



Written for Lexington News-Gazette, Feb. 20, 2019

## **“Black Histories at Natural Bridge”**

*Rockbridge Historical Society and Natural Bridge State Park  
Team Together for Black History Month*

**Saturday, Feb. 23, 1:30 PM**  
**NBSP Visitor Center, FREE**

**Matthew Jackson, NBSP Park Ranger and Education Specialist**

**Eric Wilson, Executive Director, Rockbridge Historical Society,  
Director for History, Virginia Association of Museums**

Mountain View Cottage no longer stands – as a surviving structure, or in the records of Courthouse ledgers. But its history still echoes as one of the many mid-20<sup>th</sup> century tourist homes that served visitors near Natural Bridge – African-American guests, in this instance – in the years when automobiles newly made Rockbridge County’s distinctive landmark a truly national and thriving attraction.

Nearby, similarly named, if now in ruins, and overgrown, in nearby woods – another tourist home named Mountain House – once welcomed overflow guests from the Natural Bridge Hotel, in parallel but distinct manner. Its hillside perch overlooking the area’s grandeur and beauty, the house’s histories are now marked only by the impressive 19<sup>th</sup> century stone chimney and concrete footprints of the four small cottages that ringed it. During the still-segregated century following emancipation, black drivers for many white guests here would be directed further down Rte. 130 to welcoming, safe lodging and restaurants, part of a vital contemporary network of publicly advertised and informally recommended establishments. In the mid-1940s, neither TripAdvisor, nor GoogleMaps, were yet on the map.

Now, the only trace of the “Mountain View Cottage Tourist Home” – the assured cue to its well-advertised vitality, among competing local memories – lies in the witness of “The Negro Motorist Green Book,” a national guide for black travelers published between 1936-1966 (before the Civil Rights Act of 1968 desegregated public facilities). It was this passing, un-photographed, even un-addressed reference on p.78 of the 1947 edition – the singular Rockbridge County mention beyond three other businesses noted in Diamond Hill and N. Main Street, Lexington – that spurred a new journey for the Rockbridge Historical Society’s Executive Director, Eric Wilson.

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**NATURAL BRIDGE**

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Mountain View Cottage

**NEWPORT NEWS**

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Mountain View Cottage, Natural Bridge Tourist Home.  
First and only Green Book listing (1947-9) of any Rockbridge County establishment.  
Complemented by 3 Lexington sites on Diamond Hill and N. Main Street,  
that were consistently listed between 1939-1966.

As the Virginia Association of Museum's Director for History, Wilson looks to the place of regional African-American histories and traditions relative to Rockbridge County's namesake icon, over the arc of time, and across changing cultural conditions: "For four centuries, and well beyond, Natural Bridge – sometimes called The Rock Bridge, or The Great Bridge – has meant many things to many individual encounters, and different groups and traditions. Written and legal accounts tend to turn first to the Euro-American immigrant settlers of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, to George Washington's fabled survey of the massive rock formation in 1750, to the emergence of broader farming and timber-forestry around the time that Rockbridge County was formed and named in 1778."

"Of course, for millennia before, indigenous peoples of the Valley lived and traversed the area, with their own understanding of the iconic formation's origin and natural resources, its aesthetic and spiritual value."

"These histories have summoned or centered on African-American experiences less frequently," he notes, "partly because those encounters have been less common, and often less accessible. Partly because of the available resources and habits of history-writing that have shaped more lasting local accounts: whether over the 80 years since RHS' founding in 1939, or the past two-and-a-half centuries of published writings about the Bridge, highlighted by Jefferson's lyrical 1787 ode in "Notes on the State of Virginia."

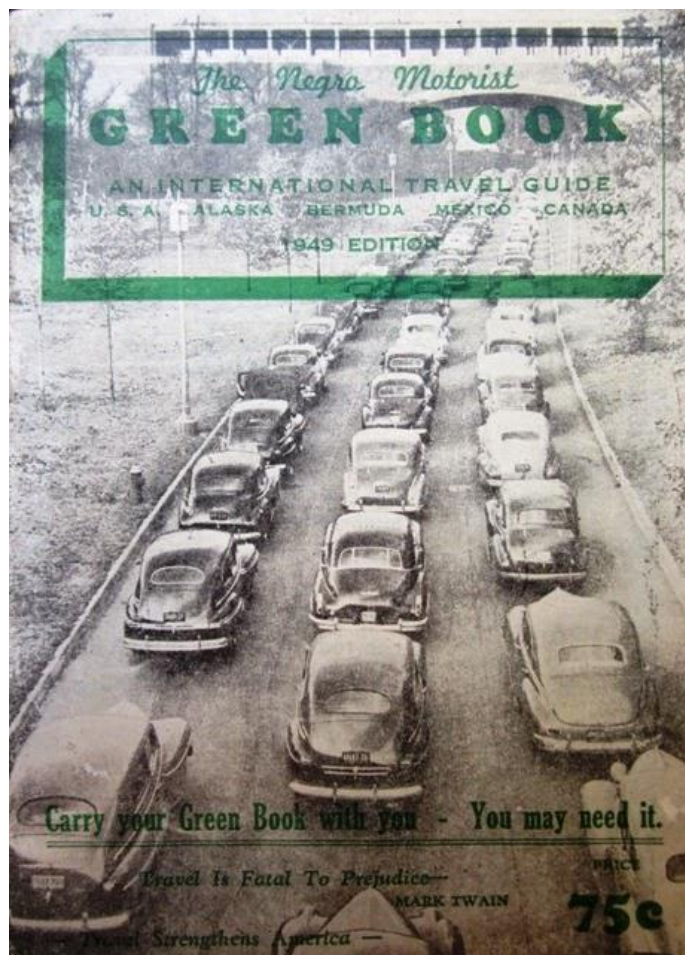
RHS' continued research and its first public program of the year now jointly pursue these opportunities. They help to anchor a growing archive and interpretive turn that looks to more distinctly and inclusively illuminate and preserve the stories of the Bridge's black visitors (or "colored," the term of currency for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). Similarly, these studies both assess and credit the contributions of local black residents who lived and worked here, or visited for civic occasions, religious gatherings, and leisure, as the Bridge's hospitality industry has variously and nationally grown, and declined.

On Saturday, February 23, 1:30 PM, the Rockbridge Historical Society and Natural Bridge State Park will partner to host a free public presentation and discussion at the NBSP Visitor Center, spotlighting "Black Histories at Natural Bridge." Eric Wilson and NBSP Ranger and Education Specialist Matthew Jackson will collaboratively present an illustrated slideshow that spans four centuries, newly frames some familiar resources, premieres fresh archival finds and oral histories, and also situates the recent establishment of an accessible State Park – committed to both historical interpretation and environmental and recreational engagement – relative to another of Virginia's State Parks, during the decades of Jim Crow and desegregation.

As part of the Park's second annual "Winter Speaker Series," the talk was conceived and timed to advance the growing cultural witness of Black History Month (extending since Dr. Carter Woodson's foundational launch of "Negro History Week" in 1926). Looking back over the last several years, Wilson reflects as well on RHS' important institutional connections with the Bridge: "In working with Matthew and NBSP Head Ranger Jim Jones, it's been exciting to continue our run of partnered programs and joint-promotions with the Park, as well as with the Hotel and the support of Tom Clarke and the Virginia Legacy Conservation Program."

“In 2014, as the sale of the Bridge was being negotiated, RHS’ Museum on Washington Street opened an exhibit centered around “Images of the Natural Bridge.” And in the five years since, we hosted two national experts from the Library of Congress and Monticello to speak to the four centuries of visitor experience at the Bridge, helped organize the Gala event celebrating the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Jefferson’s First Visit to the Bridge, and most recently, partnered with the National Park Service on my program last spring on “Bridging Nature and History.” We’ve extended that work into K-12 school projects, programming with the Virginia Association of Museums and state and national parks, and collaborations with about a dozen local history, environmental partners and friends groups. This next collaborative program provides another inviting opportunity to continue all those commitments, while working to identify and fill some of the gaps, where archives, oral histories, and institutional connections have not more fully reached.”

On this particular occasion, the historical narrative will begin in 1949, when service at the Natural Bridge Hotel was still segregated, and the last year when nearby Mountain View Cottage was the only Rockbridge County tourist home listed in “The Negro Motorist Green Book.” [The revealing touchstone for a growing RHS research project, in and beyond Lexington, the “Green Book” was a national guide for African-American travelers to find safe and accessible accommodations and services, before passage of The Civil Rights Act of 1968.]



**1949 Cover of “The Negro Motorist Green Book,”  
the last year in which Natural Bridge’s Mountain View Cottage was listed.**



**Rose Inn Tavern, operated by Mary Rose, listed in *The Green Book* (1939-1966)  
331 N. Main St. Lexington, where VMI Training Facility now stands.**

If the present spur started with the mystery of Mountain View Cottage, and “The Green Book” (subject of the currently Oscar-nominated film), the presentation will then spool backwards in time. Jackson and Wilson’s illustrated slideshow will draw from series of photographs, paintings, letters, newspaper articles, and commercial advertisements that reveal changing conditions and constraints – not just for hospitality and tourism, but as valuable business and work opportunities for local black residents: from the eras of slavery, emancipation and Jim Crow, and up through the modern Civil Rights Movement.

A more personal glimpse of the Bridge’s collective appeal comes from a 1921 outing and luncheon at Cedar Creek (just as conferences still center there today). The trip was described in a local newspaper account as the highlight of the statewide Convention of the Virginia Federation of Colored Women hosted photographed by Lexington’s Eliza Bannister Walker (its scores of attendees were photographed on the steps of Blandome, her home on the top of Diamond Hill).



**1921 statewide Convention of the VA Federation of Colored Women, Lexington. Pictured here at Blandome, the Lexington home of Eliza Bannister Walker: local activist, poet, singer, political advocate for local schools and the election of Chicago Congressman Oscar dePriest. Mrs. Walker organized an ambitious multi-state campaign during World War I to build a “Colored Old Folks Home and Orphanage.” President of the Rockbridge Chapter of the VFCW, she organized an outing to Natural Bridge and luncheon at Cedar Creek noted in 1921 newspaper accounts as the gathering’s highlight.**

A generation earlier, in 1898, the panoramic scene of a “Colored Baptism,” crowded beneath the Bridge’s span around Cedar Creek, was captured in a stereoscopic photograph that was published and nationally marketed for sale by a St. Louis studio.



**"Colored Baptism at Cedar Creek," Natural Bridge, 1898.  
Stereoscopic Photograph (McCormick-Goodhart Collections, W&L)**

Continuing the episodic approach, a mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition in early American oil paintings and prints frequently featured African-American and Native American figures at the Bridge, including one of the most famous of all by Frederic Edwin Church in 1852, now held at UVA's Fralin Museum of Art.

And reaching back into the years that Thomas Jefferson owned the Bridge, from 1774-1826, earliest attentions in the presentation return to Patrick Henry: the "mulatto" freeman Jefferson hired to manage his properties there, and keep the keys to the ammunition shot tower there. Periodically, Henry also guided visitors around the Bridge, including a memorable trip high up "the precipice" with the former President and his granddaughter, Cornelia, as chronicled in her lyrical 1817 letter to her sister, back at Poplar Forest.



**Frederic Edwin Church, "The Natural Bridge, VA," 1852. Fralin Museum of Art, UVA.  
Note the African-American figure at bottom, guiding a female visitor,  
and directing our own sightlines as the painting's own viewers.**

Matthew Jackson notes that, in many ways, Henry figures as the Bridge's first "park ranger." He explains, "Beyond his more noted ties to Jefferson, the larger story shows us a man who took initiative to protect the land that now makes up the Park, and actually provided a lot of the same services we would expect from a ranger today, from stewardship, to interpretation for guests."

To further extend this sense of contemporary relevance, and RHS' parallel efforts to "Bridge History and Nature," Jackson will provide context from another of Virginia's state parks, and its active engagement with public history. He forges this comparison by reflecting, "I started my career at Twin Lakes State Park, the first Virginia State Park



available to African-Americans, only combined and integrated in 1986. I also volunteered at the Robert Russa Moton Museum in Farmville, which tells the story of the student-led walkout that provided most the plaintiffs of Brown vs. Board of Education. I learned that what many people see as a dark but now-resolved chapter in American history still affects the lives of the people in that county in a very real way. And while some of the history of Prince Edward County is particularly egregious, it doesn't exist in a void."

"Developing an understanding of black histories at Natural Bridge is particularly gratifying, in the context of "The Green Book" and beyond, because I know from experience that, no, we're not seeing just another group of visitors in these pictures and accounts. We're seeing a demographic that is routinely turned away from other natural wonders being able to experience one of the most impressive that North America has to offer, which is a story worth telling."



**Prince Edward State Park for Negroes, est. 1950, Prince Edward County: the Commonwealth of Virginia's first state park open to African-Americans. In 1986, it merged with Staunton River State Park to form Twin Lakes State Park.**

Wilson connects these different highlights and snapshots in time, saying, "Each of these encounters and highlights at the Bridge variously and distinctly witnesses a diverse array of interconnected journeys: through nature, into history, and along what Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois famously described as "the problem of the color line." For the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in particular, researching and preserving these histories – roughly stretching from the economic and racial constraints of the Great Depression and gradual desegregation of business and public facilities in the 1950s and 1960s – depends not only on photographic and archaeological evidence, interpreting fine art and commercial advertisements, but on the personal witness of senior community members."

Over the past month, patient, personal witnesses have shared valuable contributions to these narratives through their interviews and guided tours of the area. Wilson gratefully acknowledges the insights of these longtime residents of Natural Bridge, some now in their 80s and 90s, offering the complementary perspectives of men and women, white and black, natives and those who moved away and back, that stretch back to the 1920s.

Born and schooled in Covington, Don Carter came to work for the summer at the Natural Bridge Hotel in 1956, and stayed for 43 years, taking on all manner of jobs and managerial roles at the Hotel and Gatehouse. While talking about the boom of mid-century tourism, and the range of independently-operated cottages that sprung up house the growing wave of visitors, Carter spoke distinctly to the restrictions and freedoms available to staff, onsite, and as they traveled and labored across the area connecting the Bridge to Lexington, and the Natural Bridge train station.

He was particularly moved, when describing one memorable incident near the close of Jim Crow laws, shortly before the catastrophic fire burned the historic wooden hotel in 1963. An African-American Air Force Captain – visiting from Colorado with his wife and two young children – came to the cafeteria to purchase their food through the self-service line. But when they came to the cashier, they were re-directed to a separate segregated room, to have their orders taken by black busboys. Having earned sergeant's rank in Covington's white National Guard unit, Carter recognized that he was outranked by the black officer. In the moment and in reflections since, he expressed his concern and embarrassment, as an Assistant Manager, at legally having to re-direct the visiting family to eat in the small segregated room annexed to the kitchen, where black employees would catch their own meals.

The most extensive witness came from Nadine Hubbard, now 92, who spoke with Wilson after First Baptist Natural Bridge Church's recent Black History Month Service, and a series of conversations since. She shared specific details about visiting tourists, drivers, preachers who stayed at one of those tourist homes for African-American travelers. Just a few doors up from the church, James and Annie Sadler Dixon operated this business from their large two-story home on the 20 acre farm purchased on Buck Hill Road in 1931. About a mile away, the Watts family also offered lodging in a house on Forge Road that boasted nice porches on both floors, and at least four bedrooms.



**Tourist Home once run by James and Annie Dixon, Buck Hill Road, Natural Bridge. Though not listed in *The Green Book*, it was one of at least two such establishments run in this historically black area of Natural Bridge, with neighboring churches, and black-owned restaurants, a convenience store, social hall, and swimming pool patronized by African-American residents across Rockbridge County, and visiting travelers who could not access accommodations at Natural Bridge and the Hotel during Virginia’s Jim Crow years.**

Although many attractions and amenities at the Bridge and Hotel remained segregated or off limits to African-Americans at the time, Hubbard spoke warmly – looking back to her teenage years – about how local neighbors, younger black residents from around the County, and passing visitors to the Bridge would enjoy spirited parties and picnics at the “Old Log Shack,” variously described as a restaurant, bar, and dance hall (no longer standing, near where the Natural Bridge Animal Hospital now operates). On the neighboring corner – at the foot of the saw mill, today – the “Virginia Inn” tea room sold sandwiches and sodas, beer and cigarettes, with a swimming pool and 2 changing cabins for local black residents and others passing through or vacationing in the area (Hubbard also noted that groups of girls from Washington D.C. frequently spent their summers at the Dixon house in the 1940s).

These are just a few personal glimpses that ground and extend appreciation of Natural Bridge’s importance and vitality. Community-based histories have the capacity to color understandings of the Rockbridge past, and its present: beyond the sustaining draw of the stone marvel, the stonework from ruined foundations, the archival images, and commercial souvenirs that still mark the Park and recently renovated Hotel. But deep as these stories tunnel into the American past, anchored in geological time, they also continue to find fresh focus in light of the concerns and commitments of a historic, ever-evolving Rockbridge community.

RHS invites you to come share stories like these as part of the program at the Park, or share them digitally via [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org), whether they touch on tourism, work, and recreation, or social, church, and family gatherings. Even if drawn from more contemporary accounts, those different encounters and traditions all frame a diverse record of Rockbridge experience that will come to be part of history, in both reflections and records to be preserved for decades ahead.