

NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

September 2015

September Program

Four centuries of visiting Natural Bridge: From Jefferson's family to tourism today

On Sunday, September 20, the Rockbridge Historical Society will present a double bill of eminent speakers to chronicle the history of visitor experience at Natural Bridge. Fittingly, the program will meet at the historic Natural Bridge Hotel itself, in their recently renovated Washington Hall. A reception will follow the 3:00 p.m. presentation; both are free and open to the public.

Extending from the RHS exhibit, "Images of the Rock Bridge," on display at Campbell House through 2015, the speakers will canvas visitor accounts over the centuries, beginning with Jefferson's purchase of the Bridge in 1774 and including a memorable 1817 letter written by his granddaughter, Cornelia, as they traveled to the landmark from Jefferson's Poplar Forest retreat.

Over the years, the site was transformed into a 19th century resort (illustration on Page 5) and later a nationally advertised attraction featuring amenities such as an indoor heated swimming pool and an air conditioned cafeteria. Now the Virginia Conservation Legacy Fund has renovated the historic structures, created museum displays, and expanded recreational activities in preparation for donating the Bridge and its surrounding acreage to become a state park.

Program at a Glance

Topic: Visiting Natural Bridge
Date: Sunday, September 20
Place: Washington Hall
Natural Bridge Hotel
Times: Program 3:00 p.m.
Reception to follow.



Dr. J. Jefferson Looney

The program will be opened by Dr. J. Jefferson Looney, Editor of the *Thomas Jefferson Papers: Retirement Series* at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. Having worked on the project at Monticello for more than 15 years, Dr. Looney is recognized as a leading archival expert on Jefferson's writings. He has recently been instrumental in digitally indexing thousands of letters in the ongoing effort to make Jefferson's voluminous, wide-ranging personal correspondence more available to scholars and digital audiences around the world. For this program, Looney's attention to Jefferson's family and post-presidential years will provide a unique and intimate angle on Jefferson's 50 years of ownership of and visits to Natural Bridge, which he famously described as the "most sublime of nature's works."

The second speaker will be Dr. Jurretta Heckscher, Reference Specialist for Early American History at the Library of Congress, known to many in our community as an advocate for preservation of the Bridge and author of a monograph on its narrative and visual histories. As a collector of Bridge memorabilia herself, Heckscher was also a vital support in the development of the RHS exhibit, including the loan of a rare 19th-century print of colorfully dressed women visiting the Bridge, an image you can see in the entry to Campbell House. Dr. Heckscher will also bring some distinctive items from her collection for guests to view – from unique artifacts and prints to playful souvenir *tchotchkes* – as an index of the Bridge's international status as natural icon and tourist attraction.



Dr. Jurretta Heckscher

NOTE: Washington Hall is located to the rear of the main hotel. Accessible parking is located around back, with restrooms in the main hotel reached via a breezeway. For more information, contact RHS at 540-464-1058 or rochist@hotmail.com.

Executive Director's Letter: Souvenirs

Like many of you, I am a history geek. A bit of a packrat, too. Sometimes with wife and kid, sometimes flying solo, summer vacation itineraries become dotted with historical sites and museums. Backpacks and suitcases return stuffed anew with books, postcards, brochures that will extend the memory, and new curiosities, into byways of the past and the local communities we visit. I'm not big on snowglobes, but I like a good souvenir.

This summer our travels took us through the Midwest, heading through the Ohio River Valley (as the Lewis and Clark's expedition once did, in a very different vehicle). While staying in Cincinnati, we visited the National Underground Railroad Museum and Freedom Center, an extraordinary museum that weaves national narratives of Escape, Emancipation, and Equality, with the local narratives of its gateway city, along with international parallels for freedom struggles the world round. Among the many virtual and material displays: a fully reconstructed of a "slave pen," square in the central atrium, built from the very timbers into which men, women and children were locked while awaiting a sale across the 'Freedom River' river in Kentucky.

Westward Ho, the State Historical Museum of Iowa's sesquicentennial exhibit on the Civil War held up a fascinating mirror to our local and state commemorations: its flags, its letters, and its sabers; the mementos from the home front, and the numbing statistics of service and loss that found Iowa (while obviously smaller in scale than Virginia) nevertheless to provide higher percentage of soldiers per state population than any other state in the War, North or South, with fully a third of them deaths or casualties. Most memorable for me will be a the souvenir belatedly claimed by an Iowa soldier, imprisoned in a South Carolina Prisoner of War camp, who twice escaped by cutting his way through the wallboards. And though twice recaptured, he was granted permission after the war to return and saw out as a souvenir the very planks he'd twice, and more urgently, cut through. Indeed, the wooden remnants of that prison wall and the four-walled slave pen still engrain their own stories, even as such structures may be variously reused, preserved, or demolished into the stuff of memory.

Of course, period letters and legal documents, contemporary education programs, documentary films, even "artifact apps" remain key means through which we re-present such histories to our own present, even when we can't take them with us. Both the means and the matter of history touch us all differently. I think on my ten-year-old navigating the interactive touch screens at Monticello; a veteran from Afghanistan watching the documentary on human trafficking in Cincinnati; poring, myself, over the captions of an artifact's particulars and provenance. But for all those treasures we have to leave behind, good public history can provide us the postcards and publications, the soundtracks and maps, the memorable imprints of mind's eye that not only help bring those experiences back home, but help connect them to our local place and present.

Vacations do, as ever, come to an end, bringing these encounters back to Rockbridge. We also return to revisit a range of eras, as the sesquicentennials of Appomattox or Lee's arrival in Lexington begin to give way to centennials of World War One, or as the Cold War enters more fully into the span of our mission to "preserve and promote the history of Rockbridge County," as the decades tick on. The work of our Society continues to reach, of course, beyond the memorials of conflict and the journeys they involve, to those of the family hearth, of industry, of the arts and commerce that continue to define our neck of the Valley, and the means through which we bring its past to memorably to heart, materially to hand.

When people come to visit us at Campbell House, they're most frequently interested in taking away one of our 18th or 19th century maps of Rockbridge County. Others purchase the stories and photographs wrapped in a copy of our landmark 21st century history, "Remarkable Rockbridge." Some glow to leave with the inscription of another genealogical branch on the family tree. But even when you stay put yourself, you can help us share our stories with others. Gifts to or from our Society come in all manner of support. Please take a moment to think about why you value our County and our legacies, and consider what 'takeaways' you can extend to those around you. Bringing a visitor to see our own exhibits and other local museums. Share one of our books with a local family member, or one more far-flung. Enjoy the joint fellowship of inviting a neighbor to our programs, or to join our membership. In meaningful ways, these are all good souvenirs. And we hope you keep finding them in Rockbridge, and sharing them in turn, through your many journeys.

-- Eric Wilson

Drawing on Diamond Hill: History beyond the classroom

The end of any school year brings its run of review, tests, and closure. But it can also bring the occasion for new prospects, pathways, and curiosity. The state's fourth-grade Social Studies curriculum focuses on Virginia history – a close match to RHS' focus on local and regional history – providing a foundation for fifth and 11th graders' broader study of US history. In 2014, aiming to couple the Society's mission to those broader arcs of study, RHS piloted a week-long project that had students investigate their school's surrounding neighborhood, writing about and illustrating some of its distinctive buildings, residents, and street names. In June, that initiative moved into new terrain with the development of a station-to-station walking tour and a series of multimedia presentations that drew from the stories and histories of Diamond Hill across the 19th and 20th centuries.

Preparation for these activities drew on the materials produced for the "Dialogue with Diamond Hill" exhibit, cosponsored in 2012 by the Historic Lexington Foundation and RHS, along with an earlier RHS display on the Knights of Pythias building, supported by a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.

More than 60 students from Waddell Elementary school and a dozen parents participated in a two-day project that included historical background on the neighborhood, its schools and places of worship, its homes, businesses and social halls, as well a variety of spiritual, artistic and musical traditions that enriched the growth of the Lexington's African-American community. Educational Outreach Chair Mary Harvey-Halseth warmed up students for the tour with a spirited dance session that drew on the period dance styles that enlivened the parties at the Pythias Hall.

In-school presentations included a student-edited film that featured a conversation between RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson, and HLF President Beverly Tucker.

Their discussion coupled reflections on the oral histories Beverly recorded with longtime Diamond Hill residents, intercut with images of her original paintings to accompany those narratives. Students were also glad to hear stories about someone their own age, as City Council Member Marilyn Alexander spoke of her own experiences growing up in the neighborhood and attending Lylburn Downing School. At the four stations of the walking tour itself, Mary and Eric were joined by HLF Secretary Alison Bell and former RHS Officer Dick Halseth, who brought their own expertise in oral histories and community research.

Fresh from their run of state standardized testing, students clearly welcomed the opportunity to engage history through so many different media, and to draw and annotate their own brochures featuring First Baptist Church, the Knights of Pythias Hall, Blandome, Willson-Walker House, and Lylburn Downing School. The public is invited to view some of their inventive representations of this historic community, on display at Campbell House.

Whether through such community-based connections or in preparing new historical materials, RHS plans to extend these types of projects to other schools and other neighborhoods in the years ahead.



Students on Diamond Hill Tour watch a historical video with Professor Alison Bell of WLU, Secretary of the Historic Lexington Foundation. (Photo by Kit Huffman, News-Gazette)

Volunteer profile

Harry Wilson Hamilton III

Harry Hamilton decided he would like to live in the beautiful, green state of Virginia after his mother's death in 2009, when he drove from San Antonio, Texas, to Staunton to see his sister, Mary Ann Stripling.



Harry Hamilton

They knew that their paternal grandfather had graduated from Washington and Lee University in 1904 and his father from Washington College in 1870, both becoming Presbyterian ministers. After several years of research, they have found family members here as far back as ten generations. His sister worked with the Beverley Daughters of the American Revolution to find that Colonel George Moffett and Sarah Martha McDowell were

their 5th great-grandparents, and that Sarah's parents, Captain John McDowell and Magdalena Woods McDowell, were considered the first settlers in the Borden Grant after John McDowell surveyed it in 1737.

Harry says, "That alone was amazing, but became just one of many gems found in this thrilling family history treasure hunt." He plans to continue looking for family members past and present and for more wonderful historical information using the assets provided by the Rockbridge Historical Society.

He continues, "I did not know until I lived in Rockbridge County how deep my family roots are here or how much my many grandparents contributed to the growth of this country with their time, talent, treasure and spiritual commitment to God. I hope to continue their legacy of giving by volunteering at the Rockbridge Historical Society. Now I know why Rockbridge County, Virginia truly feels like home."

Board member and Programs chair

Reed Belden

Reed Belden returns to the RHS Board as its new Programs Chair. A proud Cornhusker, Reed graduated from the University of Nebraska with a degree in chemical engineering. He then worked for more than 30 years with Allied Chemical (now Honeywell) before retiring in 1986 as Vice President and General Manager of an operating unit.

After buying property in Kerr's Creek, Reed moved here in 1993 and has been very active in the Rockbridge community. He is a Past Secretary of RHS and Past President of the Historic Lexington Foundation, having initiated the memorial for Pam Simpson, another vital leader in both organizations.



Reed Belden

A President of the Rockbridge Area Hospice, Reed has also served as an officer in a variety of local organizations, including Habitat for Humanity, Sunrise Rotary, the Mental Health Advisory Board, Yellow Brick Road, and is an Elder in the Lexington Presbyterian Church. As President of the Rockbridge Antique Auto Club, he also brings to RHS a particularly "mobile" interest in historical preservation.

Reed's leadership in the Programs Committee has already demonstrated his passion for the small communities and legacies that dot Rockbridge County across a range of historical eras. The committee aims to harness the energies and interests of the RHS Board with the Society's general membership, steering a course to some new topics, new voices, and new types of organizational collaborations that jointly engage Rockbridge's many histories.

Upcoming event

The Amazing Legacy of James E. Hanger, Civil War Soldier

Civil War Roundtable, Wed. Sep.16, VMI Nichols Engineering Building Auditorium, 7:30 PM.

Author Bob O'Connor will recount anecdotes from his recent book by that title. Hanger lost a leg in the battle at Phillippi, Virginia (now West Virginia), on June 3, 1861, thus becoming the first amputee of the Civil War. He lived in Churchville and was a member of the 14th Virginia Cavalry, the unit in which the Rockbridge Historical Society's "Dragoon Helmet" was worn. Unhappy with his Yankee-made peg leg, he built his own articulated prosthesis, and in 1861 opened an artificial limb factory in Staunton. Today, the company he founded is the largest manufacturer of artificial limbs in the United States.

Robert E. Lee in Lexington 150 years later:

Remembering his years as president of Washington College

On October 2, 1865, Robert E. Lee was sworn in as the President of Washington College, a position he held until his death five years later. His service to what is now Washington and Lee University will be commemorated at WLU throughout 2015 with a range of talks by historians, journalists, educational leaders, and musicians. In addition, there will be performances and special exhibits at Lee Chapel and at WLU Library's Special Collections, both featuring items from RHS' own holdings.

Along with these new interpretive displays, Fall highlights include: a Sep. 19 children's program about Lee and his horse Traveller; an October 1 address by author and columnist David Brooks on history, policy and higher education; WLU President Ken Ruscio's State of the University address on the very day of the October 2 anniversary; Jonathan Horn on "Lee at Washington College: The Link and the Legacy" on October 12; and a commemorative concert on October 11 featuring 19th Century music expert and composer Bobby Horton, whose scores for 16 Ken Burns films include "The Civil War."

For more on these and other events, many of which will be livestreamed and archived through the WLU website, go to <http://tinyurl.com/PresidentLee150thWLU>.



A Picnic at Natural Bridge, *Harpers Weekly* 1888.

Rockbridge Historical Society www.rockhist.org

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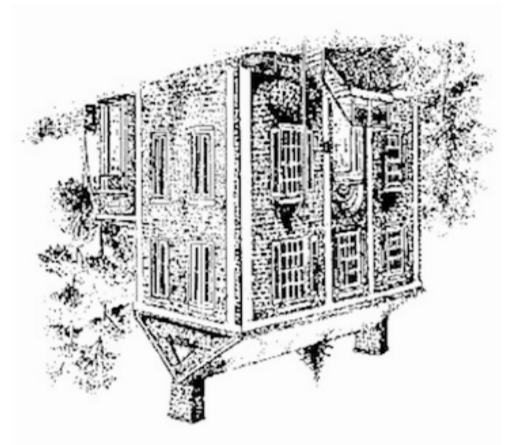
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Newsletter

Sally Nunneley



Campbell House
Washington & Randolph Streets
P.O. Drawer 1409
Lexington, Virginia 24450-1409

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