

# NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

August 2016

## *September Program: A history of Alone Mill in Rockbridge County*

Local author Anne McClung will present the RHS Fall Program, free and open to the public, at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, September 11, at the Bethany Lutheran Church, Alone Mill. Her talk will be illustrated with archival photographs, as well as recently captured aerial and ground images, to illuminate the mysteries of Alone Mill's past and its current environs (see sample photo on Page 5).



**Anne McClung**

The program will be followed by music performed by Laurie Lipscomb and his musician-friends Dick Sessoms, Dan Newhall, and Mark Dalton. In addition to an original bluegrass tune that Laurie composed called "Alone Mill," they will share two other songs that speak to the community and its timelessness. Following the music, discussion and fellowship will continue during refreshments, when guests are encouraged to browse (and contribute to) "show and tell" tables displaying artifacts and pictures from the Alone Mill area.

Anne McClung is a lifelong resident of Rockbridge County. She resides on her farm at Alone Mill with Laurie, where they keep cows, horses, and chickens. Anne has written several books on the county, including "Goshen Pass, a Magical Place in Virginia," "Among these Mountains: The Story of Rockbridge County," and most recently, "Dried Apples and Other Vanishing Memories of Rockbridge County." Her love of history and her interest in people, influenced by a

graduate degree in sociology from the University of Virginia, are the driving forces of her never-ending curiosity regarding Rockbridge County's history.

The presentation will take place in the sanctuary of Bethany Lutheran Church, 1320 Bethany Road, approximately 20 minutes west of Lexington via Routes 60W and 631 to Route 625 (Bethany Road).

### **Program at a Glance**

**Theme:** Alone Mill

**Date:** Sunday, September 11

**Location:** Bethany Church, 1320  
Bethany Rd, Alone Mill

**Time:** 2:00 p.m.

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## **The RHS President calls for volunteers!**

The Rockbridge Historical Society is in vital need of volunteers who can give two to four hours a month to help keep the Campbell House museum and library open to the public. The society's dedicated pool of volunteers has dwindled, making it difficult to support the scheduled openings. Help is needed for two-hour shifts on Friday and Saturday afternoons.

Volunteering at our historic headquarters provides a great opportunity to meet natives and visitors, many of whom have just been to the Visitor's Center or are waiting for the carriage tours that begin nearby. On slow days, volunteers can enjoy the wonderful RHS library covering many topics on Rockbridge County, as well as local genealogy. Please check your schedules and lend us a hand. No expertise is needed beyond your welcoming spirit. You will be greatly appreciated by all in advancing our good work.

Another pressing need is someone to maintain RHS membership records, a task that requires only basic computer skills. Surely there is someone out of our nearly 400 members and supporters who could take on this activity. Or maybe you know someone who needs a bit of activity and could help us out.

To help the society serve all who enjoy and support its efforts, please contact RHS, telephone 540-464-1058 or email [rochist@hotmail.com](mailto:rochist@hotmail.com).

— *Stephen D. Beck*

## ***Letter from the Executive Director***

### **History at our Feet...and at our Thumbs**

As you read this, 20 final “Story Stones” are being installed in the sidewalks of downtown Lexington, complementing the first 50 that inaugurated the Righteous and Rascals of Rockbridge (RRR) historic pavers program. As this phase of development draws to its close – and as RHS now prepares to assume lasting stewardship of this project in Public History – we hope you’ll continue to look to your feet when you walk the streets, and thumb your way to the associated website at [rrrockbridge.org](http://rrrockbridge.org).

Whether in those ‘Twitter-length’ granite inscriptions, or the paragraph-length biographies and hotlinks that elaborate those lives online, these life stories provide portals to Rockbridge experience that both creatively extend and often complicate local histories as traditionally told. This wide cast of characters was chosen by the RRR’s founding committee to span four centuries and to variously speak to shared and differing experiences of gender, race, and social class. They work to represent different professional, artistic and domestic endeavors, while also spotlighting residents both reverent, rascally, and those – like most humans – with a touch of both.

With this last batch of pavers, the RRR working group will pass the torch to RHS for further illumination and outreach. And in fit recognition of the new RHS role, two new markers will front our historic properties. Outside the Campbell House, a paver for Ruth McCulloch honors her service as one of the co-founders of RHS in 1939, the Blue Ridge Garden Club, and the Ignorance Club. Next door, at the Castle, another story-stone describes the life of Phil Nunn. A sometime resident there, Nunn was born to emancipated parents on Christmas Day 1866, eventually becoming a towering and enterprising ‘Gentle Giant’ about town, a memorable highlight to the popular Ghost Tour led by RRR committee member Mark Cline.

Walk to the Rockbridge Regional Library, its own standing resource for local history and imagined stories, and you’ll see two new stones that counterpoint two leaders in language and learning: Margaret Junkin Preston, daughter to the Unionist President of Washington College, wife and sister-in-law to leaders of VMI and the Confederacy, and often credited as one of the most popular poets of the post-War South. Steps away: Rev. Lylburn Downing, whose enslaved parents attended VMI Professor T.J. Jackson’s “colored Sabbath school” at Lexington Presbyterian Church. In 1927, Rev. Downing would be honored as namesake for the area’s first secondary-level school for African American students; yet it’s also surprising to learn that in Downing’s own Roanoke church, he installed a stained glass window echoing the Confederate General’s famously spiritual last words. History, even the brief inscriptions of these stones remind us, comes with its complexities.

Another constellation of lives will now ‘anchor’ the pedestrian experience in the plaza outside Wells Fargo Bank. The quartet there plays folk music legend Mike Seeger off Natural Bridge owner Thomas Jefferson. The cluster couples Edward Tarr (first black landowner West of the Blue Ridge) with Mary McDowell Greenlee (feisty founding settler of Rockbridge, who lived to 102 and outlasted neighbors’ accusations of witchcraft).

On **Friday, October 21, at 4:00 p.m.**, a ‘ribbon-cutting ceremony’ will mark the completion of the new installations and the transfer of the project to our own mission with new opportunities in preservation and programming. The day’s celebration of our institutional partners, sponsors, and community heritage will also feature several first-person impersonations by Mark Cline. Bring a friend, and bring your smartphone, to dig more deeply into the histories at your feet.

As we integrate this unique educational resource with the aims of our other institutional efforts, several pathways present themselves for engaging residents, visitors, students of all ages, and lifelong learners. A clear priority is enlivening and promoting the digital platform beyond its present foundations. Concurrently, we’re re-designing the RHS website to increase visual and archival content and to adopt more versatile tools for our communications. As we integrate these two websites, we’re eager to see how the virtual histories of our Righteous and Rascals might grow (through tagged images and maps, say) in order to more readily grab and sustain attention in a busy market for entertainment, information, and history.

Please join us at Wells Fargo Plaza on Oct.14, and enjoy some time browsing [rrrockbridge.org](http://rrrockbridge.org) beforehand. Thanks as ever for your continued support of our programs, our initiatives, and our commitment to recognizing the diversity of lives and legacies that have shaped Rockbridge history.

— *Eric Wilson*

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*Save the date!*

## **RHS inherits the Righteous and Rascals of Rockbridge**

**Friday October 21, 4:00 p.m**

Wells Fargo Bank Plaza, corner of Main and Nelson Streets in Lexington

The event will be a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the successful program to install 70 historic pavers in Lexington sidewalks with its associated website.

*Come and enjoy Mark Cline's impersonations of quirky and iconic Rockbridge characters.*

BENJAMIN BORDEN. SR.  
OBTAINED ROYAL LAND  
GRANT 1739 FOR  
EARLY SETTLEMENT OF  
ROCKBRIDGE CO.

THOMAS JEFFERSON  
VA GOV. 3RD US PRES.  
BUYS NATURAL BRIDGE  
1774. "MOST SUBLIME  
OF NATURE'S WORKS"

MARGARET J. PRESTON  
POETESS OF THE SOUTH  
WROTE "BEECHENBROOK"  
FATHER W & L PRESIDENT  
MARRIED VMI FOUNDER

HARRY LEE WALKER  
AF-AM MERCHANT  
LEX. MEAT MARKET 2D C  
ACTIVIST WIFE, ELIZA.  
OWNED BLANDOME, LEX.

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## **Brownsburg Museum highlights "Grain into Gold"**

First there was grain, raised by the earliest settlers of our valley. But, as the new exhibit at the Brownsburg Museum vividly displays, grain led directly and indirectly to a variety of activities on which the economy of the area depended. The exhibit, "Grain Into Gold: Milling & Distilling on the Dividing Waters," depicts not only the ways of processing grain itself, but also associated activities such as saw mills, hog farms, barrel-making, and transportation systems.

The milling story is told through photographs and stories of mills and millers from Ackerly to Wade in Rockbridge and Augusta Counties. In the distilling section, objects on view include an actual still that turned grain into alcohol, and local whiskey bottles. Display panels contain a discussion of the social and political issues surrounding whiskey production.

The entire exhibit benefits from the expertise of local historians who wrote the text and from the generosity of many individuals and institutions that have loaned items for display. The Brownsburg Museum is on Route 252 in Northern Rockbridge and is open from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Saturdays and 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. on Sundays through November.

— *Margaret Skovira*



A still on display as part of the Brownsburg Museum exhibit, "Grain into Gold" (Skovira photo).



Original sign for Wade's Mill on display as part of the Brownsburg Museum exhibit (Skovira photo).

## *Collections Spotlight*

### **Margaret Junkin Preston's Writing Desk and "Fancy" Chair**

In August of 1857, Margaret Junkin married a VMI professor, the widower Colonel John Thomas Lewis Preston. She thus became the stepmother of a large family to which she and Col. Preston added two boys of their own. Before she married, Margaret had been a writer; although she now struggled to find the time to pursue her craft, she became known throughout the country as the "Poetess of the South," for even though she was Northern-born, her themes were especially Southern.

The RHS is fortunate to have on display in the Campbell House a chair and a desk that once belonged to this remarkable woman. Margaret called this her "fancy" chair, a term commonly applied to the style of "Baltimore Painted Furniture" popular in the Federal era. Strikingly, this elegant, cane-seated chair is decorated with a painting of the Natural Bridge. Whether the image was specifically commissioned, or manufactured as part of the contemporary vogue for all things Natural Bridge – a symbol of American grandeur, even on Parisian wallpaper – it is one of the Society's most distinctive local artifacts, and an imaginative cue to one of Lexington's most notable authors.



Although we are not sure how Margaret used the chair, we can be certain that she used the desk for her writing. Her biographer, Mary Price Coulling, believes that Margaret had the desk made to accommodate her small stature. The writing surface is indeed low; however, as the visitor will notice, the bookshelves above it rise beyond a small woman's reach and must have been an inconvenience.

While many of Margaret's poems were written during visits to such resorts as White Sulphur Springs and Rockbridge Baths, where she had leisure to be creative, Margaret very likely sat at this desk to write much of the correspondence she sent from Lexington. A striking example of her letters is now in the possession of W&L's Special Collections in Leyburn Library. The letter was written to Captain Hugh White's mother when Margaret learned of the young officer's death in the Battle of Second Manassas (Aug 28-30, 1862). It is especially poignant because Margaret's own beloved stepson, Willie Preston, had been killed in the same battle.

It was also during the Civil War years, arguably her most creative, that Margaret wrote her best known work, "Beechenbrook: A Rhyme of the War," her epic poem about the Civil War. When her husband learned that his son Willie had been killed in action, Margaret said he went about the house exclaiming "Slain in battle! Slain in battle!" And from this, she said, came the idea for the poem, and one of its haunting refrains.

After the Civil War, Margaret continued to write and to publish, despite failing eyesight. By the time she died in Baltimore in 1897 at the age of 76, she was both blind and very deaf.

Margaret Junkin Preston had a personal connection to the Campbell House. In 1861 her stepson, the Rev. Thomas Lewis Preston, married Lucy Waddell, and in 1865, Lucy's father, Dr. Livingston Waddell, moved his family into what is now called the Campbell House. While the Waddell daughters gained no wide fame, they were well known locally and, like Margaret Junkin Preston, are remembered in Lexington as women who displayed a wonderful ability to adapt, survive, and persevere in post-Civil-War Virginia. It is wonderful to imagine the Waddell women with Margaret, gathered at the Campbell House in the very room where her desk and chair are displayed today.

— *Marian Faye Novak, RHS Volunteer*

# The Rockbridge History Bee

For my fellow members, here is an update on our exciting new initiative, the Rockbridge History Bee, a ‘quiz bowl’ with cash prizes that challenges high school students to demonstrate their command of local history. Through the tireless efforts of Mary Harvey-Halseth, RHS Secretary and Educational Outreach Chair, we’ve received more than \$3,000 in targeted contributions from Cornerstone Bank, the Historic Lexington Foundation, the Rockbridge Area Genealogical Society, the Sunrise Rotary Club, and the Rockbridge County Public Schools Foundation. In addition, the Washington and Lee Community Grants program has provided a generous grant to cover the costs of a promotional banner.



Mary has also organized RHS board members, volunteers, and professional librarians to prepare the many questions for the contest, all drawn from chapters of Remarkable Rockbridge, the legacy county history published by RHS and written by Dr. Charles Bodie. A next step will be ensuring that questions cover a wide variety of topics, and tiering them into levels of difficulty. Combing the book for questions has already been a rewarding activity for all of us involved.

As the new school year begins, RHS school visits will promote the contest directly to students, explain the format and resources for independent study, and highlight the significant prizes (\$1,500 1st prize, \$750 2nd prize, \$500 3rd prize). There is no cost to enter. I know of several students who have already announced they will be vying for top honors. Their efforts in this competition are especially noteworthy because they extend beyond students’ normal high school coursework.

RHS has donated multiple copies of Remarkable Rockbridge to the school libraries at Parry McCluer and Rockbridge County High Schools and branch libraries throughout the county, so that books will be freely available to home-schooled students and accessible to all. As always, paperback copies can be purchased for \$25 at the Campbell House and at the two local independent bookstores on Nelson Street: the Bookery, and Books & Co. and Toys Too.

Please help us make this event a success by encouraging high schoolers to participate, be they your own children, grandchildren, or neighbors. Should we achieve our inaugural goals, I hope future History Bees might also draw on materials like RHS Proceedings, maps, and other resources that bring Rockbridge history closer to students’ lives, studies, and family histories. I hope you will join us in the audience in Kendal’s Anderson Hall on Saturday, December 3, 2016 to witness this extraordinary event, cheer on our next generation of citizens, and enjoy learning about our local heritage.

— *Stephen D. Beck, RHS President*

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## Back in the day:

### Alone Mill

Construction of the steel bridge that once spanned the North (now Maury) River at Alone Mill, ca.1908 (photo courtesy of Anne McClung).



# Rockbridge Historical Society

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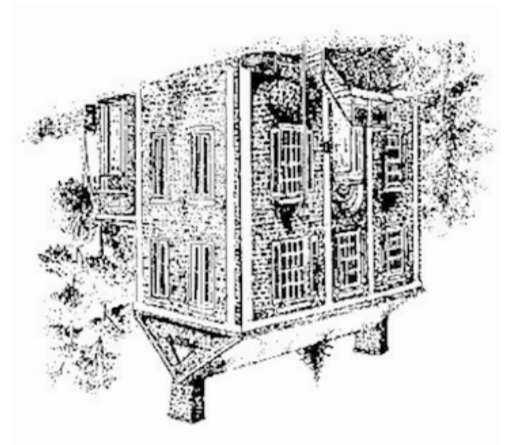
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**ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
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