

# NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

August 2018

## *September Program*

### **“Rivers, Ridges & Rails: Rockbridge’s Vesuvius”**

What do “Gertie’s” and O. Winston Link have in common? In a word ... Vesuvius.

Gertie’s Country Store is the well-known, well-respected, restaurant/store that sits on Tye River Turnpike (Route 56) as you approach Vesuvius from the west. Offering hamburgers, award-winning BBQ, ice cream bars and newspapers, its most unusual feature comes from its customers, who have been encouraged for years to sign their names on the walls, ceilings, shelves, posts, etc. Today there is hardly an empty space, so it is a challenge to find room to leave your mark among the thousands already there.

#### **Program at a Glance**

**Topic:** Vesuvius

**Date:** Sunday, Sept. 16

**Time:** 2:30 p.m.

**Place:** Vesuvius Baptist Church,  
830 Tye River Tpk (Rte 56)

Vesuvius has some other distinctive ‘signatures’ that mark its history. O. Winston Link, the superb American photographer, took three of his iconic photos there. He is best known for his black-and-white photography and sound



Citizens gather at the train depot on Vesuvius Heritage Day, ca. 1900 (photographer unknown).

recordings of the last days of steam-locomotive railroading on the Norfolk & Western Railroad (now the Norfolk Southern) in the late 1950s. A commercial photographer, Link pioneered night photography, while also helping to establish rail photography as a hobby.

On Sunday, September 16, at 2:30 p.m., local historian Dick Halseth will present a slideshow that explores more histories of Vesuvius, some unique, some representative of the Rockbridge area and eras. The program is free and open to all, with refreshments to follow.

Vesuvius sits on the northern edge of Rockbridge County, just east of the historic corridor that developed from the pioneering Great Wagon Road into the Valley Pike and then today’s Route 11. The village’s fascinating history began with the construction and operation of an iron furnace in the

*See Vesuvius history program, Page 5*

## **Apple Days Encore!**

On Saturday, Oct. 20, RHS will again join Stonewall Jackson House for its annual Apple Day festivities. The Campbell House parlor will welcome back the “Ladies of the Union,” a trio of costumed interpreters from Pennsylvania. In their interactive “salon” they will demonstrate domestic crafts from the 19th Century, including quilting, textile handiwork, and the use of an early sewing machine, famously developed by James Gibbs of Raphine (see Book Review, Page 2). Their historic photographs and magazines also spotlight domestic relief programs by Christian and Jewish women during the Civil War. Enjoy free apple cider and cookies and a chance to try your hand at old-style handiwork.

The Ladies’ ‘husbands,’ “Soldiers of the Union,” will meet visitors in our gardens to bring to life Civil War soldiers’ uniforms, duties, firearms, maps and correspondence. Come and see our new Healing Garden, too.

## Book Review

# ‘How Inventions Really Happen’ by Paul C. Wilson

“The Threads of History.” The phrase is a common figure for how we talk about historical change, continuity, and connection. Stitching together the broader ties of people, place, and phenomena, the metaphor holds artful appeal because it is at once tangible, sinuous, and deeply woven into our own desire to connect with the past.

Paul C. Wilson, a Rockbridge resident and former RHS speaker, brings a new, material dimension to the phrase, by focusing on a familiar tool, the sewing machine. His inventive study, subtitled “The Sewing Machine Story in Five Acts,” tracks early prototypes through a series of technical advances and commercial expansion in 19th century Europe, America and, in its notable final chapter, Rockbridge County. Yet well beyond that particular instrument and influential industrial era, his framework invites new comparisons to a range of technological innovations and their cultural impact.

In a powerful, two-page preface, Wilson broadens our reflections from the physical labor and gears that drove the machine to the very idea of singular genius; serial refinements of concept and craft; and the efficiencies, frustrations, and failures that inventions ever face. Along with the technologies and techniques that can change our lives, the author explores changing cultural attitudes about progress and creativity, offering imaginative insights to shape our understanding of what’s remarkable in the past and what becomes part of – as another well-woven saying goes – “the fabric of everyday life.”



**PAUL C. WILSON**

Wilson’s tie to Rockbridge history centers on the inventive achievements of James Gibbs, who patented his revolutionary single-thread, chain-stitch machine in 1857, becoming co-owner of Willcox & Gibbs, still a thriving company 150 years later. Gibbs and his family would move in and out of Rockbridge, as he struggled to find consistent work and markets to reward his skills as a carpenter, craftsman, and tinkerer. Tellingly, the abiding struggle between engineering and commercial enterprise is a common thread in this book.

Whether a coincidence, or important influence, Gibbs came to live on a farm in northern Rockbridge, only a half mile from Walnut Grove. There, in the 1830s, Cyrus McCormick began his own early development of the mechanical reaper, revolutionizing fieldwork; only a few years later, Gibbs would begin re-shaping the capacities of domestic labor, and particularly women’s work, with his own small, reliable machine. As a lasting memorial to that vital breakthrough, Gibbs named the town of Raphine itself, from the Greek word *raphis*, for needle.

Fans of technology, engineering and mechanical systems will find many rewards in Wilson’s research (complemented, he notes, by his own long experience in tinkering with sewing machines and antique cars). For Gibbs and his predecessors, Wilson both explains and illustrates the intricacies of design and the subtleties of variation. He reproduces visual schematics and patent applications for the practical innovations that commanded the market, as well as many that failed. His decision to focus on a ‘single machine’ is a shrewd one, even while anchoring more extensive histories of industrial and rural development, of individual and corporate production.

Paul Wilson has recently been helping RHS to repair one of its own early Gibbs machines. When restored, this 1866 treasure will stand as an arresting and representative artifact to feature in our displays. A similar period machine will be used in live demonstrations by costumed interpreters on Oct. 20 (see “Apple Day Encore” on Page 1). Stay tuned for more threads, ahead!

— Eric Wilson, RHS Executive Director

## Hail and Farewell – Thank You RHS Leaders!

RHS has been fortunate in those who have volunteered to lead us. So it is with sadness that I report several departures. Neely Young and Margaret Skovira rotated off the RHS Board earlier this year, each having served two three-year terms. David Stull recently left the board. And long-time board member and trustee David Coffey moved away with family.

Neely chaired our Development Committee and in 2013 helped to establish our Annual Fund Campaign, which continues to grow and advance. As we seek to identify a new Development Chair (and we hope you can share interests or suggestions with us) he has offered to continue to serve on RHS committees, the kind of service we need from more non-Board members.

Margaret has served in several capacities, most notably her recent leadership as Membership Chair and as Collections Chair. Her careful attention to detail has led the way in consolidating our inventory and records, drawing together three prior attempts to better organize our hard-copy and online catalogues and storage. Thankfully, she has agreed to continue working with Seth McCormick-Goodhart, who succeeds her as Collections Chair.

This summer, David Stull stepped down as our Vice President for Property. He provided critical support in helping manage RHS' tenants and leases, as well as the maintenance challenges that come with historic properties. But with the arrival of new family obligations and an expanding business, David felt that he could no longer carry out these responsibilities to his satisfaction through the remaining months of his term. With both appreciation and reluctance, we respect his decision and wish him well in his new circumstances. He too will be missed and hard to replace.

Finally, we bid farewell to our longest-serving board member, Trustee David Coffey, an RHS mainstay for more than 25 years across many roles. A Professor of History at VMI for many years, David's long and creative run as Programs Chair established a high standard for the quality and variety of our lectures, as witnessed in the four volumes of RHS Proceedings published during his tenure, including a number of landmark essays of his own. David has moved to Cape Charles with his family. But in another departing gift to our archives, he and his brother, Dan, have bequeathed to RHS a remarkable collection of local historic photographs, artifacts, and memorabilia, as well as a range of materials from the Hutton, Firebaugh, and Coffey families.

Thank you David and David. Thank you Margaret and Neely. And thank you, in advance, to those of you who will step up to fill their shoes and carry on their good work as board members, officers, and committee members!

At our Annual Meeting and program in December, RHS members will be invited to vote in our biennial elections for officers. Two of our current officers remain eligible for re-election, but we will need to fill at least three other roles, and are always on the lookout for energetic souls who want to serve on the Board and committees. Please contact [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org) if you are interested in helping us in some capacity, or know someone we might approach. This society continues to be most fortunate in attracting talented, vibrant and selfless board members to carry on the mission envisioned at its inception in 1939. The RHS leaders we salute above exemplify those attributes. We will miss them mightily.

— Stephen D. Beck, RHS President

## Volunteer as a Campbell House Greeter

If you enjoy books about Rockbridge, interesting artifacts, and air conditioning when it's hot out, you can serve the RHS by welcoming local neighbors, their guests, and new visitors to the county, introducing them to some of the local histories you value. We're always in need of more volunteers to staff the Campbell House museum. And this can be an exciting time to newly connect with us as our board plans to revitalize our in-house and mobile exhibits while spotlighting broad themes running through four centuries of Rockbridge history.

No special knowledge is needed. Even a single two- or four-hour shift per month can be helpful and will allow you to browse our library of local history, genealogy, and RHS Publications; explore exhibits and artifacts; and even learn from the visitors' family stories and cultural ties. Contact us at [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org) for details.



## Yard-sale treasure: A historic family Bible

Some years ago, a Bible containing a Hutton family history was “rescued” from a yard sale in Woodbridge, Virginia. Over the years, the buyer had bought and returned other Bibles and a photo album to families who welcomed the return of the historic items, but the Hutton Bible remained forgotten in a trunk. Recently the buyer, now living in Florida, was able to identify a Rockbridge connection for the Hutton family through 1940 census records, and donated the Bible to RHS for its collections.



Two pages in the center of the Bible track births, deaths, and marriages back into the 1840s; the photograph at left shows a marriage certificate. The annotations reveal ties between a number of families in Lexington and Collierstown, including Montgomery and Showalter ancestors. Stretching back in time, their names also indicate a broader sweep of residence across Rockbridge and Rockingham Counties. In addition, the Bible was interleaved with correspondence and miscellaneous documents relevant to local history and genealogy.

This volume will be added to the RHS collection of family Bibles held in Special Collections at Washington and Lee’s Leyburn Library.

Bibles or otherwise, we hope you will take good care of your own family papers. And keep your eyes peeled at yard sales for other images, texts, and artifacts that can continue to enrich our collections!

— Margaret Skovira, RHS Collections Volunteer

## RHS welcomes two new board members

**Dr. Harper Donahoe**, a career educator in Virginia’s public schools, is a native of Danville, Virginia. An All-State tackle in high school, he then matriculated at UNC-Chapel Hill, earning an A.B. in Education while playing on the Tar Heels’ ACC Championship teams.

In 1973, Harper began a nearly 40 year career teaching and coaching in Virginia Beach Public Schools, earning a Masters in Social Studies curriculum at ODU, an Ed.S. in Educational Administration at George Washington University, and his Ed.D in Educational Leadership at NOVA Southeastern University. Between 1990 and 2012, he served as Principal at five high schools and one middle school, and was an Adjunct Professor at GWU during much of that time.



After retiring, Harper and his wife, Kathy Burant, moved to Natural Bridge Station, sharing their seven-acre farm with four rescue donkeys, six chickens, and his precious black lab, “Pootie.” Harper was one of the readers for our 2018 Rockbridge History Bee and helps maintain the Campbell House gardens. He remains active with St. Patrick’s Catholic Church and the Knights of Columbus.

Harper shares that, “Upon retirement, I looked for ways to serve my community. One avenue was my church and the other was to help RHS facilitate education about the richness and complexity of Rockbridge history.”

**Greg Frederick**, Senior Vice-President and Chief Lending Officer for CornerStone Bank, is a native of Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

Greg and his wife, Alison, have two grown children and reside in Lexington. He received a degree in Business Management from North Carolina State University, an MBA from Georgia College and State University, and completed advanced banking schools at LSU, the UNC-Chapel Hill, and East Carolina University.

Greg brings his financial skill and experience to the RHS board, including long management experience with regional and national banks. At CornerStone, he manages all aspects of the bank’s commercial loan portfolio.



He was recently appointed Secretary and Treasurer of the Rockbridge Regional Fair and Expo, and he is a member of the Board of Directors of the George C. Marshall Chapter of the Military Officers Association of America.

Greg notes: “My personal library shows my longtime interests in both military and economic history. When asked to be part of RHS, and learning more about its mission, I jumped on the opportunity to not only serve, but to expand my own knowledge about the history of Rockbridge County.”

# Vesuvius history program

*Continued from Page 1*

early 1800s. The surrounding mountains provided the raw materials, including iron ore, marl, and timber for making charcoal. The South River provided the water power to operate the bellows on the furnace that heated the ore into a fluid state. Sadly, nothing now remains of the furnace, as Hurricane Camille destroyed the last remnants in 1969.

In 1882, the Shenandoah Valley Railroad came to Vesuvius, at one time the busiest freight station between Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and Roanoke. In time, that line became the Norfolk & Western, and then the Norfolk Southern. The railroad carried plows, lumber, huckleberries, hay, tanbark, and chestnuts. However, freight trains stopped after 1957, and by about 1963 passenger traffic had also ceased.

But 1963 also brought another memorable event to Vesuvius, as Rockbridge caught a touch of Hollywood fever, commemorating dramatic wartime events from a century earlier. On April 12, 1862, a year into the Civil War, a military raid took place in northern Georgia. Led by civilian scout James J. Andrews, volunteers from the U.S. Army commandeered a train and its locomotive, *The General*, and took it north toward Chattanooga. Along the way, they did as much damage as possible to the vital Western and Atlantic Railroad line running from Atlanta into Tennessee. They were pursued for 87 miles by Confederate forces, first on foot and later on a succession of locomotives. The event was memorialized in a 1956 Disney film, “*The Great Locomotive Chase*.”

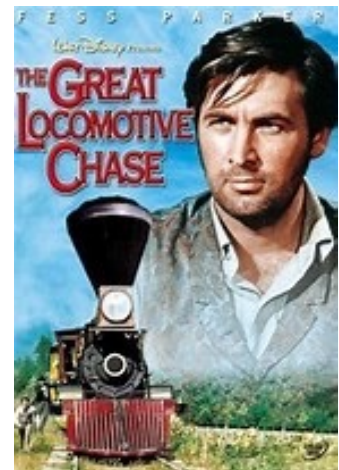
Because Union soldiers had cut the telegraph wires, the Confederates could not send warnings ahead to forces along the railway. Confederates eventually captured the raiders and quickly executed some as spies, including Andrews, while others were able to escape. Some of the Union raiders were the first to be awarded the Medal of Honor by the U.S. Congress for their actions, but as a civilian, Andrews was not eligible.

Although these events took place far from Rockbridge (U.S. General David Hunter’s forces would not raid this stretch of the Valley until 1864), *The General* was restored in 1962 for a centennial tour. As part of its run through the southeastern United States, *The General* pulled several cars into Vesuvius in 1963. Some of the locals boarded and rode the train to Waynesboro. *The General* is now an exhibit in the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History in Kennesaw, Georgia.

For more information on programs, resources, interactive media, and maps of the Vesuvius area, visit the new RHS website, [rockbridgehistory.org](http://rockbridgehistory.org).



Left: O. Winston Link’s photograph inside the bustling Austin Store in Vesuvius, ca. 1956. Notice the wheels of locomotive 127 just outside the window at upper left (courtesy of O. Winston Link Museum).



Above: a poster for the 1956 Disney film “*The Great Locomotive Chase*” with Fess

# Rockbridge Historical Society

## Board Members and Officers

President: Stephen D. Beck  
VP and Educational Outreach:  
Mary Harvey-Halseth  
Secretary: Paul Barron  
Treasury/Finance: Richard Hubbard  
Programs: Reed Belden  
Membership: Pat Gibson  
Volunteers: Anne Herring  
At Large: Harper Donahoe  
At Large: Greg Frederick  
At Large: Peter Simpson

## Board Member Ex-officio

Archives: Tom Camden

## Trustees

Peggy Webster Hays  
Seth McCormick-Goodhart (Collections)  
Dick Rathmell

**Executive Director** Eric Wilson

**Newsletter** Sally Nunneley

**Telephone:** 540-464-1058

**Email:** [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org)

**Website:** [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org)

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



NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
PERMIT #25  
LEXINGTON, VA  
24450