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Neighborhood Story Proposal: Drugstore Soda Fountains

Mechanicsville, Va., is usually noted for its history, such as its Civil War battlefields; its natural features, such as the Chickahominy Swamp; or its quirks, such as the windmill along Mechanicsville Turnpike that serves as an important landmark when directing someone to an unfamiliar location near the old part of town. What is not as well known about the bedroom community to the northeast of Richmond is that it preserves working samples of a bit of long-lost Americana—drugstore soda fountains. Once common fixtures of the American landscape, communities with even one are a rarity in the 21st century. Mechanicsville has two: one at Mechanicsville Drug Store, the other at Westbury’s Colonial Pharmacy. I propose to profile one or both of these soda fountains and the way of life that they sustain.

In addition to the print story, I propose the following packages: two video pieces, two audio pieces, an annotated Google Map, and a Vuvox multimedia presentation. One of the video pieces would feature the day-to-day operations of the soda fountains, possibly including interviews with owners, workers and patrons. The other will focus on some of the “characters” (as Mechanicsville Drug owner Tommy Thompson refers to them) that constitute the establishments’ regulars. One of the audio pieces will focus on the sounds of the soda fountains, including those of ordering, cooking, serving, and the banter around the counters and tables. The second audio piece would be based on an interview with one of the owners or workers; this latter piece may also include an interview with an expert on the history of the soda fountain. The Google map will include material on the location of the featured drugstores, along with other area landmarks such as the windmill, local battlefields, the Chickahominy, and other places of interest. Finally, the Vuvox presentation will focus on the history of the soda fountain, with

photos of the soda fountain through time and, if possible, maps that show the spatial expansion and decline of the soda fountain across the American landscape.