



VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Story of Virginia

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Contact: Jennifer Guild, Senior Officer for Public Relations and Marketing
(804) 342-9665, jguild@vahistorical.org

From Civilian Pilot, to Imprisoned Spy, to War Hero Virginia Man's Cold War Crisis Story Told in New Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

Richmond, VA—On Saturday, January 16, 2010, the Virginia Historical Society (VHS) opens a powerful exhibition called *Cold War Crisis: The U-2 Incident* about the life of Pound, Va., resident and Grundy High School graduate Francis Gary Powers (1929–1977). The exhibition tells the story of how Powers went from being a military pilot on a top secret mission to an international figure caught in the cross-fire of political conflict, military tension, and economic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Powers was a civilian pilot flying for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). On May 1, 1960, the American U-2 reconnaissance plane he was flying was shot down by a surface-to-air missile over the Soviet Union. The plane crashed largely intact. The event became known as the U-2 Incident.

Because the U-2 plane was specifically designed for covert surveillance, Powers was tried by the Soviet government, convicted as a spy, and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. In 1962, after twenty-one months of captivity, he was exchanged in Germany for a Soviet agent. Upon his return to the United States, Powers was cold-shouldered by the CIA for having failed to destroy the plane or kill himself. Less than one month later, a Senate committee determined that Powers followed orders and did not divulge any critical information to the Soviets, thus fully exonerating him.

“Francis Powers’s story is one that made world news and had a huge influence on international relations for decades,” said Paul Levensood, Virginia Historical Society President and CEO. “Some Virginians may remember the U-2 Incident, but to many, the story will be new. In an effort to focus more on 20th-century topics, the VHS wants to show visitors the Cold War’s effect on Virginia history.”

In 2000, on the 40th anniversary of the U-2 Incident, Powers’s family was presented with his posthumously awarded POW Medal, the National Defense Medal, and the CIA Director’s Medal for “Extraordinary Fidelity and Essential Service” for his military service and for never disclosing any classified information.

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Post Office Box 7311
Richmond, Virginia 23221
www.vahistorical.org





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The *Cold War Crisis: The U-2 Incident* exhibition is organized by The Cold War Museum, which was founded by Powers's son, Francis Gary Powers, Jr. The exhibition features more than fifty items including photos, letters, Soviet artifacts, and a never-before-seen propaganda poster that Powers's son has kept in his Midlothian, Va., home over the years.

Powers, Jr., will give a gallery walk of the exhibition on Wednesday, March 10, 2010, at noon at the VHS. Gallery walks cost \$6/adults, \$5/seniors 55+, \$4/students and children under 18, and are free for VHS members. There is no charge to visit the exhibition while it is on display at the society through May 30.

"I am so honored that the Virginia Historical Society is hosting this exhibit about my father," said Powers. "I have spent decades preserving Cold War history, honoring Cold War veterans, and making sure that stories like his do not get forgotten."

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For more than 182 years, the **Virginia Historical Society** (VHS) has been connecting people to America's past through the unparalleled story of Virginia. The VHS—a history museum and research library—features award-winning exhibitions that are entertaining and educational for visitors of all ages. The Society is the only museum with all of Virginia's history under one roof—all centuries, all regions, and all topics are covered. Although designated the Official State Historical Society, the VHS is a privately funded non-profit organization that relies on contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations to sustain its operations. The VHS is located at 428 North Boulevard in Richmond's Museum District. Admission is free. Museum hours are Monday–Saturday 10 a.m.–5 p.m. and Sunday 1 p.m.–5 p.m. Library hours are Monday–Saturday 10 a.m.–5 p.m. For more information, call (804) 358-4901, visit www.vahistorical.org, or find the VHS on Facebook and Twitter.

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