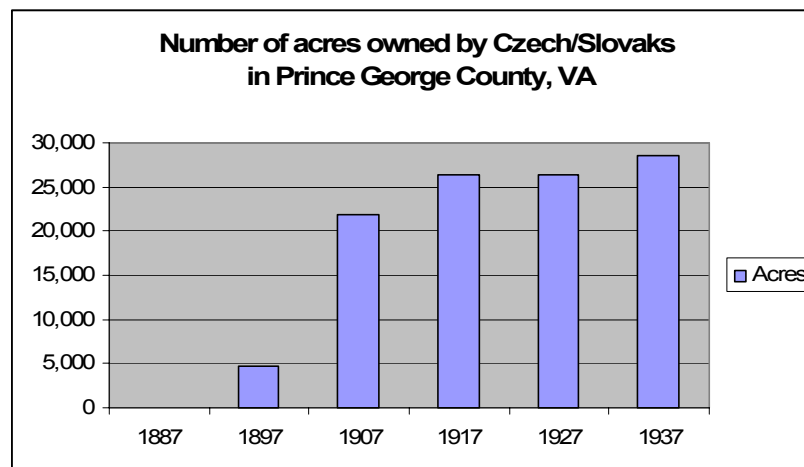
²⁰ Kovacs, p. 80.

generations later, only a few families (specifically, those who happened to have boys who married and had more boys) carry Slavic surnames.²¹

Physical Dispersion

The Farms

Long before the state immigration office or the local newspapers ever recognized the existence of the Czech/Slovak immigrants in Southside Virginia, their names were recorded in the courthouses of Prince George, Dinwiddie and Chesterfield counties – a growing group, quietly buying up farmland. Forests and farmland in the area had been decimated by a nine-month siege of the City of Petersburg in 1864-65, the fall of which resulted in end of the American Civil War. Economic and social structures also collapsed with the abolition of slavery, and farm land surrounding Petersburg lay fallow and available for cheap prices. By 1915, when the Bohemian Land Company was advertising the farms of prosperous Czech/Slovaks, there were already 20,000 acres of farmland in Prince George County owned by Slavs. The growth of in the number of acres owned by Slavs was nothing short of phenomenal. In 1897, 4,700 acres were owned by Czech/Slovaks in Prince George County. Ten years later, the acreage had increased to 22,800, and by 1917, 26,000 acres were owned by the former immigrants.²²



Unlike Gernic, Romania, the people did not live “next door” to each other in a village, and tend fields located in non-adjacent tracts. Immigrants to Virginia bought what was available at the price they could afford as soon as they could after arrival. In this, they were assisted by local land agents²³ and by countrymen who had arrived earlier and, having accumulated some cash, acted as “bankers.” Most farms were generally located near the family’s church. For instance, most of the Czech/Romanian immigrants’ farms were located in Dinwiddie County, within a

²¹ Some early families had only daughters, so their names died out immediately. Other families’ Slavic surnames continue to “disappear” to this day, but are recorded in the Southside VA Czech/Slovak Heritage Society Family Database.

²² Courthouse research conducted by the author, 2006.

²³ Pyle and Dehaven were real estate agents and land brokers from Petersburg, Virginia advertised themselves as “Agents Virginia Immigration Society.”

comfortable horse-drawn ride to their shared church. As the dominant mode of transportation changed from horse and buggy to automobile, courthouse records show that farmland in outlying areas began being bought up by Czech/Slovak families. In buying up the abandoned farmland, the Slavs inadvertently purchased some of the historic Virginia estates. A 1936 WPA survey indicated that 15 historical sites in Prince George County, having names such as Racefield, Marborough, and Scarborough, were owned by Czech/Slovaks.²⁴

A few families have kept their original farms for generations, but often families “traded up” for better farms or acquired additional farmland for children in their large families. Sometimes they were forced to move by the march of progress. In 1917 a total of 800 acres was taken from eight Czech/Slovak families for the development of Camp Lee, which is now Fort Lee, Virginia. These families then established new farms in the Southside area. In just the past few years, numerous Czech/Slovak farms are being sold for housing developments or industrial parks, or being acquired by eminent domain for super highway or other economic development. The unwanted farms of the 1900’s have become very valuable now.

On the 2005 trip to Girnic Romania, families sought out physical evidence of their families’ existence there. They discovered villagers with the same surnames living in the same houses that the family had held for generations. For instance, the Missera (Mizera/Mezera) family located the exact family house pictured in a photo taken in 1905. Other travelers to Romania in 1905 also located the fields tilled by their ancestors, the mills where they ground flour, family gravestones, and road-side monuments erected by the departing families.



Missera house in Romania 1905



Same houses - 2005

The Churches

The early Czech/Slovak immigrants in the Southside Virginia counties successfully established 9 churches close to their farmland homes: 3 Catholic, 2 Congregational, 2 Lutheran, 1 Presbyterian and 1 Baptist. The churches provided for the spiritual, social and burial needs of their members. They have evolved over time – several have closed, merged with other congregations or moved to bigger buildings and/or newer locations. Most churches have a graveyard located nearby the original church building and the legends on many tombstones are written in the native language. Services were conducted in the native language until the 1960’s

²⁴ Works Progress Administration of Virginia, WPA State-wide Project, Historical Inventory, 1936.

when services in all the remaining Czech/Slovak churches were conducted in English only, except for special occasions.

However, the successful establishment of these churches and the fierce loyalty of the Slavs to their churches may have been a factor in the subsequent failure of its members to see themselves as part of a more encompassing area-wide Slavic community. Both sociological studies of the Southside Virginia Czech/Slovaks (Anderson in 1929 and Kovacs in 1939) noted the importance of church affiliation. However, both Anderson and Kovacs also indicated that the churches tended to divide rather than unite the area's group of Czech/Slovak immigrants as a whole.

In 1929 Anderson described that "The Protestants and Catholics were once very genial neighbors," but relationships frayed when new ministers and new churches focused on proselytizing and gaining membership in their respective churches. Anderson said, "The different groups are watching one another and all standing aloof from the Catholics and the unchurched, except to attempt evangelization."²⁵

Ten years later, Kovacs found no improvement in the situation:

"The churches divide rather than unite the Czechoslovaks in their community and social life, for they are sectarian under the leadership of men who are Baptists, Presbyterians, and so on, first and last. There are no planned and regularly held community meetings of any kind where people can go regardless of their church affiliation."²⁶

There was also a group of unchurched Czech/Slovaks, the Freethinkers, who followed the passionate and anti-clerical philosophies of Jan Hus. They caused "no amount of worry" to the church.²⁷ Apparently the Freethinkers tried to organize community-wide meetings but failed.

"Attempts were made to hold a community meeting each year on the twenty-eighth of October in Prince George county to commemorate the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic. Two such meetings were held at Disputanta High School with very good success. Yet some...held back for they felt that the meetings were not religious enough. Another drawback is the fact that...when an outsider or a non-churched individual wants to arrange for them he finds no cooperation."²⁸

The Freethinkers were active in the area until their social hall in Prince George County burned down in 1938. They used to meet there on Sundays "not to worship but to play, to dance, to debate, to discuss and study questions of current interest, or to stage dramatics."²⁹ During the First World War, they "collected about 3,000 dollars to help to carry on the war against Austria and to help establish the Czechoslovak Republic."³⁰ By 1940, there were only 16 active members

²⁵ Anderson p. 196. Note: during the time of Anderson's work in Petersburg, the Institute of Social and Religious Research was under the direction of Harlan Paul Douglass, who was "driven by an overarching commitment to use empirical data as a basis for recommended actions to strengthen churches and promote interchurch cooperation." (<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/douglass.htm>)

²⁶ Kovacs p. 95.

²⁷ Anderson, p. 198.

²⁸ Kovacs, p. 95.

²⁹ Anderson, p. 198

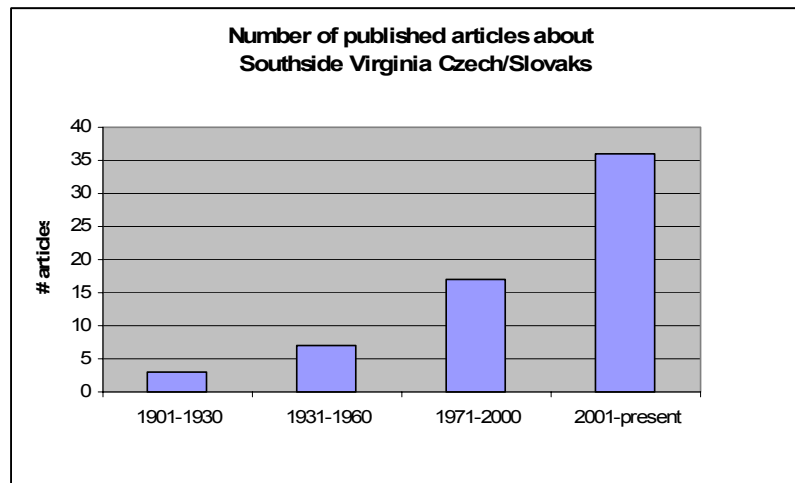
³⁰ Kovacs, p. 64.

and the organization eventually disbanded, with some of the remaining members married into the church community. The Freethinkers, however, provided the core membership of the Bohemian-Slavonic Farmer's Mutual Benefit Insurance Society of Virginia, which still continues as a chartered corporation in the State of Virginia. A clause in the charter prohibits from membership any person not of Czech descent and the books are kept in Czech.³¹

Media Presence

When published, newspaper and other articles about the Czech/Slovaks were generally complimentary. However until the 1980's there were few such articles published. The earliest article in the archives of the Southside Virginia Czech/Slovak Heritage Society dates from 1913 and describes the settlement of the first Bohemians "20 years ago."³² The next year, "Slavs on Southern Farms," an economic study which was published in the Congressional Record, reported, "It is significant, as well as interesting, that in the Southside counties having the largest Slavish rural population is found the highest percentage of improved farm land."³³

A count of the publications collected by the Southside Virginia Czech/Slovak Heritage Society about local Czech/Slovaks and their activities shows less than 2 articles per decade until the 1980's.³⁴ As interest in the Southside Virginia's Slavic community began growing, articles began appearing in the local newspapers about annual church festivals at the Czech/Slovak churches and how specific families came to settle in the area. In the 1990's, media attention was drawn to one of the Slavic farms that proved to hold a significant place in Virginia history, having been previously owned by the son of Pocahontas (the American Indian princess who helped the first English settlers to Virginia in the 1600's). A dozen articles were written about archaeological digs conducted at the farm and the Slovak family that lived there.



³¹ Charter, dated 1898, and newspaper article, dated 1958.

³² Southside Va. Dispatch, May 13, 1913.

³³ Hodges, LeRoy, "Slavs on Southern Farms," Senate document No. 595, 63d. Congress, 2nd. Session, 1914, pp. 14-17.

³⁴ The count of the number of newspaper articles does not include obituaries, birth announcements, weddings nor instances when individual persons are named in context of their jobs and their Slavic background is not mentioned.

The Heritage Society is proud to have made good progress on the stated goal of “Promoting our Heritage” because, in just the past 3 years, presentations and activities of the Society have been the impetus of 20 published articles highlighting the area’s Slavic community. Ten of these articles related to the group’s trip to Romania in 2005, including three articles published by international media in the Czech Republic and Romania. Also, in February 2006, the Virginia House of Delegates passed a Resolution “Recognizing Czechoslovakian-Americans and their descendants in Virginia.” Because “truck stops, hotels, and housing developments [are] displacing what used to be Czech farmland,” the Resolution was enacted to “preserve and honor the their contributions as an integral part of the early history and culture of the Commonwealth.”³⁵

The Future

The Southside Virginia Czech/Slovak Heritage Society will continue to develop its relationship with the residents and our relatives in Girnic, Romania and would like to assist other families in finding and visiting their “home villages” as well.

There are also opportunities for continued research of the current and past Czech/Slovak Heritage in Virginia. Here are some areas that are of interest to the author:

- The exact location of farms and an analysis of the patterns of the growth/decline in the number acres owned by individual families.
- Intermarriage rates between the Czech/Slovaks and non-Slavs, as well as intermarriage within the Czech/Slovak community. Due to the early non-acceptance by the dominant culture, the first generations of immigrants tended to marry within their own community. Just as the visitors to Romania in 2005 found their third and/or fourth cousins, it has been estimated that a sizeable percentage of the current Virginia descendents are third or fourth cousins.
- Although language (as indicator of the culture) has essentially died out in the younger generations, it appears that most families continue to follow some Czech/Slovak traditions at holidays, particularly in the serving of traditional ethnic dishes. It would be interesting to survey the current Czech/Slovak descendents to determine the elements of culture still maintained in their families.
- Most Southside Virginia Czech/Slovaks no longer maintain a living by farming. The first economic draw away from farming was in 1914, when Dupont opened a munitions plant in nearby Hopewell, Virginia. Many of the younger Czech/Slovaks, particularly women who could be spared from farming activities, went to work there or at subsequent industries. But the plants closed in 1929, just as the Great Depression hit. How the Czech/Slovaks were able to hold onto their farms during this era merits investigation.

³⁵ Commonwealth of Virginia, House of Delegates, Richmond, Va., 2006 Regular Session of the General Assembly, House Resolution No. 13, February 10, 2006. <http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?061+ful+HR13ER>