

# Local Black Histories: Virtual Access, Lasting Archive

Eric Wilson, Executive Director, Rockbridge Historical Society  
for the Lexington News-Gazette: 'Juneteenth,' June 19, 2020

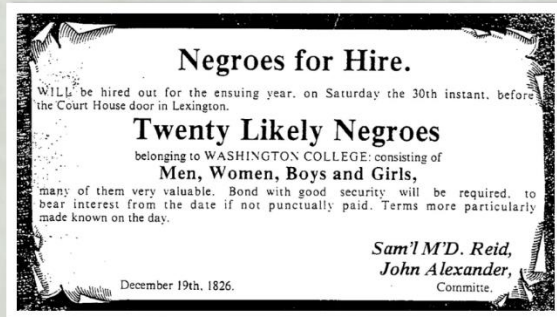
Over the past six weeks, the Rockbridge Historical Society has been digitally sharing a summer-long series on "Local Black Histories." As it grows online, this archive newly gathers precedent RHS articles, image galleries, primary sources, and multimedia links. Fitting additions from other sources and suggestions are weekly bringing momentum, and a critical weight, that serve to more broadly illustrate and constellate the lives and contributions of African-American residents, across four centuries of Rockbridge histories.

The currency and urgency of the Black Lives Matters movement – and the expressed curiosities of a growing number of community members – now lead RHS to share these timely, relevant resources more widely. Its website will both add and interconnect new materials as the series chronologically and thematically develops through September, to further remain as part of its standing digital collections. That archive is now accessible and serially expanding at [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org).

## Local Black Histories: Virtual Access, Lasting Archive

As our e-Newsletters roll out this series in the coming months, please check back in to see what new materials we've added. You can click hotlinks to access sites, or download full articles. Please [Contact Us](#) with your Questions, or suggestions for additions, or to add join the email list for latest releases, additions, and notice of relevant events.

Note: Resources with an \* have been produced in conjunction with RHS Programs or Publications.



### Rockbridge Slavery, and Journeys to Juneteenth

\*Eric Wilson, Local Black Histories: Virtual Access, Lasting Archive, Series Forecast

\*Fitzhugh Brundage, [Attitudes towards Slavery in Antebellum Rockbridge County](#)

\*Charles Dew, [Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge](#)

Larry Spurgeon, [Stonewall Jackson's Slaves](#)

\*Ted DeLaney, [Aspects of Black Religious and Educational Institutions in Lexington, 1840-1928](#)

\*Eric Wilson, [Journeys to Juneteenth](#)

Kenneth Wilson, [Juneteenth is for Everyone](#)

[Juneteenth Art Show 2020](#): Project Horizon and Nelson Gallery

Other clusters we will be adding in, ahead, spanning eras and different themes:

- *Emancipation, and Unease*
- *Reconstruction: New Institutions, New Challenges*
- *Re-Visiting Rockbridge: African-American Communities in Brownsburg, Diamond Hill, Natural Bridge*
- *Visitations: Graves, Memories, Homecomings, Communities*



[This portal is also complemented by other thematic clusters on Memorial Days and World War II, Hurricane Camille, and the 1918-1920 Influenza Pandemic: all topics that the organization has been developing since April, to provide free community-sourced content through COVID-19 enclosures].

This broad attention to a range of local African-American histories through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries builds on a foundation of programs, articles, and newsletters that RHS has produced, published and posted over the past four decades. Some items from the present menu are thumb-nailed below, with others to be spooled out in months ahead. Over time, these materials will push beyond some of the more familiar touchpoints before and during the Civil War, to wrestle with the long shadow of Jim Crow, trace some of the new turns and alignments through the steps of desegregation.



**Lexington Poet, Mechanic Spottswood Styles (b.1869), photographed with family ca. 1920s.  
When visiting W&L in 1941, Robert Frost noted that Styles' work "shows a poetic frame of mind"**

Community-sourced studies and oral histories will help canvas the county with spotlights on Brownsburg, Diamond Hill, Natural Bridge. To serve and further cue a range of interests, they draw on anthropology, art history, genealogy, fiction. And collectively, they ask questions of how the terms of 'history-telling' evolve – as well as the means through which we mark and memorialize history – media and messages that evolve just like the people and communities those narratives re-present, over time.



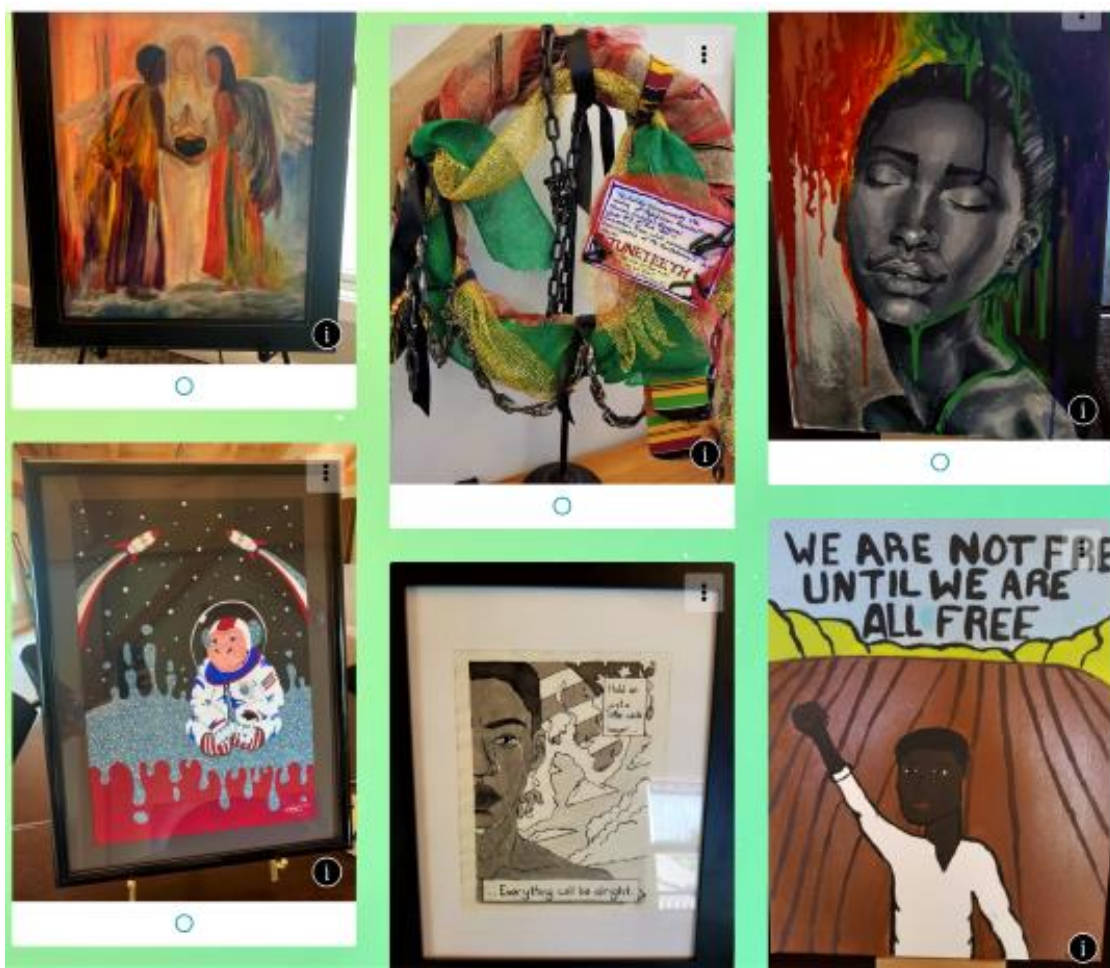
**Virginia Federation of Colored Women's statewide convention, 1921, hosted by Rockbridge Chapter President Eliza Bannister Walker at her Diamond Hill home, Blandome, pictured here.**



A ‘community syllabus’ of sorts, this series’ broadening vision was given a timely spur, at the year’s midpoint, leading toward the Juneteenth celebrations that have been growing locally and nationally in recent decades. RHS first explored its long and local histories in 2018 (see [tinyurl.com/RHS-Juneteenth](https://tinyurl.com/RHS-Juneteenth)).

Juneteenth heralds the ‘final’ end of slavery, as announced to the Confederacy’s last slaves in Galveston, TX, June 19, 1865 (although the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment would not be ratified til December 6). In the 150 years since, a range of African-American community gatherings and rituals have variously evolved through a range of witness and traditions: often in family and church reunions, with distinctive cultural, musical, and even distinct culinary traditions. And just last week, revived proposals for the holiday’s official recognition in Virginia state law add further relevance in thinking about how conversations about our local and national histories continue to reflect and refract lived experiences, past and present.

This year, Project Horizon and fifty local artists brought new color to these shared celebrations, piloting a ‘Juneteenth Art Show’ (open at the Nelson Gallery through June 27, Wednesday – Sunday, 11AM-5PM). Since the beginning of June, paintings submitted by local children have graced the storefronts of Main Street businesses and restaurants. Generous judges’ prizes were complemented by an online ‘People’s Choice’ vote, with a spirited celebration at the Gallery the night of June 19.



**Student and Professional Submissions to the 2020 Juneteenth Art Show, Nelson Gallery**

Given its broader theme of ‘Freedom,’ Project Horizon invited the Historical Society to support the exhibition by broadcasting some historical contexts. In turn, RHS’ website can now include some of those images – a community record all their own – to memorialize this moment in time. They will add new color to its own emerging canvas of African-American lives and institutions that have contributed locally to the Rockbridge community.

A common criticism of a singular “Black History” – common, because generally on target – is that: in textbooks, or Black History Month events, or popular media, the arc of significance too often, too breezily tends to jump from Southern slavery, to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, to Dr. King’s Dream. These are key benchmarks, indeed, but merely a few; even when recognizing of the shaping constraints time and space through which people learn about interconnected African-American, American, and global histories through schools, museum exhibits, newly consume through our age of quick-click media. As a result, this series looks to provide a broad and accessible reference, both for the general public, and for schools and university use.

The first cluster of articles focuses on 18th and 19th century Rockbridge Lexington. Several pieces highlight local experiences, attitudes, and systemic dimensions of slavery in the first hundred-plus years of local settlement, when the Valley, and newly established county and city, were increasingly populated by both immigrants and natives of varied European and African descent.

**Negroes for Hire.**

WILL be hired out for the ensuing year, on Saturday the 30th instant, before the Court House door in Lexington.

**Twenty Likely Negroes**

belonging to WASHINGTON COLLEGE: consisting of  
**Men, Women, Boys and Girls,**

many of them very valuable. Bond with good security will be required, to bear interest from the date if not punctually paid. Terms more particularly made known on the day.

*Sam'l M'D. Reid,  
John Alexander,*  
Committe.

December 19th, 1826.

**Bill of Advertisement: 20 Washington College-owned slaves  
For hire: Lexington Court House, Dec. 30, 1826 (image from Fitzhugh Brundage)**

On the eve of the Civil War, the 1860 Rockbridge census shows that 23% of the county’s residents were enslaved, most commonly depended on for agricultural, industrial, and domestic labor. Additional enslaved workers were rented from other areas in the Valley, or across the Blue Ridge, often appearing on government and property records kept where their owners lived. A smaller number of free people of color lived here as well. And in the arc of time, many women and men emancipated themselves by running away, and others would find their way to serve in United States Colored Troops.

Fitzhugh Brundage presented his RHS Program “Shifting Attitudes Towards Slavery in Antebellum Rockbridge County,” researched during a fellowship at the Stonewall Jackson House in the 1980s. His essay examines a range of local writings and speeches about slavery, between the 1790s – 1860s, those attitudes narrowing and hardening in the 1850s. Through detailed economic and census data, excerpts from diaries and local newspapers, and profiles of the many white and black lives that matter centrally in the primary sources, he provides key grounds to understand the systemic dimensions of enslaved labor, output, and ownership in Rockbridge.

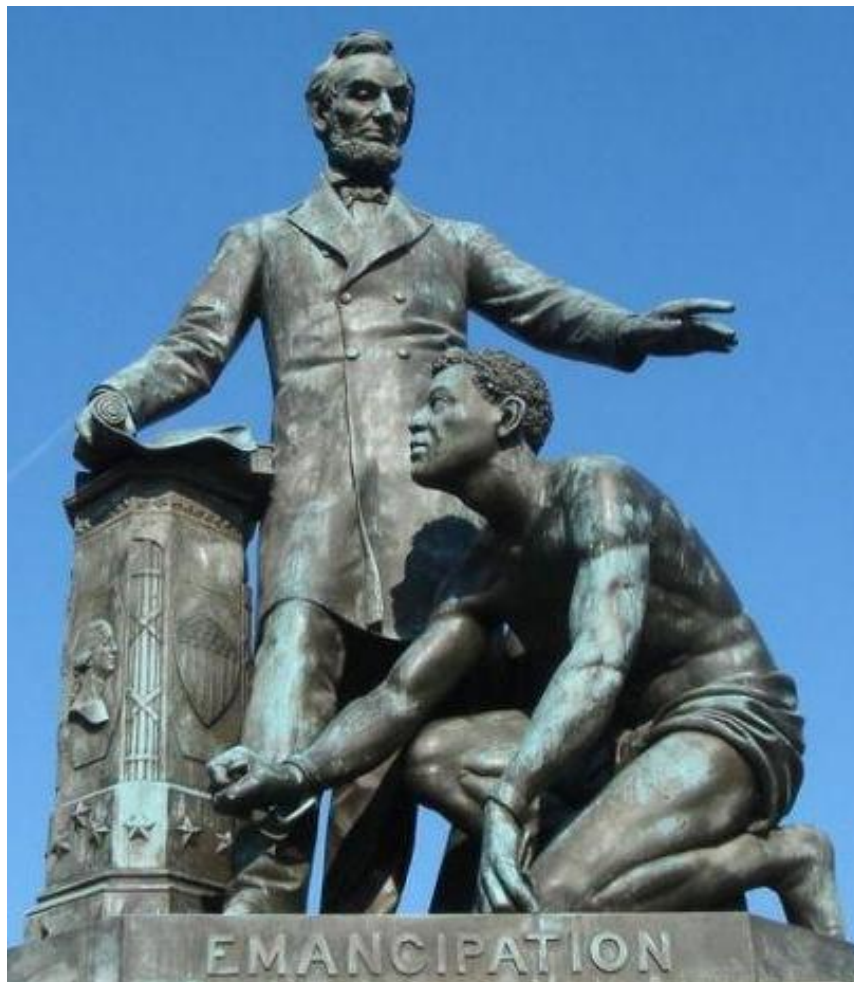
Brundage’s more general overview is complemented by Charles Dew’s “Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge,” a 1994 Program whose highly local analysis is even more intricately mapped in his prizewinning book, Bond of Iron. Dew’s extended case study centers on William Weaver’s iron-making and agricultural complex in southern Rockbridge, a syndicate of regional forges and furnaces he operated from the 1820s until his death in 1863. Although conventional images of slavery tend to envision either fieldwork or housework, the enterprise at Buffalo Forge was also critically dependent on skilled craftsmen and early industrial laborers (some owned, some rented, some already free), to drive its manufacturing, cultivation, and commerce.

Other contributions to the series turn more specific profiles of women and men whose lives transitioned from bondage to freedom. Larry Spurgeon, an expert genealogist who's worked with staff at the Stonewall Jackson House, has quilted together a range of half-seen threads and scraps: crossed-out court-ledger entries, newspaper snippets, and personal letters, as well as family webs that emerged within the era, and through descendant communities.

Cumulatively, his original research illuminates the biographies of seven men, women, and children who were owned by Thomas J. Jackson when he taught at VMI. He also uncovered new life-trails after emancipation, and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as some of them built new families and networks in Lincoln County, North Carolina. The care and new clarity in these records now brings due witness and context to the integrity of their distinct lives, providing newly resonant grounds to say their names: Albert, Amy, Emma, Hetty, Cyrus, George, Ann.

In offering his previously unpublished manuscript to help inaugurate RHS' new digital archive of 'Local Black Histories,' Spurgeon provides fresh encounters and facts for those here in Lexington, and the wider audience of Civil-War readers: purposefully cueing new insights, interpretations, and next questions, by turns.

In a future article for the News-Gazette, RHS will sketch another portrait it has newly, singularly discovered. For a brief tease, its hero was born into slavery in 1806, owned by one of the Rockbridge County's prominent early families. After being moved to Missouri in the 1820s with three families settling westward, he would famously risk his life in 1863 to foil a Confederate plot to blow up a bridge in the Civil War's western theater. Since 1876, his likeness notably stands as the life-model for the emancipation memorial in Lincoln Park, the first statue in the nation's capital to include a black man, and paid in full by the contributions of freed women and men. Rockbridge histories reach wide, indeed.



**Follow RHS' virtual series to learn the exciting story of a Rockbridge man, formerly enslaved, self-emancipated, who served as the model for the Emancipation Memorial in Washington, DC: paid for by the contributions of freedmen & women, dedicated by Frederick Douglass in 1876.**



Two other web-posts to follow are written by Lexington natives, both longtime History faculty at VMI and Washington & Lee. David Coffey's essay unfolds a harrowing portrait of local race relations pushes beyond the Civil War into the two decades that followed emancipation. Published in 1999, "Reconstruction and Redemption in Lexington" chronicles the arrival, backlash, and failure of the Freedmen's Bureau's tenure in Rockbridge. Pushing beyond the formal records of government and military authority (and their counter-resistance), Coffey also outlines how Lexington's post-War recovery was scarred by violence: street-fights with local students and cadets, reports of threatening 'nightriders' in the countryside, physical attacks on black citizens, and on white teachers who'd come to teach in the new 'Colored School' on Randolph Street. Most chillingly, Coffey spotlights the fate of Jesse Edwards, who had been accused of murder, would be pulled from the county jail in June 1869, then lynched, with the editor of the Virginia Gazette pronouncing that "righteous retribution" had been done.



**Lexington's first school for African-American children, established with the support of the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865. It operated for decades on S. Randolph St. until political pressure and fundraising by parents and community members led to the building of the larger brick school atop Diamond Hill in 1927, named for Lexington native Rev. Lylburn L. Downing.**

Coffey's narrower window is coupled with Ted Delaney's longer, institutional survey of "Aspects of Black Religious and Educational Development in Lexington, 1840-1928." He chronicles the establishment and growth of Lexington's increasingly overcrowded "Graded Colored School" on Randolph St. (1865-1920s), before the opening of Lylburn Downing School atop Diamond Hill (1927-1965). Along with its key focus on schools, DeLaney's survey also points to the first and crucial priorities of local freedpeople, investing available time and monies to establish several churches within the first five years after Emancipation: now and still operating as Randolph United Methodist Church (1865), First Baptist Church, Lexington (1867), First Baptist Natural Bridge (1870).

Access this growing portal of resources at the RHS website, or join its email series by writing [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org) to receive links and copies of this works, and notice of web-postings and related events ahead.