

“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 memorable restaurant and store that sits on Tye River Turnpike (Rte 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. For years, customers have been encouraged to sign their name on the walls, ceilings, shelves, posts, etc. There is hardly an empty space today, so it can be a challenge to find room to leave your mark among the thousands of others.

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

You can follow these and other tracks into the past at the Rockbridge Historical Society’s next public program on Sunday, October 21, 2:30 PM, at Vesuvius Baptist Church (830 Tye River Turnpike). Local historian Dick Halseth’s slideshow presentation, titled “Rivers, Ridges & Rails: Rockbridge’s Vesuvius,” will explore more histories of Vesuvius, some very 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 would develop from the pioneering Great Wagon Road, to the Valley Pike, to Route 11 today. The village’s fascinating history began with the construction and operation of an iron furnace in the early 1800’s. The surrounding mountains provided the raw materials such as iron ore, marl, timber for making charcoal. The South River provided the water power to operate the bellows necessary to heat the ore into a fluid state. Nothing remains of the furnace or accompanying buildings today, 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, PA and Roanoke. In time, that line became the Norfolk & Western, and now the Norfolk Southern. They shipped plows, lumber, huckleberries, hay, tan bark, and chestnuts. Eventually, freight trains stopped after 1957, and by 1963 passenger traffic had also ceased.

1963 brought a memorable event to the rail line through Vesuvius, however, as Rockbridge caught a touch of Hollywood, commemorating dramatic wartime events from one century before.

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, The General, and took it northward 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 first pursued on foot by Confederate forces. Later, a succession of locomotives, including The Texas, would continue the pursuit for 87 miles. The chase was memorialized in a Walt Disney film in 1956 starring Fess Parker.

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; some others were able to flee. 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 the summer of 1864), The General was restored in 1962 for a centennial tour of the fabled locomotive. During its run through the southeastern United States, The General and several cars stopped in Vesuvius in 1963. Some of the locals boarded and rode the train to Waynesboro. The General is now in the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, Kennesaw, GA.

Vesuvius has long been a very close-knit community. As Halseth reflects, "Kids left their homes to play after breakfast and wouldn't return until dinner. Baseball, football, hiking, bikes, sleds, and hide-and-seek kept them outside. Everybody knew everybody else, and the children were the community's children. Religion bound the community together, and the Baptist Church was the social center for both children and adults. Going to Sunday school was never a question, ahead of the regular church service. Come Wednesday, you would surely be found at the prayer service there, too."

RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson adds, "I used to be amused by the idea of Vesuvius as our 'Rockbridge Volcano,' a nod to fabled antiquity right here in the Blue Ridge. But over time, I've become more and more impressed by the series of other monumental 'eruptions' right near Vesuvius, and right around the time that its cluster of mines, furnaces, and railroad industry was flourishing. At nearby Walnut Grove, Cyrus McCormick would pioneer his game-changing mechanical reaper in the 1830s. And in the 1860s, only a mile away, neighbor James Gibbs perfected his patent for a single-thread chain-stitch sewing machine that would help revolutionize work for many women in the era. Perhaps spurred by Vesuvius itself, Gibbs chose a classical figure of his own in naming the town of Raphine (after '*raphis*,' the Greek word for needle)."

"Metaphors, even myths, help us see connections to the past in fresh ways," Wilson concludes. "But in looking back to the histories of settlement and growth in this stretch of the Valley, it's easy to overlook how the places and people of Rockbridge were newly woven together by these threads of mechanical innovation; they're a distinctive feature in the broader fabric of labor patterns that changed so dramatically across the reach of the 19th century. Even or perhaps especially in a small settlements like Vesuvius, Raphine, or the South River area, we can reflect on the evolution of agricultural, industrial, and domestic work, and the intimate social and transportation networks needed to cultivate and sustain those communities. A number of our recent programs, ringing a range of the County's smaller crossroads, have worked to showcase that vitality, through different moments of challenge, change, and continuity. Dick Halseth's research into this northeastern corner of Rockbridge brings another spotlight to help us see that in richer detail."

For more information on RHS programs, resources, and interactive media, see RHS' new website. There, you can also zoom in on the Vesuvius area, and Rockbridge at large, through a range of period maps (also available for purchase) at rockbridgehistory.org/rockbridge-maps.