

Harrisonburg, Virginia: Documenting a History of Refugee Resettlement

Mary K. Gayne

James Madison University

Abstract

Harrisonburg, Virginia, self-designated as the “friendly city,” is a rural town of 50,000 residents located in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. It serves as a major poultry processing and packaging site for the surrounding agricultural community; thus, the region can assure economic opportunities to significant quantities of workers with limited English proficiency. Since 1988, Church World Service, an international humanitarian ministry, has maintained a refugee resettlement office in Harrisonburg based on a cooperative agreement with the US State Department. Local religious, educational, and civic leaders also assume structured roles in overseeing how waves of displaced individuals are resettled and in assuring employment, housing availability, educational access, legal protections, and public sociability. As refugees transition from newcomers into fully-settled residents, they discover occasions to connect with each other for the purposes of creatively and competitively positioning themselves within the local community.

These preliminary observations about the social processes of refugee resettlement are gradually taking shape within the context of a collaborative undergraduate research project, titled “The World is Harrisonburg: A Global History of Immigration, Refugee Resettlement, and Transnational Migration, 1970-2020,” It is a Digital Humanities project that I have chosen to position within the context of a General Education course. The course is targeted at first- and second-semester James Madison University students, who are themselves newcomers to Harrisonburg. Specifically because the project is entirely based on publicly-available sources and, therefore, resists the recounting of narratives of rebirth in a new homeland, the emerging cultural heritage of migration belongs to the city, as a fully-situated community, rather than to collections of displaced and resettled individuals.