Aboard the Learning Barge, some of the many resources you’ll find are three 24-foot canvas timelines exploring three time scales of development around the Elizabeth River. Children will learn about the population of Virginia beginning 15,000 years ago; see how the river and the depictions of the land around it have changed since the 1600s; and understand how the three specific neighborhood histories of Ghent, Cradock, and Sugar Hill are thematically connected (or disconnected).

The first timeline includes all of recorded human settlement in Virginia. Beginning 15,000 years ago, this timeline highlights the insignificant amount of time during which modern day humans have impacted the land in Virginia. By looking at this timeline, educators can discuss with their classes how much the river has been altered in a relatively short period of time. This timeline provides a framework through which to view the other two. The timeline of the neighborhoods elaborates the concepts in the largest timeline, showing that each neighborhood started out relatively the same, as farmland, but became extremely different in a short period of time. We hope that it encourages conversation about what caused each neighborhood to be so different.

The middle-scaled timeline features maps of Virginia and covers from the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to present day through one map for every 50 years. The concept for this timeline sprang from the reading “Producers and Consumers” by Worster. In this reading, Worster discusses how it is not nature that changes, but humanity’s perception of it. Thus, every so often, someone comes up with a new theory about the functionality of nature, which inherently affects society at large’s view of the ‘natural world.’ Applying this concept not only to nature but to humanity’s depictions in general, the maps of Virginia show
society’s conceptions of water, and specifically the Elizabeth River, during the 400 years between European discovery and present day. It is amazing how the way that the maps are drawn show the transition from the river as defining Virginia in 1607, to the prevalence of roads as a defining feature in 1946. We hope that this timeline will encourage educators to talk to their classes about what the Elizabeth River is to them.

The most specific and interactive timeline features photos and documents representing the development of Ghent, Cradock, and Sugar Hill beginning in 1850. By juxtaposing the important events in each neighborhood, the combined timeline is more telling than a simpler timeline of events for each neighborhood on its own. By combining timelines, students can learn from three communities representative of three common but distinct experiences in Portsmouth and Norfolk. The timeline layout encourages children to not only understand the connectedness between communities around them, but also how their community relates to past communities. Images and documents stored on the interactive neighborhood timeline stress the relationship of the three communities to the river as a point of reference to children, so that they will ask why it is that they do not swim or crab or do laundry in the river anymore; community history at this point connects to the history of the landscape. The neighborhood timeline is divided into 6 categories based on water usage: livelihood, industry, population/migration, dumping, transportation, and leisure. Mapped over a 150 year span, these activities show changes in how the different neighborhoods have related to the water over time. Pockets on the timeline hold larger maps as well as individual photographs, printed with captions which include the neighborhood name, date, and a description of the image. Students should be encouraged to place photographs (each with velcro on the back) on the timeline both in chronological order, and in correspondence with the perceived ‘correct’ category that the image might represent.

We hope that you enjoy using the canvas timelines on the Learning Barge as interactive learning tools for understanding the river, specific neighborhoods, and more about each child’s place in the world in which they live.