



Remarks by Dr. Mesha Jones, President of the Madison County African American Historical Association, at the Madison Chamber of Commerce Dinner – June 1, 2026

Good evening,

It is truly an honor to be here tonight at this dinner. Thank you for the invitation, for your hospitality, and for the work each of you do to strengthen this community through business, service, leadership, and investment in Madison County's future.

I would also like to acknowledge the leadership and board members of the Madison County African American Historical Association, especially our founder, Nancy Garnett Williams. Nancy had the vision, determination, and courage to ensure that important stories from our community would have a home, a voice, and a future. What began as an effort to preserve local history has grown into a resource for education, heritage tourism, community engagement, and local pride.

For those who may not know me, my name is Mesha Jones. I wear many hats: nurse, leader, educator, advocate, historian, and proud Madison County resident. Much of my professional life has centered around improving health, equity, and outcomes for people. But one thing I have learned is this: strong communities are built not only through the work we do today, but also through our understanding of the people and experiences that came before us.

Tonight, I want to talk about history, but not history as something frozen in the past. I want to talk about history as economic development. History as identity. History as community building. History as tourism. History as education. And most importantly, history as connection.

Recently, our association received confirmation that the roots of the Odd Fellows organization in Madison County extend back into the 19th century. The first lodge hall was located at Antioch Baptist Church, built in 1894, before members constructed the dedicated lodge hall on South Main Street in the town of Madison in 1917. These milestones help us better understand the depth of this history and the generations of community members who worked to build and sustain it.

One of the most important pieces of that history is the Odd Fellows Lodge. The organization itself reflects a long tradition of leadership, service, mutual aid, and community support within Madison County's African American community.

During a time when opportunities and resources were limited, organizations such as the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows provided structure, fellowship, economic support, and a sense of belonging. These organizations helped communities care for one another, support families in times of need, and develop future leaders.

As the organization continued to grow and thrive, the 1914 lodge hall became a gathering place for community life. More than a century later, that building still stands as a testament to the vision, determination, and resilience of those who built it.

What makes this story even more remarkable is the connection to England through the charter received there. That international connection reminds us that Madison County's African American history is part of a much larger story of resilience, organization, faith, and community.

Nearby on Mudd Road sits the Household of Ruth, the women's counterpart to the Odd Fellows Lodge. Together, these organizations created a powerful network of support and service. The Odd Fellows and the Household of Ruth worked side by side to strengthen families, care for neighbors, support education, and build community.

I am excited to share another meaningful development in this preservation journey. Recently, we received encouraging news from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. After presenting the Odd Fellows Lodge to the evaluation team, they determined that the building is potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

To think that a building constructed in 1914 by members of the Madison County community is now being considered for national recognition speaks not only to the significance of the structure itself, but also to the lasting contributions of the people who built, led, and strengthened this community.

This is an important first step not only for the building itself, but for the recognition of history in Madison County at the state and national levels. The next phase will involve a presentation to the State Review Board in June, and we remain hopeful as the process moves forward.

National Register recognition matters because it does more than preserve history. It positions Madison County to leverage one of its most valuable assets—its unique and authentic story. Recognition can create opportunities for future preservation funding, support educational initiatives, strengthen heritage tourism, and attract visitors seeking meaningful experiences.

As heritage tourism continues to grow nationwide, travelers are increasingly looking for communities that preserve and celebrate their history. National recognition helps put Madison County on the map as a destination where visitors can gain a richer, more complete understanding of Virginia's past. Those visitors support local businesses, restaurants, lodging, shops, and community events, creating economic benefits that extend throughout the county.

This recognition also contributes to community growth by strengthening local pride, encouraging investment in historic resources, and providing future generations with a deeper connection to the place they call home. Most importantly, it affirms that these stories and the people connected to them are an important part of Madison County's history, Virginia's history, and the broader American story.

I am proud to say that our association has received recognition for preserving and sharing these stories. The Madison County African American Historical Association was honored with the Cultural Enrichment Hometown Hero Award for 2026. I was humbled to receive the Hometown Hero Award in 2025. Those recognitions are meaningful not because they celebrate individuals, but because they acknowledge the value of preserving and sharing local history.

Our association has also been blessed to receive significant grant support that is helping us move this work forward.

One of those grants came through Virginia Humanities. That grant allowed us to honor enslaved individuals resting in a burial ground discovered on a farm in Graves Mill. This project represents exactly what community collaboration can look like.

This was not about blame.

This was about acknowledgment.

This was about humanity.

This was about remembrance.

Because of our partnership with the owners of Graves Mill Farm, we hosted a luncheon that brought together descendants, researchers, residents, and those with personal or historical connections to the site. People gathered not in division, but in shared respect for history and community.

This work was strengthened through collaboration with Dr. Andrea Roberts of the UVA School of Architecture and the Arc of the Enslaved Communities Initiative. Her work helped bring broader visibility and understanding to the importance of preserving local history and honoring descendant communities.

After the luncheon, we walked together to the site itself. We paid tribute through songs, prayer, speakers, and the reading of names uncovered through research and documentation. While we honored those names, we also recognized the many more who remain unknown.

One of the most moving aspects of that project came through a generous donation from Weaver Works: a large stone that now serves as a permanent marker with an interpretive sign. Arrangements have been made to care for the site so that future generations can continue to visit, reflect, learn, and connect.

Another outcome of the Virginia Humanities grant was the creation of a coloring book developed by Sue Garnett, Dorren Brown, and Nancy Garnett Williams. The book was designed to educate younger generations about local history in an engaging and accessible format.

We have had outreach from teachers in Culpeper and beyond asking how they can receive copies for educational use. A local history project created right here in Madison County is now reaching classrooms outside our county lines.

Perhaps one of the most encouraging signs that this work matters is seeing young people become engaged in preserving and sharing these stories.

Recently, Nancy and I had the opportunity to be interviewed by two rising ninth-grade students participating in the Smithsonian's Democracy in Dialogue Virtual Exchange Program. As part of the nation's upcoming 250th anniversary, students were challenged to explore a powerful question: How has our local community contributed to 250 years of the American experience?

The students were given the freedom to choose their own topics, and two of them focused on African American history in Madison County. Through their research, they discovered resources from the Madison County African American Historical Association and reached out to learn more.

In a world where young people can access information from anywhere, these students chose to look closely at their own community. They chose to explore the stories of local people, families, churches, schools, and organizations that helped shape Madison County and, in turn, America.

That is the true impact.

It is not only about protecting the past. It is about inspiring curiosity, pride, and understanding in the next generation. It is about ensuring that our children and grandchildren know that history happened here and that they have a role in carrying these stories forward.

We have also recently received a grant from the Northern Piedmont Community Foundation to create a new exhibition focused on the history of African American schools in Madison County.

The story of African American schools in Madison County is a Madison County story. It is a story of perseverance, aspiration, and investment in future generations.

Why does preserving and sharing these stories matter to the Chamber of Commerce?

Why does it matter to business leaders?

Why does it matter to tourism?

Why does it matter to people considering moving here?

Because people today are looking for authentic communities.

They are looking for places that value culture.

Places that are committed to preserving and sharing their history.

Places that preserve heritage.

Places where people from different backgrounds and experiences can see themselves reflected in the story of the community.

History creates identity.

Identity creates pride.

Pride creates investment.

Communities that preserve their stories become stronger communities.

When families visit Madison County, they should not only experience our beautiful mountains, farms, wineries, and scenic roads. They should also experience the full story of the people who shaped this county.

Heritage tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors of tourism across the country. People travel to experience authentic stories and meaningful places.

That creates opportunity.

Opportunity for local businesses, educators, artists, tourism partners, and entrepreneurs throughout the county.

But more importantly, it creates connection.

Preserving history is not simply about looking backward. It is about creating assets that strengthen our community today while helping future generations understand the people, places, and experiences that shaped Madison County.

I believe Madison County has a unique opportunity right now.

We can preserve our rural charm while embracing growth.

We can honor the past while preparing for the future.

We can welcome visitors while protecting authenticity.

We can deepen our understanding of the past while building stronger relationships for the future.

That is the kind of Madison County I believe in.

A Madison County where preserving African American history is part of preserving Madison County's history.

A Madison County where children learn not only national history, but local history.

A Madison County where people from different backgrounds come together around a shared stewardship of place.

And a Madison County where future generations will one day look back and say:

"They cared enough to preserve it."

Before I close, I want to thank everyone who has supported the work of the Madison County African American Historical Association—our board members, volunteers, grant partners, researchers, educators, donors, local families, descendants, churches, business supporters, and community members.

This work is often emotional, challenging, detailed, and deeply personal.

But it is worth it.

Because every preserved story becomes a bridge between generations.

For generations, these buildings quietly carried stories that are now reaching new audiences and gaining broader recognition. Today, those stories are becoming part of a deeper understanding of Madison County's history. That recognition matters because places like the Odd Fellows Lodge and the Household of Ruth help us better understand the people, institutions, and experiences that contributed to the community we know today.

And in a world that often feels divided and disconnected, perhaps one of the most powerful things a community can do is remember together.

Thank you for allowing me to share tonight.

Thank you for investing in Madison County.

And thank you for helping ensure that the full story of this community continues to be told.