

NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

May 2017

June Program

‘Collierstown: Rockbridge’s Gateway to the West’

On June 18, Dr. Horace Douty will share a slide presentation highlighting the people and past of Collierstown. Those with family ties to the area of western Rockbridge are especially encouraged to come and to share materials and stories to enrich our understanding of these legacies. The talk will be free and open to the public.

Program at a Glance

Theme: Collierstown

Date: Sunday, June 18

Time: 2:30 p.m., reception to follow

Location: Effinger Firehouse,
2824 Collierstown Road

Collierstown sits tight against North Mountain on a pioneer route for people traveling east-west through the steep hills. Early Rockbridge developer John Jordan built a wagon road through the area to move iron from his Lucy Selina Furnace to markets in the east; that road became part of the “Lexington and Covington Turnpike,” a section of the longer route between Richmond and Charleston, WV. With increasing traffic through the town, commerce moved in to supply travelers with lodging, clothing, and tools. Five general stores opened, water-powered mills turned out flour and lumber, and Collierstown enterprises manufactured boots and rifles, hats and wagons, leather and liquor (see photographs on Page 4).

As churches and schools sprang up along Collier’s Creek, the village became nearly self-sufficient, mining and harvesting the materials it needed, while attracting physicians, teachers, and farmers drawn to the fertile soil. A courthouse and Temperance Hall, singing schools and the Commoran finishing school boarding ladies from afar all brought cultural life and refinement to Collierstown in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the development of the Midland Trail (later designated Route 60) gradually took the traffic from the older turnpike, and Collierstown’s commercial activity dwindled and disappeared.

Today we appreciate the long family ties in the area together with dramatic stories of past residents. In 1809, native Jane Todd Crawford became the first woman to survive an ovariectomy – without anesthetic, no less – when Rockbridge physician Dr. Ephraim McDowell removed a 20-pound tumor from her abdomen. In another milestone, Dora Armstrong studied medicine at Johns Hopkins University before serving as a nurse missionary in Congo, saving thousands of children’s lives by inventing a peanut-based nutritional cake. William Armstrong, author of the best-selling novel “Sounder,” was also born and raised in Collierstown.



See Collierstown talk, Page 3

Pupils and teachers at the Collierstown School, 1908 (photo courtesy of W&L Special Collections).

Collections Spotlight

World War II medals of Rockbridge's Eugene Kyle Sweet

In May, RHS was honored to receive the bequest of military decorations awarded to lifelong Rockbridge resident Eugene “Gene” Kyle Sweet, including the Purple Heart, the Silver Star, and dog tags identifying his home as Lexington. Last fall, family members approached us about donating these treasured artifacts, taking particular note of our engagement with the Rockbridge and Virginia World War I and World War II Commemoration Commissions. We hope items like these will help RHS and its partners highlight aspects of military service that connect local histories to national and international campaigns, conflicts, and careers.

The eldest son of Andrew and Emma (Rowe) Sweet, Eugene was born in Steele's Tavern in 1918. The Sweets and their seven children later moved to Walkers Creek.

On September 2, 1941, three months before Pearl Harbor, Gene enlisted in the U.S. Army. After training, he shipped to Africa for the Allied invasion of Sicily, fought at the Battle of Anzio in the Italian Campaign, and was wounded in both actions. In Sicily in 1943, he was hit in his right leg by sniper fire. Soon after, he suffered a service-ending injury at Anzio when struck by machine gun fire up and down his left side. Gene returned to the U.S. on April 5, 1944, and was awarded the Silver Star during his recovery. His citation reads:

“[At Anzio] in November 1943, when his squad attacked a strongly defended German positions on a hill, Staff Sergeant Sweet personally destroyed two hostile machine gun nests and inflicted many casualties on the enemy. After successfully taking their objective, S/Sgt. Sweet and his squad were subjected to an intense enemy mortar and artillery barrage which killed one man and wounded every member of the squad with the exception of S/Sgt. Sweet. Despite the heavy hostile fire, he administered first aid to the wounded and assisted in carrying them back to safety, finally leaving him alone in the position. He continued to maintain his position until other squads arrived to support him in defending the area. His courage and concern for the welfare of his men reflect great credit to him and the armed forces.”

While still recovering at Ashford Hospital in White Sulphur Springs, WV, Gene married Mae Elizabeth Sweet on July 1, 1944, at the manse of the Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Rockbridge Baths. They would have two children, Betty Jean and Stanley Eugene. Rated 60% disabled as a result of his injuries, he spent the rest of his working life driving a delivery truck for Gulf Oil. Gene passed away in 1996, and is buried at Alone Cemetery near Kerrs Creek.

With the crucial support of the staff and resources of Washington and Lee’s Special Collections, RHS is proud to serve as steward for objects that bear witness to Rockbridge lives and legacies, keeping them secure but accessible for public research and programming. The Society depends on personal, familial, and organizational donations of historic papers, photographs and artifacts that support our uniquely local mission. RHS also relies on the work of volunteers to archive, organize, and exhibit its materials. And we count on your financial contributions to sustain these preservation efforts. Please consider how you might assist in this good cause.



Some of the medals earned by Eugene Kyle Sweet in World War II (family photo).

Thanks to our Supporters!

The recent RHS Annual Fund appeal has already produced the strongest early response in five years, reaching 70% of this year’s budgeted goal, thanks to the board’s new policy. Every donor is now a Contributing Member of RHS, with many responding to our challenge to increase their gifts by 25%. Thank you!

We deeply appreciate the confidence these contributions demonstrate, and the other ways in which member skills and time support our efforts. As the 2017 campaign continues, we hope that all our members – and new friends in the community – will extend RHS’ capacity to honor generations past by preserving their legacies for generations ahead.

Letter from the Executive Director

Preservation

National Preservation Month annually brings to May a chance to reflect on the past while keeping a purposeful eye to the future. In the world of public history, *preservation* is one of our most grounding principles and suggestive words.

There are many active verbs that fuel the enterprise of making the past present, highlighting its value for those to come. The historic origins of words aren't their only index of meaning, framed by context and connotation alike, yet they often help spotlight associations over time. In meaningful ways, an "archaeology" of words reveals their cultural history. To summon a few in the orbit: *Restore* is rooted in the phrase, to build again. *Protect*, anchored in the sense of covering, from the front. *Sustain*, to hold, from beneath. *Archive* originally pertained to the keeping of governmental records, before expanding to other sacred canons and secular sources.

All are key terms in our understanding and various strategies used for historical assessment, interpretation, preservation, and education. But at the core of the word *preserve* is a unique force: the call to serve, and more specifically, the call to serve *before*. Service that leans ahead, while grounded in the past, is critical to our institutional needs, growth, and succession over time.

The audience we serve well knows the value of preservation and service at large. But other questions lie deeper: *What*, when setting needed priorities, is most worth preserving? *Whom* are we preserving things for? And, no less important, if often unspoken: *why* are we preserving them?

As this newsletter variously notes, sometimes our mission seeks to honor the service of others, through the artifacts we've been entrusted with to preserve the family, neighborly, and national memories of WWII war hero Eugene Keefe (helping credit, in turn, the commitments and sacrifice of other Rockbridge veterans over the centuries). Many of our programs seek to illuminate both the habitats and habits of everyday life as they've evolved in Buena Vista, Diamond Hill, and Natural Bridge Station. We also shape and share the stories of Rockbridge County through different curricular units we've developed for area schools – centered on Lewis & Clark, or local African-American histories and arts, or Hurricane Camille – to complement the lifelong learning experiences of museum visits, member field trips, and walking tours for all ages.

As May brings spring greenery, we might also think about integrating historic preservation and natural conservation. At the March conference of the Virginia Association of Museums, I chaired a panel titled, "Bridging History and Nature, through Public and Private Partnerships." I'd organized the session to recognize and promote local and statewide initiatives coupling historic and environmental preservation. The manager of the Monacan Village at Natural Bridge State Park spoke on interpretive strategies for understanding natural resources in Rockbridge County and the Valley corridor. The Henricus Historical Foundation's Director addressed the recreational and ecological resources of the 800-acre Dutch Gap Conservation Area as an asset that complements their neighboring 1611 living history village, Henricus, Virginia's second English settlement, where Pocahontas was also held captive and baptized. And the Visitor Experience Director for the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation offered an overview of the planning that sustains partner organizations and citizens in Rockbridge and across the Commonwealth.

Consider Rockbridge County's resources to preserve and promote similar joint service. RHS shares collections and programming with Natural Bridge State Park and the Miller's House Museum. Historical factors bear on considerations of removing the dam at Jordan's Point and interpretive signage along the Chessie Trail. RHS is involved with local environmental conservation groups and we advocate for preservation of local historic structures and districts.

Through all RHS programs, publications, and partnerships, the words and images and sites we preserve will continue to serve us, and to serve you: not only because they still merely exist, but because they enable. Going forward, what can you help to *pre-serve* in our area? And whom can you connect with in the venture? How, in short, can you help us 'serve before,' in caring for and cultivating the future rewards of Rockbridge?

— Eric Wilson

Historic photographs from Collierstown



The photographs above depict Painter's Mill (left) and a farm near Collierstown (images courtesy of Washington and Lee Special Collections). See story on Page 1.

Education Springs Forth, in Spring

During the busy run of school testing and term papers, RHS has worked hard to extend our educational outreach to develop interactive elements to school curricula and provide an authentic, local complement to the broader state standards.

We visited Natural Bridge Elementary School for the first time (just days after our 250+ person program there on Natural Bridge Station), bringing some newly designed fifth-grade projects with our Lewis & Clark Discovery Trunk, and inviting two National Park Service Rangers to help in the cause. In May, we adapted our third annual "Histories and Stories of Diamond Hill" two-day program and tour, to include a pass down our Righteous and Rascals historic pavers on Main Street.

And stay tuned for our August newsletter which will describe three exciting university student projects that found their way to us, ranging from historical tourism to Hurricane Camille to paranormal histories of Lexington, Rockbridge, and VMI. All are exciting ways to educate our community through public history!



As part of their Virginia Studies curriculum, fourth grade students in Waddell Elementary's new library eagerly watch presentations on the local histories of music, dance, architecture, and African-American businesses and social organizations.



Washington and Lee Professor Alison Bell leads students in a game illustrating the different commercial and cultural uses of Lexington's historic "Knights of Pythias" building through two centuries.

The Proceedings are Coming!

The 14th Volume of *The Proceedings of the Rockbridge Historical Society* has just arrived from the printers. Its articles were drawn from selected RHS programs 2006-2010, with an index of presentations given 2011-2016. Topics include the desegregation of schools and integration of area churches, as well as social life and leisure in the 19th Century Valley; biographical features on Moses Ezekiel, Robert E. Lee, Matthew Fontaine Maury, Francis H. Smith, and the “Forgotten Heroes of the Buffalo Side;” as well as thematic surveys of Lexington in 1870, the horse at VMI, and ‘Secret Lives of Rockbridge Cemeteries.’ The volume is helpfully indexed, interspersed with lively bits of “Did you Know?” curiosities and trivia, and its cover boasts a beautiful painting of a Rockbridge County landscape.

Co-Editors David and Marian Harrison Novak deserve lasting thanks for their careful work over many months, helping authors to adapt their presentations into more fully developed, annotated articles.

As we transition to new forms of digital and print publications, RHS plans to distribute free copies of this volume to all current members. We hope it will further inspire your passion for Rockbridge and good fellowship past, and spur you to share our work with others.

Collierstown talk

Continued from Page 1

Though not himself native to Collierstown, speaker Horace Douty proudly notes that his first pastorate was a five-year term at Collierstown Presbyterian Church.

Born and educated in Rockbridge, he graduated from Washington and Lee, followed by post-graduate studies at Wake Forest University Medical School. After earning his doctorate from Union Theological Seminary, he served a long pastoral career across Virginia and North Carolina.

Dr. Douty retired to Rockbridge County, and currently serves as pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church. At the age of 70, he published “History Lessons from a Country Church,” with volume two, “Rockbridge Heroes,” forthcoming.

He remarks that when he first lived in Collierstown, “I loved the scenery so much that I bought land here over the years. Collierstown provided rich, uncommon experience to smooth the rough edges of a greenhorn preacher. I made lifetime friendships. I know about haunted houses, unsolved murders and unrequited love because I lived in Collierstown, an enchanting section of Planet Earth.”

New Volunteer Chair Wants... YOU!

It’s my pleasure to join the RHS Board and coordinate our volunteer efforts for the Campbell House. We’re currently looking for ways to bring more visitors to our Campbell House and its gardens. If you love Rockbridge history and the chance to share its stories with others, then volunteering at the Campbell House is the place for you.

We don’t expect you to come with historical expertise, just warm hospitality and enthusiasm. Over time, you’ll reward your own curiosity and sense of community, too. As you welcome people to visit our collections and browse our books and maps, you can enjoy the chance to read from our library of local history, visit with our other volunteers and board members, and learn from our visitors through the questions and family histories they bring. Volunteering just a few hours a month can prove a key asset in furthering our mission, especially as the busy summer season picks up.

Please contact me at hokie@hughes.net or 540-460-3365, and we can develop a schedule that suits you within our current hours: Fridays and Saturdays, 12-4. We hope you’ll join our team!

– Anne Herring, Volunteer Chair



Anne Herring

A native of Rockbridge County, Anne is employed with the USDA as Virginia’s Rural Development Coordinator and feels blessed to contribute her talents each day to improve the quality of life for rural Americans. An alumna of Lexington High School, she graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in Agricultural Economics. She describes herself as a true farm girl at heart, with deep roots in the agricultural sector. She resides at Herring Hall Bed and Breakfast as a fourth-generation owner, continuing a family tradition in the local hospitality industry. Her ancestors operated Herring Hall as a famous Inn and Restaurant from 1926 – 1970.

Rockbridge Historical Society

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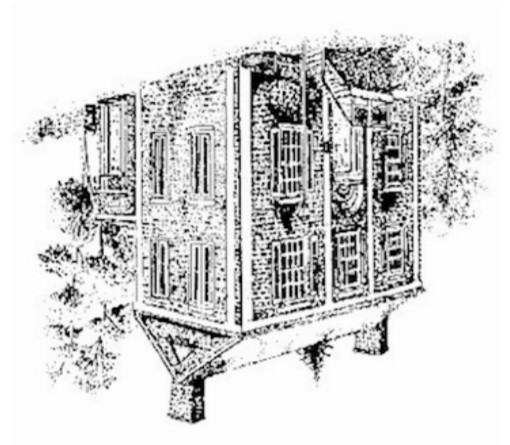
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