

NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

April 2019

May Program

Digital 'Historytelling' in Rockbridge, the Valley, and Virginia

Naked Savages? American Vampires? Virginia's Notorious Penitentiary? Rockbridge's Union Spies?

Our online age values arresting headlines: quick cues that catch the ring of something singular, while often hinting at the promise of broader patterns and relevance. Dale Brumfield, celebrated journalist, novelist, public historian – and self-described “digital archaeologist” – will present



Mr. Brumfield

samples of his writings and media work in this terrain on Sunday, May 5, 2:30 p.m., at Fairfield Elementary School.

For this program, Brumfield will cover some Rockbridge tales. But more broadly, the four phrases above signal not just the diversity of his topics, but the variety of multimedia narrative,

modes in which he has published. “Naked Savages,” his just-released fifth novel, imagines a filmmaker traveling to document an East African famine. Those other three cues witness his viral, online magazine article probing New England's 19th century vampire craze; an impressively footnoted 270-page monograph tunneling into the histories of Virginia's harrowing state penitentiary; and the last, a surprising turn of Blue and Grey, issued as one of the 127-and-counting columns he's written for the Staunton News-Leader.

And in a call to anyone who's lived in smaller communities, Dale titled his first book – a memoir about growing up in Waynesboro – “Three Buck Naked Commodores: And 18 More Tales from a Small Town.”

Here in Rockbridge, Brumfield has previously honed in on Raphine, where James Gibbs's technical experiments not only revolutionized the sewing machine, but led to the very naming of the town. A few miles away, in Steeles

Tavern, his research recently restored due credit to Jo Anderson, the enslaved innovator recognized by many of his contemporaries as co-inventor of the mechanical reaper patented by Cyrus McCormick. In 2017, Brumfield visited the RHS Museum to examine the unique ‘adult cradle’ crafted for Brownsburg's Mary Moore Brown, whose captive history he has recast in light of human trafficking on the American frontier.

But how to tie those Union Spies to one of the “First Families of Rockbridge” and to Cherry Grove, the estate of Virginia governor James McDowell, only a mile away from Fairfield? You'll have to hear Brumfield himself explain that. But to rouse your interest in the ways that digital hashtags now quickly do, the storylines flow through the notable, if forgotten, accomplishments of Jessie McDowell Benton Fremont (see photo on Page 5). Born at Cherry Grove in 1824, she was a daughter of the South who became a writer, an abolitionist, and an insistent advocate for women's rights; President Lincoln was impressed enough by her maneuvers to call her “quite the female politician.” She died in Los Angeles in 1902.

By the Civil War, Mrs. Fremont's reputation was such that a group of irregular U.S. soldiers organized in St. Louis by her husband, Senator John Fremont (Commander of the Department of the West), named their spy ring ‘Jessie's Spies.’ And in an incident that sounds more like pulp fiction than textbook history, their operations behind Confederate lines would include a Shenandoah Valley campaign involving a Quaker schoolmistress and a coded message wrapped in a ball of foil, carried in the mouth of a slave who was regularly entrusted to sell produce across the battle lines.

Program at a Glance

Topic: Historytelling

Date: Sunday, May 5

Time: 2:30 p.m.

Place: Fairfield Elementary School

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Letter from the President

Looking forward to a year of great activity

As new RHS president, I welcome you to another year full of stories, artifacts, presentations, interpretive walks, movies - even music! - all celebrating and sharing the history of Rockbridge. Already, we've launched our inaugural film series, accompanied with speakers and interactive displays, honoring the centennial of the end of World War I. This winter and spring, we have led presentations and enlisted community partners to focus attention on Black Histories of Natural Bridge, Women's Histories, and new modes of digital storytelling. Looking ahead, we are planning programs in collaboration with the Historic Lexington Foundation on Rockbridge Barns, the 50th Anniversary of Hurricane Camille, the Kerr's Creek community, and Rockbridge railroads.

In committing to both a diverse range of topics and varied modes of presentation, the Rockbridge Historical Society continues to engage our community in many ways: through the Rockbridge History Bee, Apple Day festivities, school programs centered on Diamond Hill, and the Lewis and Clark Discovery Trunk and Diamond Hill programs in schools, presentations in our smaller communities, our celebrated historic gardens, walking tours of Righteous and Rascals pavers, as well as open houses and exhibits at our Campbell House Museum.

Of course, none of these occasions could happen without continued your financial contributions and help from volunteers. And our planning and vision depend on that steady support to advance our efforts. We cherish and value every one of our helpers, whether out in the front lines or working quietly in the background. We always need help to do this; we don't expect prior experience or historical expertise, and we're ready to provide you training and assistance in our many and varied ways of working within the community. It is you - and your valuable time - that make it possible for us to share our story throughout Rockbridge.

So, onward! As we enter 2019 we can't wait to see what the future brings to us all in our continuing mission to "preserve and promote the history of the Rockbridge area."

Mary Harvey-Halseth

An art exhibit in Lynchburg that resonates in Rockbridge



The Barns are Coming!!

Save the date, Friday, July 5, for a free community reception and new exhibit opening in our RHS Museum's Remsburg Gallery, as we close the centennial commemorations and displays illustrating World War I and move to spotlight "Historic Barns of Rockbridge County." The core of this new exhibit is curated by the Historic Lexington Foundation and it features interpretive text and taxonomies of barn types prepared by HLF's Executive Director, Don Hasfurther. The exhibit also features color photographs covering a range of still-functioning local barns and some that need preservation.



Painting of a barn on Zollman's Mill Road, built in the mid- to late-1800s. Oil on canvas by Beverly Tucker, 2018.

The Gallery will be decked with a rich array of original canvases depicting 19th- and 20th-century barns as well as barn interiors and landscapes newly painted by former HLF president Dr. Beverly Tucker. RHS last collaborated with Beverly and HLF in 2012 for our exhibit, "Dialogue with Diamond Hill: Oil Paintings and Oral Histories."

The barns exhibit will be complemented by relevant RHS artifacts featured throughout Campbell House; historic photographs from our trove at W&L Special Collections; other archival and community resources that illuminate the social histories of local farming; and as projects we've piloted in local schools that challenge students to integrate history, economics, and statistics in assessing the evolution of Rockbridge agriculture.

Stay tuned for updates on expanded museum hours and special programming that will extend the reach and variety of these materials through December 2019. On May 18, an HLF program held in the remarkable barn at Camp Maxwellton will situate their architectural themes in the context of Historic Preservation Month.

And in the Society's continued commitments to connecting history and nature, join us through the summer in a new initiative by our team of Master Gardeners to promote deeper understanding of our own cultivated resources and cultural history.

In the shade of our historic Campbell House Gardens, enjoy a relaxing change of pace through interactive summer Lunch Box Garden Talks on May 23, June 27, and July 25. Expert speakers will address the habits of "city birds" as distinct from their more rural cousins seen around barns; the therapeutic and culinary uses of herbs and plants in traditional folk medicine and foodways; and the relations between historic preservation and environmental history in Rockbridge.

As with any well-planned crop, there's much to cultivate here in our new initiatives and continued partnerships. And as with sturdy barns, there's much to store, preserve, and also to fuel, in the resources we duly share regarding local history.

— Eric Wilson



A barn sits atop Wade's Mill in northern Rockbridge County.

Selected Black History Resources in Special Collections and Archives at W&L

Through May 2019, W&L Special Collections and Archives is featuring an exhibition that showcases pockets of collections which we feel are important resources in studying Black History. Items on display include a copy of the 1841 Anti-Slavery Almanac, detailing the famous trial of the Africans who arrived aboard the Amistad. Another highlight is an original letter written by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to Louis W. Hodges, a representative of W&L's University Christian Association, declining an offer to speak at W&L owing to the work needed in forming grass-roots organizations to advocate for Civil Rights in communities across the south.

The exhibit also features items from the Walker-Wood Family Collection, which is part of the archival collections of the Rockbridge Historical Society housed in W&L Special Collections. These materials include brochures with maps (illustration at right) from 1940, when C.M. Wood became the first superintendent of Green Pastures Recreation Area. Located in George Washington National Forest, which today is known as Longdale Recreation Area, Green Pastures was created for use by families not welcome at Douthat State Park and similar facilities due to Jim Crow laws.

The W&L exhibit also highlights a recent addition to the archive: a ledger showing the membership and baptisms of the Randolph Street Methodist Episcopal Church from 1871-1887. The ledger was donated by Mr. Mike Roselius, who found it discarded in the

1970s while doing some contract work on the stained glass windows of the church. He realized its historical significance and received permission to save it. It made its way to Special Collections in March of 2019.

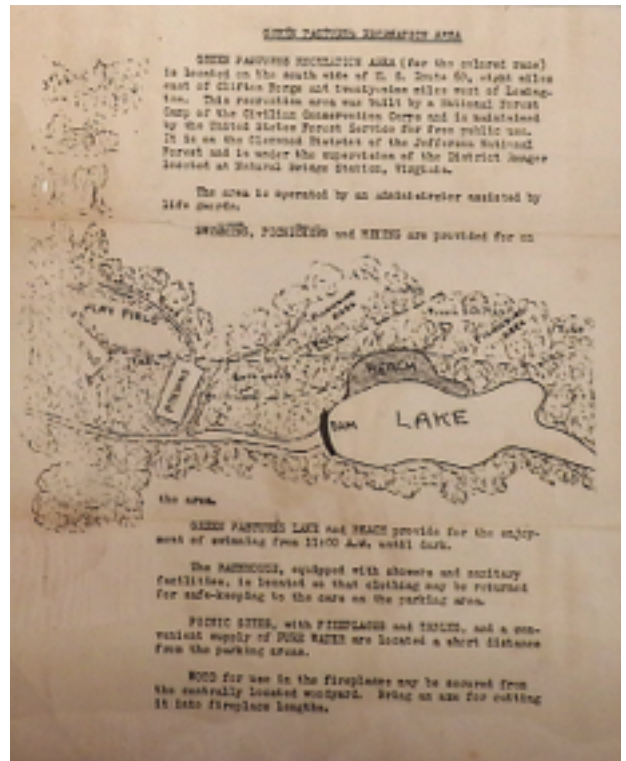


Though the book (seen at left) is worn and its spine broken and nearly nonexistent, the ledger is full of information thought to be lost to time. Not only is this a direct window into the African American community in post-reconstruction era Lexington, but it also stands to serve as an invaluable resource for documenting local genealogy. Written by people who were not legally allowed to read or write a decade earlier, it is a record of an important part of our community and the story of its citizens.

The exhibition will be open for viewing in the lobby of Special Collections and Archives in the James G. Leyburn Library at W&L until the end of May, 2019.

— Byron Faidley*

* Mr. Faidley is Collections Assistant, James G. Leyburn Library Special Collections



Historytelling in Rockbridge, the Valley, and Virginia

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Grounded in the archive, but narrated with brio, this is just the kind of brisk tale that Brumfield brings to life: surprising readers with things unknown, yet in a relevant, intriguing framework that bridges between past and present.

As Brumfield notes himself, “If my personal philosophy could boil down to a single sentence, it would be ‘Find what no one knows is missing.’ This adds the extra layer, to locate the stories. It’s always about the people and the personalities – I rarely write only about buildings!”

After Brumfield’s sampler of local, regional, and Virginia histories, he’ll join RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson in a brief conversation intended to seed wider audience discussion about how “historytelling” operates today across different media. What do we variously want – as audiences and authors, in short forms or long, interactive or exhibited – when we set out to talk about history in our evolving, digital age?



Rockbridge native and civil rights advocate Jessie McDowell Benton Fremont at her home in Los Angeles, late 19th century (Wikimedia).

Rockbridge Historical Society

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