

OPINION

The history of the Sailor Sandwich

On my way home from speaking at a Norfolk history conference this spring, I stopped in Richmond to have Sunday lunch with my fellow avocational historian Neil Hening.

Neil descends from the famous eighteenth century Virginia jurist William Waller Hening, and is currently researching the jurist's biography.

We met at the New York Deli in Carytown at 2920 W. Cary St. and I had a sailor sandwich. It had probably been more than five years since I had eaten a sailor sandwich, and though I had often eaten them in Blacksburg, I had never before eaten one at Richmond's New York Deli — where the sandwich was invented.

The deli's online menu today says the sailor sandwich is "pastrami and Swiss topped with grilled knockwurst on rye with spicy brown mustard."

After finding a parking place some distance behind the restaurant, I stumbled upon the large painting (shown in the accompanying image) that stands outside the rear wall of the deli. The painting commemorates the sandwich's 1943 birth and depicts a pin-up sitting on an anchor eating one.

A check in the online academic history databases reveals no mention of the sandwich, so for its history, we have to rely on informal sources. Wikipedia is prominent among these sources and devotes a page to the sailor sandwich. The sailor is one of 65 distinctively American sandwiches in Wikipedia's list.

Because of its Richmond origin, the sandwich has been described frequently in local newspapers and magazine articles. Thus a 2010 Richmond Times-Dispatch article labeled it "Richmond's Very Own Sandwich." A 2015 blog by

New Yorker Barry Popik gave a timeline of its history.

Between the summers of 1943 and 1945 the University of Richmond, located just two miles from the deli, participated in the V-12 officers training program. That wartime navy program operated at some 130 colleges and universities around the United States, providing young men with naval and physical training along with accelerated college courses.

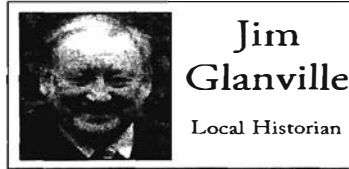
When they got their paychecks on the 1st and 15th of each month, the naval officers in training at UR would fill up the booths at the New York Deli. In 1943, some unknown person at the deli created the sailor sandwich for these aspiring officers.

Whenever one was ordered, the deli's owner's wife would shout "another sandwich for the sailors," and that was how it got its name.

There is an online video (Vimeo 38176994) in which Richard Lutz claims it was his grandfather (who looks suspiciously like one of the Marx brothers) invented the sailor sandwich. The video shows Lutz with a sailor sandwich with French fries on a large plate. A recent telephone call to Lutz (now a Post-Production Assistant on the west coast) confirmed that his claim is fake news. He made the spoof video several years ago as part of a graduate school class project at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

In popular culture, Patricia Cornwell, the best-selling Richmond author of the medical examiner Dr. Kay Scarpetta series of novels, has at least two of her fictional characters eating sailor sandwiches.

My taste for sailor sandwiches developed during the years I worked in Blacksburg



Jim
Glanville

Local Historian

when I could get them at Macado's restaurant near the main Blacksburg post office. I moved to Blacksburg in 1986 at about the time that Macado's was going into business and knew nothing of the sandwich's history when I was eating them there.

These days I eat more often

at the Christiansburg Macado's than the one in Blacksburg and last Labor Day, while researching Patrick Henry's Radford connection, my wife and I ate lunch at the Radford Macado's.

Macado's restaurant chain is Roanoke based. It operates 13 restaurants in western Virginia and two each in North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia. A recent telephone call to Macado's headquarters yielded the information that Macado's took the sailor sandwich off its regular menu about five years ago.

A follow-up email message from Macado's told me about

their Oktoberfest Specials. The sailor sandwich is back for limited engagement as a hot pastrami sandwich, with grilled bratwurst, deli mustard and melted Swiss cheese on grilled rye. It is being served the entire month of October at all 19 Macado's locations.

I am looking forward to enjoying another one over the next couple of weeks before the limited engagement ends.

Jim Glanville is a retired chemist living in Blacksburg. He has been publishing and lecturing for more than a decade about the history of Southwest Virginia.

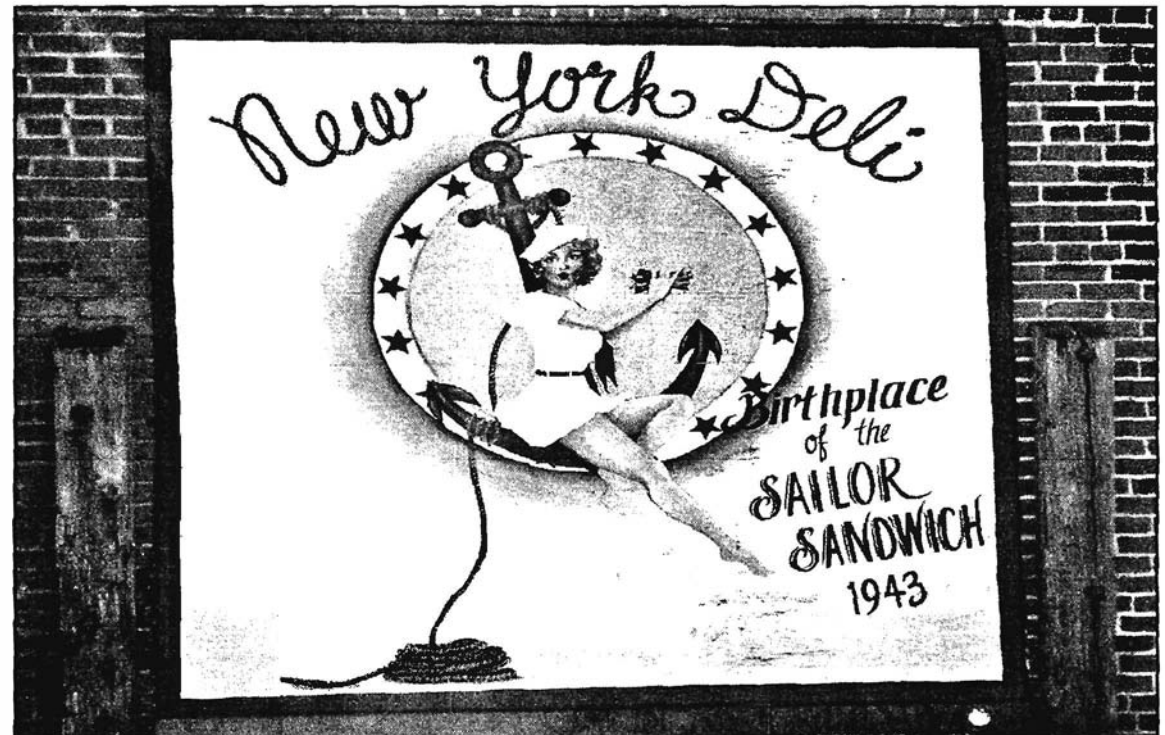


PHOTO BY JIM GLANVILLE

A painting outside of the New York Deli in Richmond claims to have created the sailor sandwich. It consists of pastrami and Swiss topped with grilled knockwurst on rye with spicy brown mustard.