

RENEWING CIVIL SOCIETY

Understanding history

Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates Kirk Cox ('79) is uniquely qualified to usher the assembly into its fifth century **BY ANDY PERRINE ('86)**



Kirk Cox is co-chair of the steering committee that will guide the 400th anniversary celebration of the Virginia General Assembly.

Established in Jamestown on July 30, 1619, Virginia’s lawmaking assembly will observe its 400th anniversary next year. In fact, the General Assembly, as it is known now, is the oldest continuously running legislative body in the New World. So it’s no overstatement to suggest that American representative democracy was born in Virginia and lives today in Richmond.

The momentousness of the occasion is widely acknowledged, but understood most fully by Speaker of the House of Delegates Kirk Cox (’79), co-chair of the 2019 Commemoration Steering Committee, which will guide the 400th anniversary celebration.

A member of the House since 1989 and a high-school government teacher for his entire career, Cox is utterly steeped in the historical and political significance of the moment. “It’s an incredible experience because I taught U.S. and Virginia government. I’d read all the Virginia history. I’d taught the textbook. One of the reasons I ran [for a House seat] over 30 years ago was that I wanted to, as a government teacher, bring it to life.”

Cox pauses in his office, lit by the white marble Virginia statehouse façade glimmering brightly across Capitol Square. “To think that I am the speaker of this 400-year-old institution that goes back to the House of Burgesses, and that the arc of American political history all comes through Virginia, it’s just amazing to have taught it and then be a part of it.”

Next year will mark the commemoration of two other formative events that occurred in Virginia in 1619—the arrival of the first recorded Africans to English North America and the recruitment of English women in significant numbers.

American Evolution, the organization planning the commemoration, states in a promotional video on its website, “We are diverse. English, African and Virginia Indian cultures collided for the first time in 1619 Virginia and laid the foundation for our multicultural nation. We are achievers. Women past and present whose trials and struggles in America are far too seldom acknowledged.”

“By lifting up all of our stakeholders in Virginia, we lift up all of Virginia,” adds Skip Ferebee, director of marketing and communications at American Evolution. “And the entire story of 1619 is highly relevant to conversations today.”

Such an inclusive approach to telling the story of 1619 matches Speaker Cox’s approach to running the House of

Delegates. Of course, as a government teacher and a JMU alumnus, Cox can’t help but invoke the political philosophy of James Madison when explaining his own approach to leadership. “It’s exactly what Madison meant when he discussed factions. He actually said, when all the factions come together, you have to compromise because they’re coming from such different points. That’s the beauty of the system, and it’s worked that way, I think, for the most part in Virginia.”

When Cox gavelled in his first House of Delegates session on Jan. 11, he stood before his colleagues in the chamber, with its desks divided according to political party affiliation. “Three hundred and ninety-nine years ago,” he began, “our forefathers gathered in a small brick church on a tiny island on the very edge of a big continent and the precipice of an even larger legacy.” After citing the General Assembly’s imminent anniversary, he continued: “The 5-foot wide center aisle that symbolically separates the two parties of this chamber has sometimes felt 5 miles wide. The first and foremost task of this body is to bridge that divide.

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We are not two parties, we are one house tasked with the responsibility of governing one commonwealth, improving the lives of one group ... the citizens we serve.”

Cox has made good on his promise. While the 2018 legislative session went into overtime because of budget wrangling intensified

by proposed Medicaid expansion, he came through as a pragmatic problem-solver by backing expansion with work requirements and a “taxpayer safety switch” that can kill expansion if Washington does not make good on its promise to cover most of the cost.

After signing the budget into law, Gov. Ralph Northam said, “We showed Virginia and the world that chaos and partisan warfare may dominate Washington, but here in Richmond, we still work together to do the right thing for our people, not our political party.” Northam also promised to present Speaker Cox with one of the pens he used to sign the bill.

Now as he prepares for his second session as speaker, such headline-grabbing budget deals can be viewed in a much broader context. After all, it was Cox who said, “The gravity of this moment should not escape us as we embark on the inspiring task of ushering this historic institution into its 400th year. From Jamestown to Williamsburg to Richmond; from the Revolution to the Civil War to Civil Rights—this House and its members have shaped and molded the arc of history that brings us to where we are today.”

