



---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Legacy: Walter Chrysler Jr., and the Untold Story of Norfolk's Chrysler Museum of Art* by Peggy Earle

Review by: Thomas Aiello

Source: *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 116, No. 4 (2008), pp. 428-429

Published by: Virginia Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27740477>

Accessed: 26-10-2020 17:47 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Virginia Historical Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*



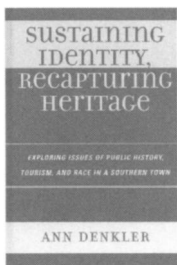
*Legacy: Walter Chrysler Jr., and the Untold Story of Norfolk's Chrysler Museum of Art* • Peggy Earle • Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008 • xii, 200 pp. • \$22.95

Reviewed by Thomas Aiello, visiting professor of history at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He is the author of "The Second Battle of Richmond: Art and Identity in the Jim Crow South, 1950," *VMHB* (forthcoming).

Peggy Earle's account of Walter Chrysler, Jr.'s, art collecting obsession argues that his eventual move, artwork in tow, to Norfolk "transformed a small city museum into an internationally esteemed showplace" (p. 5). The son of the auto magnate cultivated an appreciation of art—and, just as important, a love of collecting things—at an early age. Though he was not formally schooled, he knew what he liked, and his consistent presence among artistic kingmakers gave him a reasonable impression of whom he was supposed to like. Although Earle's treatment demonstrates a life of privilege, it also reveals an unfinished college education, an early divorce, and a naval discharge for, it is assumed, homosexuality. When Chrysler wanted to hide from broader setbacks such as these, he did so through art, and his obsession with collecting would eventually grow from catharsis to vocation. In the late 1950s, Chrysler—remarried now to a woman from Norfolk—created his own art museum in the small Cape Cod community of Provincetown, Massachusetts. The town early embraced its new art collector, but Chrysler's eccentric behavior, his increasing demands for tax breaks and city-funded building projects, his conflicts with local artists, and an international forgery scandal all soured the relationship. Earle's deft handling of the scandal—a provocative 1962 discovery that many of Chrysler's works were not originals—makes a strong case that the collector's mistakes came from ignorance and compulsion, not from willful intent. From Provincetown, Chrysler took his collection to Norfolk after an open call for bids from museums throughout the country. Earle does well in ushering the reader through the complicated machinations, board and city disagreements, and ultimate lawsuits that finally cemented the collection in Norfolk (though "cemented" might not be the appropriate term, as Chrysler would continue to trade pieces in his collection against the museum's will). Though Chrysler's eccentricities never dissipated, neither did his stewardship of the collection he considered his life's work.

Still, Earle's short account does leave the reader grasping for more. Her treatment of the Norfolk Museum before Chrysler's involvement is notably sparse, avoiding detailed analysis of collection acquisition and board motivation in favor of a swift move to Chrysler biographical material. This, in itself, is not problematic. But in the competition for dominance between the book's two central protagonists—Chrysler

and the museum—it gives a decided early advantage to the former, whereas the art historians and aesthetes who will be most drawn to the text would probably favor the latter. That said, there is still room in the sparse prose for studied nuance, particularly in the treatment of Chrysler. His “compulsive attention to detail and penchant for micromanaging practically every aspect of his businesses,” notes Earle, for example, “was surely a version—albeit distorted—of his father’s insistence on learning a trade from the ground up” (p. 22). Though Earle is sympathetic toward Chrysler, her depiction is far from hagiography. Along with her study of a philanthropist and his legacy, she provides a portrait of a megalomaniac, a narcissist, a bully, and a dupe. Chrysler’s penchant for trading pictures in his collection to fill perceived gaps in his understood artistic timeline led to easy pickings for art dealers who often got the best of him. At other times, the collector played the villain, taking advantage of local Provincetown artists by acquiring their work without promised payment and without giving them fair time on the museum walls. In 1988, Chrysler died before signing over his full collection to the museum, leaving his nephew to sell it at auction. Though Norfolk’s Chrysler Museum clearly interpreted the bequest as a devastating blow, the philanthropist did leave an endowment of paintings and money to the museum, which aided its later expansion and provided the final act of Chrysler’s, and Earle’s, legacy.



*Sustaining Identity, Recapturing Heritage: Exploring Issues of Public History, Tourism, and Race in a Southern Town* • Ann Denkler • Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2007 • vi, 132 pp. • \$55.00

Reviewed by Theodore Carter DeLaney, associate professor of history at Washington and Lee University. He is the author of “Surviving Defeat: The Trials of ‘Mrs. Ex-President Tyler’” in *Virginia’s Civil War* (2005).

This book focuses on the town of Luray and surrounding Page County, and it explores problems associated with Civil War heritage, race, identity, and tourism. This project is the culmination of many years of work for Ann Denkler, who first addressed this topic as a doctoral dissertation. That same year, historian David Blight published *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, which focuses on many of the same themes as Denkler’s study. In 2005, two other historians published important books that illumine Denkler’s topic: James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* and W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and*