

NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

September 2014

September Program

Lexington's other woman poet: Sara Henderson Smith

While Lexington's Margaret Junkin Preston, wife of VMI professor J. T. L. Preston, is widely recognized as a southern woman poet, her friend Sara Henderson Smith is less well known. Sara, wife of VMI Superintendent Francis H. Smith, was also a poet, though few of her verses were published before her death in 1884.

One of the reasons for Sara's obscurity as a poet outside the circle of her family and friends may be her emphasis devotional poetry. She and her husband were devout Evangelical Episcopalians, and most of her writings reflect her religious beliefs and concerns. However, this was more typical of southern women poets in the nineteenth century than was the broader outlook of Margaret Preston. During the Civil War, Sara also wrote a number of patriotic southern poems as well as the start of an epic poem on the role of VMI in the war, material that understandably faded into obscurity after the war and was not included in the book of poems published by her family after her death.

Original handwritten volumes of Sara's works were recently given to Col. Dooley, who has studied them for what they reveal about Sara and her world. He was also given an oil portrait believed to have been painted about 1835 by Robert Weir, instructor of art at USMA. Col. Dooley has donated the painting to VMI.

Col. Dooley's presentation add to our understanding of Sara Smith and of her husband as well as the beliefs of Evangelicals in Lexington in the mid-19th century.



Portrait of Sara Henderson Smith, taken from her book of poems published posthumously in 1884.

Program at a Glance

Theme: Sara Henderson Smith

Date: Monday, September 29

Location: Turman Room, Preston Library at VMI

Time: 7:30 p.m.

Col. Dooley is retired from VMI where, for 30 years, he taught history and variously served as Public Information Officer, Director of the VMI Museum, and Special Assistant to the Superintendent. He has written extensively on the history of VMI and on mid-nineteenth century Lexington, among other subjects.

New exhibit coming to Campbell House

Images of the Rock Bridge: From Jefferson to Miley to Today

The Rockbridge Historical Society will open a new exhibit in late September or early October called "Images of the Rock Bridge: From Jefferson to Miley to Today." The exhibit will combine art prints and photographs, old and new, to depict the ways in which Natural Bridge has been portrayed over the years.

It will feature prints by Edward Church, David Johnson and Edward Hicks, as well as photographs by Michael Miley and others. Text will address the history of the Bridge, its geology, and curiosities about the Bridge, as well as a section discussing the Bridge today.

Save the Date!

RHS Gala 75th Anniversary Dinner and Program

Monday November 17, 2014 at the newly renovated R. E. Lee Hotel. Details to follow soon.

A letter from the Executive Director

PAST TENSE, FUTURE PERFECT

Dear Readers,

Let's begin, in flashback to younger days, with a grammar lesson. Verbs today.

PAST TENSE (*we accomplished; she wrote*): actions both completed and contained, the activity is discrete and definitive, bounded and assured.

FUTURE PERFECT (*we will have accomplished; she will have written*): a leap forward to look back, the action settles somewhere between hopeful expectation, and anticipated accomplishment.

It's the grammar of everyday life, coupling reflection and anticipation. Like an Anniversary itself, the pair looks back in memory, and forward to new prospects and goals.

In the closing lines of her award-winning novel, "White Teeth," Zadie Smith offers a keen caution in writing the lives around and before us. Torn between great expectations and generations past, Smith's narrator challenges our easy tendencies to "speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect." It's a clever inversion, as compressed as Dickens' own historic look back at the French Revolution: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." But more profoundly, Smith points us to the dueling attitudes and experience that can be equally fraught: not only to what 'will have happened' (at some more remote remove), but what 'actually happened' (however wickedly or wonderfully perceived). Hers is a shrewd recognition that what we understand to have happened, or hope to have happened, is shaped by our own social positions and dispositions.

In a twist on Smith's premise, local historians – and more particularly, local historical societies – have sometimes had to answer the charge that their stories and histories run less with the wicked, than with the sainted, our Rascals nudged aside for the Righteous. Rosy local lenses, the story goes, may leave us to rest too warmly in the nostalgia of familiar haunts, and honored family. On the other hand, the wider academic arcs of national and international history seem tuned to the broader crises and fissures of politics, economics, war, or the contingencies of race, gender, religion. These characterizations are of course oversimplified, "wicked lies" in their own right. Whether 'micro' or 'macro,' our historical approaches best benefit from a sense of balance that helps to more fully appreciate the lives and colors marking our past.

In 1939, a group of citizens rallied to stop the demolition of the 'Nannie Jordan House,' Lexington's oldest surviving building. Though their specific efforts failed, that crisis established a common chord that founded a Society dedicated to archiving and conserving papers and objects of local interest; to illuminating Rockbridge history through meetings and public programs; and to emphasizing the importance of historic preservation and education in the community at large.

Today, RHS enjoys a reach that's at once local *and* broad, whether joined in advocacy for the preservation of Natural Bridge, or partnered with the Virginia Association of Museums to advance the work of history and the arts through the Commonwealth. To paraphrase Isaac Newton: if we see further, it's because we stand on the shoulders of our local and lasting civic giants. From that perch, we have great opportunity and responsibility alike. We'd be a bit naïve as individuals, perhaps even institutionally irresponsible, to fully believe the future of the RHS to be dreamily "perfect." But a supportive membership and purposeful leadership to move us ahead – to return to the grammatical cue – in the more measured footprints of the PRESENT PROGRESSIVE tense: actively honoring a targeted mission, aiming high but planning feasibly, realistically prepared to adapt to circumstances the future hasn't yet revealed.

Come 2089, even RHS' youngest members won't find themselves in Rockbridge. But as the Civil War sesquicentennials wind down, we should do all we can to ensure a sesquicentennial for the Rockbridge Historical Society, another 75 years down the road. We're very grateful for the enthusiasm, financial support, and active historical contributions you've invested in our region, and in one of the oldest historical societies of its kind in Virginia. Echoing Zadie Smith once more, RHS' judicious work helps us dodge the pitfalls of proverbial myths, helps halt the speed of projected lies. Its legacy of care and curiosity not only highlights the complex, distinctive heritage of Rockbridge County, but it also heralds the joint promise of our communities' continuities and new opportunities ahead.

Eric Wilson
Executive Director

Follow the Dragoons: RHS Helmet Honored and Digitized

One of RHS' rarest artifacts, a helmet of the kind worn by local cavalry troopers in the Wars of 1812 and the Civil War, is among the nominees for the Virginia Association of Museums TopTen Endangered Artifacts Program, which promotes preservation of Virginia's historic treasures as well as public advocacy for its sponsoring institutions.



The helmet belonging to RHS (photo credit: Dave Pfaff, Washington and Lee University IQ Center).

A Rockbridge family heirloom, the distinctive dragoon helmet was donated to the RHS in 1949, and remains protectively stored with the Society's most historic papers at Washington and Lee's Special Collections.

To local audiences more familiar with re-enactors' kepis of the 1860s, or the tricornered hats of Revolutionary iconography, the dramatic pluming and brass chinstraps of the "Napoleonic" helmet may initially strike viewers not only as fierce, but as oddly foreign. However, local military rolls and comparison to helmets from national antiques dealers indicate that this helmet was characteristic of the Virginia Militia, whose Rockbridge Volunteers were led by Lt. Col. James McDowell in the War of 1812. Later evidence affirms that these cavalry helmets were 'recycled' for more than 50 years thereafter during civic militia musters and, most dramatically, at the Battle of Manassas in 1861.

Research and presentation of the helmet – too fragile for most public encounters – has been enabled by the cutting-edge technologies used in the museum field today. WLU's new Integrative and Quantitative (IQ) Center has constructed a digital 3-D model that has not only assisted remote consultations with curators and conservators, but is interactively accessible online. Spin, zoom, and click through the annotated tags at: <http://tinyurl.com/3D-DragoonHelmet-RHS>

More traditionally, 19th century documents and living-history interpretations have also been shared by local Civil War re-enactors. During the upcoming Hunter's Raid re-enactments (Sep. 11-14 at the Virginia Horse Center), we're eager to draw on the expressed attention, and prospective support of that seasoned cohort. Details may be found at www.horsecenter.org/Events/September-2014/Sesquicentennial-Celebration.aspx.

Whether through temporary, carefully encased display at such events, or through the fluid manipulations of a digital tablet, we hope RHS programming will help this emblem of the past become more fully visible to a range of 21st century eyes.

Thanks to Washington and Lee University Special Collections

Quite simply, neither the Natural Bridge exhibit soon to open, nor the digital unveiling of our rare Rockbridge Dragoons helmet could have come about without the research resources, expertise, and time afforded by the staff at Washington and Lee's Special Collections.

RHS remains fortunate to have so secure and so professionally managed a facility to store our most precious papers and records. And we're all the more fortunate to enjoy the leadership of Head of Special Collections and RHS Board Member Tom Camden, and his

ever responsive staff: Lisa McCown, Seth McCormick-Goodhart, and Byron Faidley.

Would you like to help advance our common aims? Volunteers are needed to organize some of the many boxes of historic letters, papers and photographs belonging to RHS and held in W&L vaults, so that the materials can be properly catalogued. No special training is needed, just the gift of your time and patience working under the guidance of staff, and a readiness to learn more about the details that shape our local heritage. Take history in your hands!

Slate of RHS officers for 2015

The RHS Board presents the following list of nominees for officers of the society. The slate will be voted on at the September 29 meeting at 7:30 p.m.

President: Steve Beck

Vice President: Jane Brooke

Secretary: Patte Wood

Treasurer: Rich Hubbard

VP for Property: David Stull

Volunteers needed

Open hours for Campbell House are 10-2 Wednesday through Friday. Our ability to staff the facility depends on volunteers to welcome visitors. No historic expertise is needed, merely a spirit of welcome and your passion for what makes our historic communities so special. To volunteer, please contact Jane Brooke, VP and Chair of Volunteers, at jlbrooke@embarqmail.com or 463-6566.

From Rockbridge to Liberia: The Life and legacy of Othello Richards

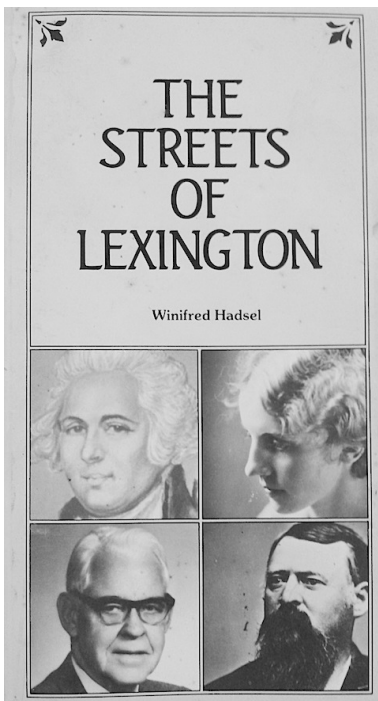
On Saturday, September 13, Neely Young, RHS Board member and author of "Ripe for Emancipation: Rockbridge and Southern Anti-Slavery from Revolution to Civil War," will be giving a presentation on the life and legacy of Othello Richards.

Richards was a slave owned and freed in Rockbridge County by the McDowell/Taylor family, then ordained as a Methodist Minister, and an early emissary to Liberia. The program is part of a series of events that Neely has arranged for the weekend and will be attended by a reunion of American and Liberian descendants of Othello Richards.

The presentation, co-sponsored by RHS, will be at the Randolph Street United Methodist Church at 2:00 p.m.

Waddell class takes to the streets

In June, a group of local 4th graders capped their year-long course in Virginia History not merely by mouse-clicking their way through the required SOL test, but by taking to the streets of Lexington.



Seeking a more interactive coda for her young historians' experience, Waddell Elementary School's Frances Richardson approached RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson about collaborating on a week-long unit that would specifically develop students' awareness and appetites for local history. Together, they coupled a presentation on more general histories of area roads and urban development with more personalized opportunities for independent study and creative 'navigation.' Small groups of students chose a street within walking distance of Waddell that they would research and present through original writing, maps and art. Armed with copies of Winifred Hadsel's landmark survey, "The Streets of Lexington" (published by RHS in 1985), students were excited to learn more about the names and lives behind the street-signs, as they both read about and rambled through the neighborhood.

Most memorably – and in fitting echo of the RHS January program on Cy Twombly – one enterprising pair of students walked down Barclay Lane to locate and draw the house where the artist had lived. As they were sketching, they were invited in to see the house and former studio space as it was being renovated, bridging past and present generations, art and history alike.

On a Saturday in October (date to be announced), RHS will welcome the community to Campbell House so that these young citizens can publicly share their posters, drawings, and research into our local histories.

Memberships for 2015

It isn't too soon to renew your membership for 2015. Dues support this newsletter, programs, and other important activities, many of them educational and open to the public.

Annual dues are \$30 for individuals or families and \$50 for businesses. Of course, donations in any amount are always welcome and may be tax deductible.

Dues can be paid on line with a credit card at www.rockhist.org. Or send a check to RHS, P.O. Box 1409, Lexington, VA 24450. Make checks to RHS and write "dues" on the memo line.

Your early response saves us the postage to send reminders.

You can also help us reach you efficiently by including your email address for our database.

About those shutters on Campbell House



The wood trim on Campbell house was stripped and repainted in July, but work continues on the always-closed shutters facing Randolph Street.

In case you ever wondered: Behind those shutters there are no windows. The original design for Mr. Sloan's large house included rows of windows on the front, facing Washington Street, but none on the side. To provide better architectural balance, Mr. Sloan created recesses in the wall to accept a set of shutters in a closed position, giving a visual impression of windows without having to pay for them.

The society is grateful for a grant jointly supported by the Historic Lexington Foundation and the City of Lexington to help RHS undertake this important maintenance work.

Give Remarkable Rockbridge in our 75th year

Help us celebrate the society's accomplishments by giving "Remarkable Rockbridge," the landmark history of our county, to a family member, neighbor, or out-of-town guest.

Or extend that legacy right here: Rockbridge's youngest residents attend twelve public schools in Buena Vista, Lexington, and Rockbridge County. Nominate a school and endow a copy of the book to be sent in your name to a school library or their 4th grade Virginia Studies and 11th grade U.S. History classrooms.

You can order a copy and pay for it on line at www.RockHist.org or use the form below.

Order Form for Remarkable Rockbridge

Mail this form with check to Rockbridge Historical Society, P.O. Box 1409, Lexington VA 24450. Books may be sent by mail, picked up at Campbell House or hand-delivered locally by arrangement.

Order details: Number of copies _____

Total for books at \$26.25 including Virginia tax \$ _____

Add \$5.00 for each volume to be sent by mail \$ _____

Total cost \$ _____

Mail to: Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ E-mail _____

Rockbridge Historical Society www.rockhist.org

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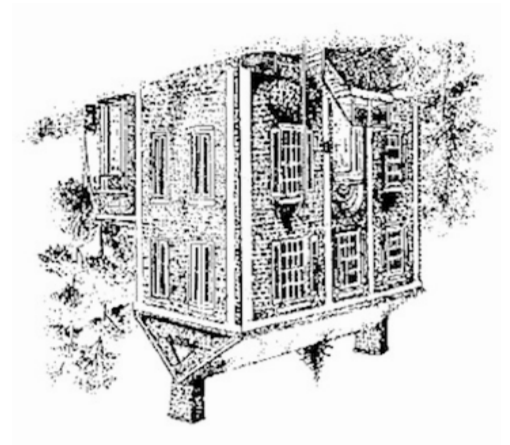
Mary Skutt

Executive Director

Eric Wilson

Newsletter

Sally Nunneley



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ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
EST. 1939

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