

NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

October 2019

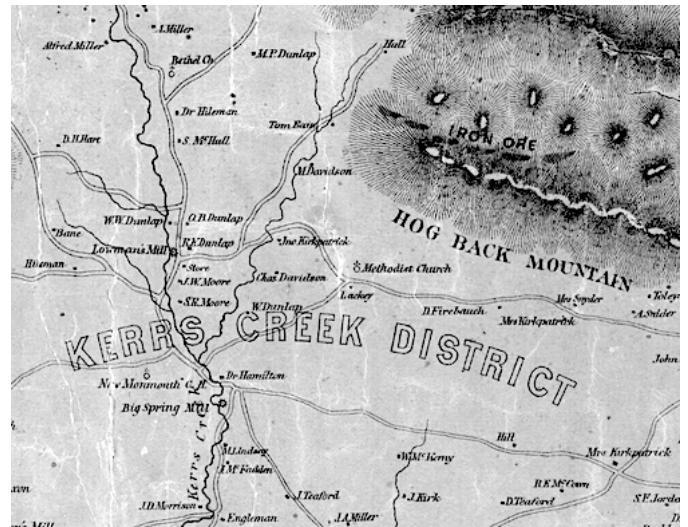
November Program

Clayton and Young returning to chronicle Kerrs Creek

In December 2015, nearly 300 RHS supporters and Rockbridge neighbors gathered at the House Mountain Inn for a multimedia program, “The Haunts of House Mountain,” presented by Sarah Clayton and Jennifer Law Young. The occasion turned out to be a game-changer for the Rockbridge Historical Society, advancing new vision for its community programming, opening outreach to local history resources and donated collections, and re-thinking the capacities of RHS organizational communications and media.

On Sunday, November 10, this pair of journalists will lead an audience on the virtual trail back down the mountain, through its hollows, and into the fertile terrain of Kerrs Creek, as they continue to craft a range of historic materials into a documentary film and a book. For this program, their rich harvest of new research will explore the history and culture of Kerrs Creek through stories, still images, and film, drawing on the voices of newcomers, old-timers, and descendants of families that began living in this western stretch of Rockbridge in the 1730s. Established in 1746, historic New Monmouth Presbyterian Church has offered their sanctuary so that RHS can host this county-wide gathering in the very neighborhood where the community first took root.

For millennia, indigenous peoples lived and moved through the area, drawing on its natural corridors and resources. Kerrs Creek was one of the earliest immigrant communities to populate what would become Rockbridge County (est. 1778), beginning four centuries of continuous settlement. For many, Kerrs Creek remains anchored in the distant past, singularly identified with the phrase, “The Kerrs Creek Massacre,” often conflating the deadly attacks and reprisals of 1759 and 1763. These clashes, like others in the region, were defining events for this 18th-century colonial frontier, as European, Indian, and American communities fought for control of land and lifestyle. These conflicts would stretch through the mid-century French and Indian War and even beyond the American Revolution into the mid-1780s.



Kerrs Creek District and its many families. Carmichael Map, 1883 (RHS Collections).

Program at a Glance

Topic: Kerrs Creek

Date: Sunday, November 10

Time: 2:30 p.m.

Place: New Monmouth Presbyterian Church
2348 West Midland Trail (Route 60)

Clayton will open the program with an overview of that era, “moving down the mountain,” as she puts it, by chronicling those early, dramatic incidents beyond the more familiar, reductive text of roadside historic markers. But Kerrs Creek has so much more history. In the 19th century, it became an active center for farming, milling, and distilling, with schools and churches, a social and commercial crossroads connecting the western passes of the Alleghenies to Lexington and points throughout the Valley. Local family trees can be traced to the era of the 1739 Borden Grant, many people still living in long-held family homes and farmsteads.

RHS and the presenters extend a personal invitation to this event for descendants of families whose names cluster in the Kerrs Creek District of Carmichael’s 1883 map of Rockbridge: Bane, Dunlap, Hall, Kirkpatrick, Miller, McKee, Moore, Teaford, Tolley, and many others.

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Chronicling Kerrs Creek

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Twin sisters Patricia Miller Hall and Pauline Miller Tolley lived in Kerrs Creek their entire lives and contributed their own oral histories to be presented here (Patricia passed away in December, while Pauline turns 93 this month). Quite literally the Miller's daughters, they were three years old when their father, Heiskell Miller, took over the the "Miller's Mill" from his own father. Originally named "Lowman's Mill" for its founder in 1816, its business operations finally ceased in the 1960s when flood waters filled the mill race with mud. Pictured on Page 3 as it was in 1928, the mill today lies in ruins, its four-story grandeur now marked only by old photographs and memories.

Across all these sites and centuries, the running narrative of Clayton's creative non-fiction, Young's artful photography, and their vivid oral histories will combine to provide the path on which to travel into the Rockbridge past. Many of these materials are already richly chronicled and illustrated on Young and Clayton's interactive website, lostintimeproject.com.



McKee Cemetery headstones for Martha Dunlap and John Dunlap (died at Gettysburg, 1863). The Dunlaps were direct descendants of families impacted by the "Kerr's Creek Massacre." Tradition holds that many of those killed were buried here (photo by Jennifer Law Young).

Clayton conjures her own memories of the area: "I spent my fourth- to sixth-grade years living in the 1832 Madison Dunlap house on a bluff above Kerrs Creek, attending the newly opened Highland Belle School, hiking and camping on House Mountain, playing softball in fields with cow-pies for bases, going to cake walks and turkey shoots at the fire house, attending the first funeral of my life, and becoming friends with many there. What I thought was going to be a purely journalistic approach to telling the story of Kerrs Creek has expanded to include memoir; rare was the house I entered, or the person I interviewed, that didn't open some personal link. I'd been to school with them, or one of my brothers had. I'd taught a few in my own "school" that I put together in the smokehouse on our

property, gathering desks from the early 20th century Highland Belle School that sat grandly on the hill above the store, old mill, bar, firehouse and garage that made up the heart of the community. Most of that's now gone, but the families are still there. Their stories became my story, or at least an important chapter of it."

Young reflects on her own personal stake in these histories, and the process of recording them: "I love history, and so much history has been packed into that one little valley between Hogback and the House Mountains. When my own family came to this country, the settlement that would become Kerrs Creek was on the far western frontier of European settlement. I often wonder what hardships those early settlers were leaving behind that made the raw frontier seem like a better option for their families. With my film, photography, and media projects, I try to capture a sense of what might have been going through our ancestors' minds. They saw the same mountains, creeks, and wildlife that we see in Rockbridge County today. When I'm out in the field shooting images, I really try to get lost in the past and bring that sense of time travel to my creative work."

After the presentation and before refreshments and time for fellowship, RHS invites community members to share their own insights and family stories at the microphone or to show mementos and artifacts at the display tables. As with other RHS programs over the past five years, this is a vital opportunity to connect your own personal ties and traditions with a variety of neighbors and new arrivals who care about Rockbridge history.

NOTE: Please consider carpooling with others to maximize parking at the church.

From the Executive Director

Our Hurricane Camille programming continues

Thanks to your attendance and your advance input, the RHS program “Hurricane Camille at 50” was an unforgettable event, with an overflow audience in the gymnasium at Buena Vista’s Parry McCluer High School. More than 375 people from Rockbridge, across the state, and out of state gathered to commemorate the storm’s 50th anniversary, its tragedies, its lesser known stories, the reckonings and resilience that followed. Remarkable Rockbridge, indeed.

You can now view a recording of the entire program on our webpage at RockbridgeHistory.org, along with the narrated slideshow prepared by meteorologist Brent Watts and a gallery of striking images taken in the wake of the storm. In addition, W&L student Nolan Zunk filmed and edited the presentations and community comments, then interpolated many of the 100+ historic photos shown before and after the program; this rich content is now available on line.

All told, these events signal strong community interest in further collecting your stories and photographs into a lasting and accessible crowdsourced archive of local history. This winter, we are planning to schedule another group discussion about the impact of Camille at the Glasgow Public Library, for a more informal and dynamic ‘conversation circle.’ Holding the event in Glasgow, where the Maury and James Rivers rushed together in catastrophic flooding, we aim to build on the testimonies of the many who shared their experiences in August and provide an opportunity for those who wish to add to it.

We are working with W&L’s Special Collections Library to add to the photographic scrapbooks, news-clippings, and other narratives archived there. Their professional support will both widen public access and provide alternative opportunities for you, your family, and your neighbors to scan images from the catastrophe or record oral histories on camera.

Stay tuned for updates on these additions to our programming, and please contact us at RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org or 540-464-1058 if you’re interested in recording your personal histories or scanning or donating family photographs.

We invite you to join our email list at RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org for regular communications about RHS programs, issues related to Rockbridge history, and partner events in Rockbridge and the region. We’d love to have you join our growing digital community!

— Eric Wilson



A Kerrs Creek landmark, Miller’s Mill, was originally established in 1816 as Lowman’s Mill. It fronted on the dirt road that would become Midland Trail. Little remains today (photo by William Hoyt, ca. 1928).

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