

NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

July 2019

August Program

Hurricane Camille, a Rockbridge disaster 50 years ago

On the night of August 19-20, 1969, the storm blew through for only a few yet terrifying hours. But its impact and memories last long...50 years and counting.

“The Roar of the Heavens” was the title that author Stefan Bechtel chose for his classic book on Hurricane Camille, tracking its Mississippi landfall as a Category 5 storm, its stall over the Tennessee Valley, and the rare confluence of forces that renewed its movement northeast to its arrival in Virginia on both sides of the Blue Ridge.

“The worst night in the world” was the phrase one Nelson County survivor summoned, more bluntly. In the hillside hollows around Massies Mill and

Lovington, Davis Creek and Tye River, 27-31 inches of rain fell in five hours, turning streams into torrents as mountains shelved off from their

ancient perch. The menacing, punishing slurries of mud, rock, and water swept away everything in their path, including 100 bridges and 900 buildings. Some 124 lives were lost in Nelson County alone, with 37 people still, hauntingly, missing.

Here on the western side of the Blue Ridge, flooding was the chief catastrophe, as the high, rushing waters flowed through South River, Buena Vista, and Glasgow. In Rockbridge, 23 people died. The factories, stores, and homes of downtown Buena Vista were inundated with six feet of water, with Glasgow hit especially hard where the Maury swept into the James.



Buena Vista citizens tow a boat along Sycamore Avenue past City Hall (photo by Harry Martin).

On Sunday, August 18 – almost exactly 50 years later – RHS will host a free public program at Parry McCluer High School, 2:30 p.m., to commemorate Rockbridge’s loss and its heroism, its recovery and resilience, in the wake of Camille.

Four presenters, all native to the area, will blend different media and professional perspectives including slideshows, scrapbooks, contemporary newspaper accounts, and live musical performance.

Most importantly, the program will culminate in an opportunity for attendees to share their personal experiences from 50 years ago and reflections on the impact those events still bear today. In lasting spirit, RHS looks to provide a venue for meaningful commemoration, and also to crowdsource materials that can be preserved for generations ahead: whether sharing with neighbors on the day, or stewarding them as donations to the Society’s museum and archives.

The program will open with a digital presentation by Brent Watts, Chief Meteorologist for WDBJ-7, who won an Emmy for his retrospective on the 1985 floods (he was a 4th grader in Buchanan when that next major flood hit locally). He’ll offer scientific perspectives on the unique circumstances that drove Camille’s path and force. He’ll also consider how environmental conditions and forecasting technologies have changed over the ensuing 50 years, and what that might mean for natural disasters inevitably ahead.

<p>Program at a Glance</p> <p>Topic: Hurricane Camille</p> <p>Date: Sunday, August 18</p> <p>Time: 2:30 p.m.</p> <p>Place: Parry McCluer High School</p>

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Barns and Farms: Exhibits at Campbell House from HLF and RHS

On July 5, the Historic Lexington Foundation (HLF) and the RHS welcomed the Rockbridge community to a lively opening reception for their new, paired exhibits. Together they focus on the historic variety and visual appeal of Rockbridge barns with attention to the long farming traditions in the county.

Curated by Beverly Tucker, Don Hasfurther, and Suzanne Rice, HLF's colorful displays in the RHS Museum's Remsburg Gallery represent this architectural legacy through original oil paintings, photographs, and interpretive accounts of barn construction and use. Portraits of still-standing structures are combined with bucolic barnscapes, along with interior close-ups of rafters, beams, and posts, captured from arresting angles. Photographs drawn from an earlier exhibit at the Brownsburg Museum are fittingly hung on a rough barn door. Accounts of different barn types, building techniques, and tools are supplemented by advocacy strategies for barn preservation. An elegant catalogue, designed by Bob Keefe, reproduces many of the images and accompanying interpretive text.

RHS displays in other rooms showcase a host of traditional agricultural implements that visitors can examine and handle, along with other artifacts and photographs drawn from RHS and W&L Collections. Curated by Eric Wilson with key archival support from Seth McCormick-Goodhart, Byron Faidley, and Lisa McCown, these materials illuminate local, social histories of farming: the human touch, muscle, and patience that shape both built structures and social structures. As the displays and captions attest: the local workforce was diverse, including a range of men and women, older and younger, of both Euro-American and African-American descent; workers for hire or enslaved; itinerant hands, tenant farmers, and stewards of inherited family farms.

One unique section turns to the local cultivation and processing of sorghum, constellated in a series of large photographs taken in the 1930s by William D. Hoyt. At that time, sorghum was an important staple of Appalachian agriculture, providing a form of molasses. Hoyt's intimate photographs show the collective work that drove these operations, from the harvesting, cutting, stacking, stripping and milling of sorghum cane to the thickening of its juice by boiling and skimming in large flat pans. Across the room is a large oil painting by his mother, Margaret Hoyt, that dramatizes the steps of syrup production and was originally designed to be a public mural for the Works Progress Administration.

Collectively, this range of approaches and resources ties directly to the RHS educational mission, through school projects we've recently piloted. A module combining history, photography, statistics, and mathematical graphing uses RHS Collections and USDA data to explore patterns and changes in local crop production, from the late 19th and 20th centuries. Another unit, connecting literature and history, invites students to compare farming communities here in the

1930s with their contemporary counterparts represented in "To Kill a Mockingbird;" from there, students further explore dimensions of economic inequality in Rockbridge at different times.

In dedicating space to highlight local farm histories, arrangements of RHS' permanent collections now open up fresh contexts for visitors to see other elements on show. New displays feature histories of Lexington's Main Street; a rare oil bust of George Washington, painted by Pierre Daura; local African-American and women's histories; community fairs; changing perspectives on Natural Bridge. A 15-minute visitor orientation film, recently created by Anne McClung, should appeal to all who live here, as it chronicles the histories and images of Rockbridge over four centuries.

The exhibits will be free and open to the public, 12-4 p.m., Thursday-Saturday, through the rest of 2019.

— Eric Wilson



From the exhibits, a historic photograph of local farm children in the snow, ca. 1930 (Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities RHS Collections).

Hurricane Camille *Continued from Page 1*

Matt Paxton, Jr., former publisher of “The News-Gazette,” will then recall his own encounters with survivors as a young reporter in the field in 1969. As the catastrophe became more acute, he rushed to register some of the unforgettable images and accounts that would define the storm for our area, along with the sudden shocks of bodies washing to shore.

Musician Mark Jones (member of the quartet “Wonder” and owner of Rail’s End Wood & Metal Crafters) will reprise the moving song, “The Night of the Flood,” that he co-wrote with W.R. Deacon and has performed many times in concerts and at wakes. Most notably, at the dedication of the flood-wall in Buena Vista in 1997, a host of local school children sang this song, offering past respects and signaling new purpose. With Mark’s lead, all are invited to join the chorus once more, especially those who witnessed those events.

But it’s the open community testimonies that will form this program’s authentic, collective close. Tom Camden (Head of W&L Special Collections Library, and RHS Board Member) will moderate a discussion, inviting the audience to share the microphone. While he can duly share his expertise as custodian of RHS and W&L’s collections of local history (including items that will be on hand for display), he was also a high school student in Natural Bridge in August 1969, scrambling about through the devastation that daylight revealed on that unforgettable day.

Community members across generations are encouraged to come early to browse through scrapbooks, photographs, and newspaper accounts that made this community – too sadly – a focus of national attention. The program offers residents and descendants a special opportunity to share and record their recollections, or to speak with RHS more personally, for those who would rather not address the gathering as a whole.

The program will be held in the accessible gymnasium of Parry McCluer High School and will be free and open to all ages, with refreshments to follow. Please contact RHS if you’d like to speak with us to help set the stage ahead of this program, or to preserve your stories and records in our archives.

— Eric Wilson



The RHS Rensburg Gallery in Campbell House, shown above, hosts "Opening Old Doors: The Barns of Rockbridge," a multi-media exhibit curated by the Historic Lexington Foundation. Other RHS displays in the museum focus on historic photographs and artifacts representing the work of local farming communities. These exhibits will be open to the public 12-4 p.m., Thursday-Saturday, through the end of 2019.

Appeal for 2019 Donations

We'll soon be mailing out the RHS 2019 Annual Fund appeal. We were honored by our supporters' generosity in 2018; now we must ask again for you to sustain and increase those gifts to support our mission, and ensure our continued growth. If you missed us last year, please come back!

We hope you'll be able to send us a contribution by September 1. And if you have questions about pledged gifts, monthly electronic giving, Planned Giving or Endowment Gifts, please email us at RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org.

Give on line at RockbridgeHistory.org/Support

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