

Appalfolks of America Association (AAA)
1047 Ingalls Street, P.O. Box 613
Clifton Forge, VA 24422

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CLIFTON FORGE—The Virginia Opry, Appalfolks of America’s outreach program that is in its 29th performance season as a country music show, has been designated as the Commonwealth of Virginia’s official Opry.

On January 8, Senator R. Creigh Deeds filed Senate Bill 283 to designate The Virginia Opry as the official Opry of the Commonwealth of Virginia. After the Virginia Senate passed the bill 40-0, the Virginia House of Delegates passed the bill by a 93-6 vote. Governor Ralph S. Northam has signed the bill that takes effect on July 1, 2020.

M. Ray Allen, founder of Appalfolks and current Director of The Virginia Opry, stated, “It is ironical that The Virginia Opry that made its debut on October 16, 1992, in The Historic Stonewall Theatre that Appalfolks owned at the time will officially become the Commonwealth of Virginia’s Opry on July 1, 2020, the same day of the year that the Town Council of Clifton Forge designated as “Stonewall Theatre Day” during the time that Appalfolks owned and operated the theatre prior to donating the theatre to the Town of Clifton Forge in 2003.”

The Virginia Opry currently features a troupe of 40 members who comprise 12 bands. The common thread is that each leader of each band has performed for Appalfolks at The Historic Stonewall Theatre (renamed The Historic Masonic Theatre by the Town of Clifton Forge). Other places that The Virginia Opry has performed are: Washington & Lee University, the Masonic Amphitheatre, Glen Haven Farm, and The Buckhorne Country Store and Campground. Nearly 50 percent of the members of The Virginia Opry reside in the Alleghany Highlands while the others live as far away as Texas and Baltimore.

During the summer of 1992, Allen recruited Ray Tucker, a vocalist, guitarist, songwriter and former leader of Ray Tucker and the Country Boys, to recruit performers to form The Virginia Opry. Tucker, a current member of The Virginia Opry, leads a new group, Ray Tucker and Friends, one of The Virginia Opry’s 12 bands.

Allen recalled, “Appalfolks received the Historic Stonewall Theatre as a charitable donation from Irwin R. Cohen on December 20, 1991, and The Virginia Opry was one of our first outreach programs that we founded in order to fill seats at the theatre while fulfilling our mission of preserving Appalachia’s musical heritage.”

Delegate Terry L. Austin attended The Virginia Opry in February of 2017 when Freight Train, a local bluegrass band, performed as the guest band at The Virginia Opry. Inspired by The Virginia Opry's long history of promoting local talent from the region combined with the Opry's track record of featuring prominent recording stars from across the nation, Delegate Austin filed "Resolution 397" that was passed by the House of Delegates on February 17, 2017. "Resolution 397" commends The Virginia Opry for presenting and producing country music shows for 25 consecutive years. After Senate Bill 283 reached the House, Delegate Austin provided strong support for the bill that was then passed and sent to Governor Ralph S. Northam for signing.

Allen remarked, "I am grateful to both Senator Deeds and Delegate Austin for their support of The Virginia Opry, and I wish to thank Teresa Hammond, director of the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, for her ongoing support of Appalfolks and its programs."

Such country music stars as the late Dan Seals have graced the stage at The Virginia Opry, and the following nationally prominent bands have performed as guests: Freight Hoppers, a regular guest band on Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion," The Lonesome River Band, The Farm Hands, Michael Hoover and His Show Band and The Darrell Webb Band.

Michael Hoover and His Show Band set The Virginia Opry's box office record (\$4,558.00) with Representative Morgan Griffith in the audience at The Historic Masonic Theatre in August of 2018. Hoover defeated 95 other Elvis tribute artists in Memphis to become the world champion Elvis tribute artist, and he and his band have performed the most concerts for Appalfolks of any other band, including Goose Creek Symphony, a frequent performing band.

Keith Bryant and Steve Hoke Band, Gentlemen South, Joey Robinson Duo, Robby Meadows Band, Brian Buchanan Band, Moonshine Express, Crimson River, Glen Shelton Band, Doug Lester Band, and Ruckus Bluegrass Band are official members of The Virginia Opry.

Also, the late Bob Campbell brought his Coachmen to perform at The Historic Stonewall Theatre in 1994, and the concert set the attendance record at 510 for a single performance. M. Ray Allen and Campbell co-wrote The Virginia Opry's theme song, "Home Sweet Home, Virginia," a song that finished as a "Top 20 Finalist" in the Virginia Songwriting Competition that was held to replace Virginia's state song.

Jana Allen, M. Ray Allen's daughter who got her start as a sixth grader acting and singing on stage at The Historic Stonewall Theatre, serves as an emcee and vocalist with The Virginia Opry as does Glen Shelton of Madison Heights. Both are graduates of Liberty University.

Jana has pursued a career as an actress/vocalist, and her credits for speaking roles include the following movies: "The Bleeding," "The Shunning," "The Taking of Deborah Logan," "The

Hollow,” and “Remember Yesterday,” the first feature film in which she landed the lead role. As a vocalist, she has toured with the Opry of the Virginias, performed in a cabaret in Hollywood, recorded “Home Sweet Home, Virginia,” and performed as a member of both the Virginia Junior Opry and The Virginia Opry.

Also, Jana Allen has landed roles on TV, performing in three episodes of “Manhunt Unabomber.” She recently appeared on “Righteous Gemstones” where she filmed on set with John Goodman.

Shelton has opened as a vocalist for more than 40 nationally prominent country and gospel music acts, and he has excelled as a songwriter, having written and recorded a number of Top Ten Christian Country Music songs.

M. Ray Allen noted, “The Virginia Opry will continue to preserve Appalachia’s musical heritage and showcase both local and national talent here in the Alleghany Highlands and across the Commonwealth of Virginia where we will present family-oriented country music shows the entire family can enjoy.”

M. Ray Allen concluded, “I also wish to thank two special people, Dr. Krishna Sankar and Gregory A. Howard, better known as “Big Al,” for helping The Virginia Opry achieve this milestone.”

Dr. Sankar has supported Appalfolks and its programs for more than two decades, and Gregory A. Howard spearheaded the effort that led Appalfolks to sign a contract with Highlands Media Group to establish Appalfolks’ headquarters at the WXCF Radio Studio Building in Clifton Forge, an action that has established a new home for The Virginia Opry at 103.5 Big Country.

