

# NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

June 2018

## June Program

### “Lost Histories: South River from Marlbrook to Old Buena Vista”

Join RHS on Father’s Day, June 17, when Reed Belden presents a slide show, “Lost Histories: South River from Marlbrook to Old Buena Vista.” This talk continues a series of quarterly programs highlighting some of the smaller villages and hamlets in Rockbridge that variously thrived but then declined over the years, such as Denmark, Alone Mill, Natural Bridge Station, Rapps Mill, or the hollows of House Mountain.

“Lost Histories” travels to the eastern sector of Rockbridge around the South River and its nearby confluence with the Maury. After the parceling of the Borden Grant in 1739, the land and timber resources soon proved a strong draw to this part of the Valley. Family names that appear in early settlements down the Great Wagon Road include Paxton, Alexander, McClure, Shields, and Glasgow. Other settlers came over the Blue Ridge from Amherst County: Jarvis, Hartless, Huffman, Cash, and Clark, many settling along Irish Creek.

If families provide one way to trace local histories, another tracks the area’s remarkable early industrial corridor. Landowners and entrepreneurs increasingly invested in grist and timber mills; the mining of iron ore, tin, and manganese; furnaces, forges, and foundries; and the associated range of craft enterprises and commercial exchanges. In addition to the core production of iron, enterprising manufacturers also began to produce plows, iron axles, and stoves; other skilled laborers in the area included gunsmiths, and even clockmakers.

But it was the large-scale factories that would most impact the area. From the mid-19th century, a number of iron furnaces were developed by families including the Leyburns, McDowells, and Jordans; other ventures such as the South River Lumber Company at Cornwall (see photo) operated through the 1930s. Rockbridge’s early industrial efforts profited from a labor force that depended heavily on enslaved workers, as well as free blacks and whites. An example is the ironworks further south at Buffalo Forge, owned by William Weaver, whose uniquely thorough records were chronicled in Charles Dew’s book, “Bond of Iron.”



South River Lumber Company, Cornwall, operated 1916-1938 (photo by Mary Steele).

South River’s industry was profoundly affected by emancipation and the economic dislocations during and after the Civil War. But the arrival of railroads in the late 19th century opened new markets and opportunities for growth. In

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<b>Program at a Glance</b>
<b>Topic:</b> South River
<b>Date:</b> Sunday, June 17
<b>Time:</b> 2:30 p.m.
<b>Place:</b> Mountain View Elementary School

## *Letter from the Executive Director*

### **Memorial Days**

Memorial Day annually calls us to honor the nation's war dead, as well the servicemen, servicewomen, and families who supported their efforts and sacrifice.

Like all holidays and rituals, the observances of Memorial Day witness their own shifting and complicated histories. In 1971, Congress formally established the last Monday in May as a federal holiday. In Virginia, that same Monday is still officially recognized as Confederate Memorial Day.

Not surprisingly, these observances have varied and evolved through time -- along with the contested "origins" that different groups have claimed — over the 150+ years since such memorial services and "Decoration Days" emerged from the bloodshed of the Civil War. Some traditions may be familiar, some more surprising. All reveal distinct turns in the history of ritual, of remembrance, of our nation at large.

Many accounts of a collectively celebrated Memorial Day turn to May 30, 1868. At the newly established Arlington Cemetery on the grounds of the former Lee-Custis estate, future President James Garfield addressed the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR, a Union veterans' organization) to recognize that date "for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion."

In the South, the practice had been preceded – as early as 1866 — by cemetery and civic rituals developed by Ladies Memorial Associations (LMAs). Caroline Janney, Director of UVA's Center for Civil War History, has shown how local women's societies were the crucial organizers in planning and promoting group observances to honor dead Confederate soldiers. For the GAR, May 30 was chosen for the ready availability of flowers; but the date first adopted in the South was April 26, marking the final Confederate surrender to General Sherman. Later variations and different states would variously commemorate the death of Gen. Stonewall Jackson and the birthday of Jefferson Davis.

Others would claim their priority with their smaller-scale, local, often family-based practices during the war itself: in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1864 to honor a son killed at Gettysburg; or April 13, 1862, when four women had strewn flowers on the graves of the many soldiers buried in Arlington Heights, Chicago.

Through the era of the Lost Cause, the most broadly promoted story turns to Mrs. Charles Williams. After her husband died at war in 1862, her daily attendance at his grave would eventually find broader vent through her service as Secretary for the Columbus, Georgia, LMA and their establishment of Memorial Day on April 26, 1866. Though Smithsonian author Ellen Litwicki notes her claim to more widespread origin as "apocryphal," Williams herself credited a friend for adopting the floral practice from the German custom of grave decoration on All Saints' Day. All told, the Columbus LMA's official history notes, Williams used her position to publicize this creation story throughout the South.

Lastly, prize-winning historian David Blight recently uncovered in Harvard's archives what he has identified as the first large-scale Memorial Day ceremony, on May 1, 1865, just days after the War's end. Even before the spread of LMA ceremonies, this ritual of remembrance was observed deep in the South. As the 21st U.S. Colored Infantry led the Union march into Charleston, South Carolina, 10,000 people staged a parade at the city's racecourse, converted in the war's final year into a prisoner-of-war camp and mass grave.

But these marchers represented the newly freed, as well as the dead: "led by 3,000 black schoolchildren carrying armloads of roses and singing 'John Brown's Body.' Several hundred black women followed with baskets of flowers, wreaths and crosses... the crowd dispersed into the infield and did what many of us do on Memorial Day: enjoyed picnics, listened to speeches and watched soldiers drill... The war was over, and Memorial Day had been founded by African-Americans in a ritual of remembrance and consecration."

However you observe Memorial Day, whomever you honor: history witnesses how diverse our experiences and our traditions may be, even as we come together on shared holidays. We hope that an appreciation of history's turns and its continuities will enrich your sense of the people who have come before us, as well as the communities we collectively create today in Rockbridge and beyond.

— Eric Wilson

# Lost Histories

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1882, the Shenandoah Valley Railroad opened commerce to Hagerstown, Maryland, and south to the networks at Roanoke. The village of Riverside grew to be the most commercially active of towns in the area, with a canning factory, a brick kiln, three general stores, a smithy, and a butcher shop. By 1900, South River boasted 4,800 residents.

However, the district's prosperity was also beset by trial and tragedy. In 1925, a notable legal case in Rockbridge and Virginia history centered on a couple in Irish Creek. Atha Sorrells sued the Clerk of the Rockbridge Circuit Court for denying her petition to marry Robert Painter on the grounds that she was not white. As Wilson explains, "Under the terms of Virginia's recent Racial Integrity Act (spearheaded by Dr. Walter A. Plecker in 1924), Sorrells' Native American ancestry would newly re-classify her as "colored," a status that applied to many of the ethnically mixed families of Native, European, and African descent living near Irish Creek. After Sorrells won her case, Plecker wrote to the Rockbridge Clerk advising against an appeal, fearing that a higher court might uphold the judgment, thus opening the door for more people of Indian descent to be qualified as white."

Fifty years on, the impact of Hurricane Camille in 1969 is still felt here. Its floodwaters not only swept away the family of Silas and Francis Clark and their six children, but also destroyed many family records, artifacts, business ledgers, and material evidence of home and industry that could have informed many more "Lost Histories" of South River.

A past Secretary of RHS, Reed Belden returned to the Board in 2015 as Programs Chair. He graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1953 with a degree in chemical engineering, then began his career in a chemical plant in Hopewell, Virginia. He and his family lived there for 10 years until he was promoted to a new position in New Jersey. After 30 years working with Allied Chemical (now Honeywell), Reed retired in 1986 as VP and General Manager of an operating unit. In his own words, he then "escaped to Lexington," and now lives in Denmark, in western Rockbridge.



**Iron Hand (ca.1860), found near Buena Vista Furnace Works. In 2019, RHS will loan the artifact to the American Civil War Museum's new exhibit in Richmond, to help interpret industrial slavery (photo by Eric Wilson).**

## Join the new RHS Gardens Team 'down in the dirt'

Summer is here, the gardens around Campbell House are in full bloom ... and our flowers need your "dirty knees."

The RHS gardens are a great asset, one of the few freely accessible, quiet green-spaces downtown, with historic stone terracing and shaded picnic tables that welcome visitors at all times. But like all historic and natural preservation efforts, the gardens need care, continued cultivation, and enthusiastic stewards. Volunteers recently planted a "Healing Garden" that identifies historic medicinals; plans for a "Period Garden" look to further anchor ties to Campbell House's 150+ year history (it even had a greenhouse out back).

RHS is also looking for help with new signage and interpretive brochures, creativity in landscape design, and collaboration on educational projects and events for both children and adults. All of those efforts will provide opportunities to engage with the community through new outreach.

Under the long and devoted leadership of former RHS Board Garden Chairs John and Jeanette Matchette, a team of Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners worked for several years to redevelop our garden beds as a beautiful, welcoming public space. As RAMGA refocuses on its primary mission of education, rather than annual cultivation and routine maintenance, Karla Wachenheim will now help us transition to a newly organized "RHS Gardens Team." While continuing to lead monthly sessions to plant and protect our flowers and shrubs, Karla has already proved a valued liaison in helping the Board to preserve and promote the Campbell House gardens.

For more information or to volunteer, please write to [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org).

# Rockbridge Historical Society

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