

***Dressed in History: Civil War Soldiers, Sewing Ladies,  
Jewish and Federal Relief Societies  
Join RHS on Apple Day, Oct. 20***

**--Eric Wilson, RHS Executive Director**

In the busy press of Fall, could you use some ‘Relief’? Might you ‘Stitch’ your sense of the Present more meaningfully into the ‘Patterns’ of the Past? Would your own community service today be enriched by fuller appreciation of such efforts 150 years ago? On Saturday, Oct. 20, 11:00AM – 2:00PM, you can weave more distant histories into the ‘Fabric of Everyday Life.’ A series of costumed, living history performances is at hand to transport you to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the heart of historic Lexington.

The Rockbridge Historical Society will again partner with VMI’s Stonewall Jackson House to bring an additional interactive, interpersonal element to the long-running festive traditions of Apple Day. When invited last year to join the popular annual event, RHS used its own mission for community-based history to bring to Rockbridge a group of amateur but passionate and experience living history. Their first-person narratives – along with their expertise and artful tools, crafts, and conversation – will return to Rockbridge, bringing to life some of the specific citizens who served the warfront and the homefront, during America’s defining conflicts in the Civil War.

Jointly, a half-dozen “Ladies for The Union” and “Officers for The Union” will complement some of the more familiar Rockbridge lives that color our local history (many of those civilians and soldiers from the period memorialized in RHS’ sidewalk-paver ‘Story Stones’ downtown, and their digital biographies at [RRRockbridge.org](http://RRRockbridge.org)). Several have researched specific biographies to authentically represent married couples from the period, including Mrs. and Gen. John Buford, and Mrs. and General Horace Porter. RHS Vice President Mary Harvey-Halseth first met this Pennsylvania-based group during an event at the Salem History Museum in 2017, and first invited them to join in RHS’ activities last Fall.

Flanking the Washington St. pedestrian zone for Apple Day’s demos, dancing, and displays, the ‘Officers for The Union’ will be encamped in their canvas tent, one block down the hill from Jackson House, where interactive exhibitions and conversations illuminate military and civilian experience: ranging from Gettysburg to Vicksburg, from Chicago to Richmond, from the two battles at Manassas to the Union campaign through Rockbridge and Lexington in the summer of 1864.

Each of "The Officers for The Union" represent specific U.S. Army officers heading a strikingly diverse range of units: a Brigadier General commanding the 1st Div. Cavalry, Army of the Potomac; another General who served both as an Artillery Commander, and Aide to General U.S. Grant; a Commanding Officer of the 82nd Illinois, out of Chicago; a Commanding Officer of the 39th New York "Garibaldi Guards" Infantry. Their period demonstrations and interactions will also give visitors a chance to learn and ask about broad wartime experiences, 'on both sides.' In our local context, it's a great chance to talk on the June 1864 campaign that memorably brought U.S. General David Hunter's army through Brownsburg and Rockbridge, in pursuit of Confederate Gen. McCausland's Confederate forces, burning VMI and looting Washington College, while largely sparing Lexington from damage.

At RHS' triangle of historic properties on Washington and Randolph Street, visitors can also enjoy an air-conditioned break in RHS' free museum, including a sneak peek at RHS' growing exhibit on 'World War I and Rockbridge.' Along with the soldiers out back, RHS' stone-walled gardens now feature a newly cultivated and interpreted Herbal Healing Garden, captioned to describe medicinal and culinary uses from the past.

Inside the historic Campbell House (built 1845), a 'Ladies Salon' and sewing circle features a striking range of handicraft tools and mechanical devices. While demonstrating their fabric arts, they also field questions, and talk visitors through their various techniques, and social purpose. Among the most distinctive features highlighted this year are vivid visual and verbal witness to the highly-organized, women-driven Relief Societies that saw the war effort through, and saw many wounded through to health. Most particularly, 'Miss Rebecca Moss' shares donated sewing samples, promotional posters and magazine articles from the 1860s, and her personal investment in the oldest Jewish charitable organization in continuous existence in the United States, founded 200 years ago in 1819 as the [Female Hebrew Benevolent Society](#). With America's growing immigrant communities – and a more diverse quilting of ethnic and religious identities across the nation – public welfare increasingly depended on groups like this, and many peacetime equivalents.

As re-enactor Shelley Reetz notes, Moss' Ladies Hebrew Association for the Relief of Sick and Wounded Soldiers bridged both local and national efforts, to complement to the U.S. Sanitary Commission, established early in the war: "The USSC was a private relief agency that was created by the Federal legislature on June 18, 1861 to be a central, national organization to assist in supporting sick and wounded soldiers, raising money, and organizing distribution of donated items, such as quilts, clothing, food."

Through Mira Form's costumed portrayal of 'Miss Moss,' visitors will also have the unique opportunity to explore 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish history here, in ways not often highlighted in Rockbridge, beyond the notable celebrated achievements of VMI's first Jewish cadet, Battle of New Market veteran, and globally renowned sculptor Moses Ezekiel; or Isaac Weinberg, Lexington's first Jewish merchant who owned the town's largest Department Store in the early 1900s, and managed the Opera House (for more on both, see RHS' book, [Images of America: Lexington](#)). While Moss's organization was based in Philadelphia, it's broadly characteristic of many charitable societies mobilized by women during and after the war, in larger cities and smaller towns across South and North (as well as the local and national variations during World War I and World War II).

Among the Ladies' onsite handiwork is the crafting of fancy bobbin lace, piecework quilting, sewing on an early Willcox-Gibbs sewing machine. Reetz' 1865 machine – like one that RHS is now restoring from its own Collections – holds special relevance to Rockbridge history. It was designed and patented by James Gibbs: Confederate veteran, ground-breaking inventor – and northern Rockbridge neighbor to that more celebrated industrialist, Cyrus McCormick – who also inventively named the town of Raphine after the Greek word '*raphis*,' meaning needle. Gibbs' single-thread, chain-stitch machine revolutionized the market and profoundly shaped the rhythms and capacities of women's work in the period, supporting both daily domestic tasks, and new professional opportunities. For more, see the recently published book [How Inventions Really Happen: The Story of the Sewing Machine in Five Lives](#) (reviewed by RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson at <https://tinyurl.com/SewingMachineInventions>).

For the soldiers' part, at their street-staked tent, each represents a Union Officer, well-rehearsed in describing the specific campaigns they served in: tracking them on period maps, and providing insights into particular regimental histories, to illuminate the broader strokes of the Civil War. They demonstrate the practical handling of arms, tools, and the everyday articles they carried, even enlistment papers that kids and adults can sign onsite.

Inside and outside, these encounters collectively bridge histories of the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, no less than the complex connections and divides between the local and regional histories that cross the Mason-Dixon Line. Join RHS in the journey, and enjoy all the other festivities, food, and fellowship that Stonewall Jackson House has on offer in its rich gardens and grounds, historic house, and bustling play on Washington Street. For more information see [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org), or contact [Director@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:Director@RockbridgeHistory.org).