

# NEWS - NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKBRIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

November 2018

## RHS Election

Just before the December program, the Society will hold a brief Annual Business Meeting to elect five officers. The RHS Board has approved the slate of nominees proposed by the Nominating Committee to serve two year-terms:

- President, Mary Harvey-Halseth
- Vice President, Harper Donahoe
- Vice President for Property, Peter Simpson
- Treasurer, Greg Frederick
- Secretary, Paul Barron (2nd term)

Additional nominations from the floor will be welcome. All 2018 members of and donors to RHS are encouraged to cast a vote for its future leadership.

To confirm your membership status, contact us by email at [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org).

## December Program

### “The Characters and the Character of Arnold’s Valley”

Stephen Beck, outgoing president of the Rockbridge Historical Society, will present the Society’s final program of 2018 on Arnold’s Valley. Held at 2:30 p.m. on Sunday, December 2, in the gymnasium at Natural Bridge Elementary School, his illustrated slideshow is free and open to all, with plenty of parking and accessible seating. Refreshments and fellowship will close the afternoon with a chance to browse historic displays, maps, and RHS publications.

Beck’s approach differs from other recent programs in that he will focus not so much on the history of Arnold’s Valley as on the impressions of this distinct corner of Rockbridge as viewed by of rest of the county. Part of that distinction comes from its unique geographic “character” as the only part of Rockbridge County south of the James River, nestled on the western slope of the Blue Ridge. Other impressions draw from the notable “characters” of Arnold’s Valley, whose lives memorably impacted the area.

The presentation will survey the area’s topography, natural resources, businesses, schools, and churches, noting that those features haven’t always aligned with the area’s lively reputation. Beck will also chronicle how the area’s reputation was affected by some colorful people who lived and worked in Arnold’s Valley, including Mary McDowell Greenlee, Francis Anderson, S.C. Burks, W. Paxton, James Gilmore, Miles Poindexter, and Martha Watkins. Many families played their part through the region’s ups and downs, including the Austins, Cashes, Campbells, Coffeys, Hills, Johnsons, Lochers, Reynolds, and Shafers. Many current residents contributed directly to the research for this program with their own stories, photographs, and tours.

Steve Beck reflects, “This turn to Arnold’s Valley is a natural outgrowth of my earlier program on Natural Bridge Station. It’s exciting to know when the community wants to hear more on a given topic. And it’s a good opportunity for the Rockbridge Historical Society to show our responsiveness to those interests. I’ve personally enjoyed the chance to keep discovering new material. And I truly appreciate the personal connections that have come forth in our shared efforts to preserve and publicize these social, commercial, environmental and familial histories. I look forward to a lively Q&A following the slideshow. Come and join us.”

#### Program at a Glance

**Topic:** Arnold’s Valley

**Date:** Sunday, Dec. 2

**Time:** 2:30 p.m.

**Place:** NB Elementary School



"Arnold's Valley Squirrel Hunt," early 1950s (from Martha Watkins' scrapbooks).

## New RHS Exhibit, “World War I and Rockbridge”

November 11, 2018, was the 100th anniversary of the official close of World War I. But here in Rockbridge, in the Valley, across Virginia, and throughout the United States, events will continue into next year to commemorate those shattering and still-influential events. In the spirit of that Veterans Day centennial, RHS held a ‘pop-up event’ featuring its newly installed exhibit in the Remsburg Gallery, opening our doors on the holiday to honor local service and sacrifice, and further spur our interpretive work and programming into 2019.

‘World War I and Rockbridge’ highlights many local dimensions to the global conflict that has been revisited through a number of important statewide, national, and international World War I Commissions over the past four years. Our displays here draw not just on 80 years of RHS Collections, but on generous loans from some of our key organizational partners including the George C. Marshall Museum, the Virginia Military Institute, and Washington and Lee University, as well as individual donors.

On arrival, visitors may be initially drawn to the biographical portraits of some of the war’s more iconic legends, while learning more about their varied ties to our area. A series of panels spotlight the VMI training and early military careers of Generals George C. Marshall and George S. Patton; legendary aviator Kiffin Rockwell; and William Couper, acclaimed engineer, historian of VMI, and onetime President of the Rockbridge Historical Society.

Also gracing the walls are letters and postcards, scrapbooks from the field, and composite photographs of the early volunteer members of the W&L Ambulance Corps. Other accounts witness the extraordinary number of VMI men who served; over 90% of graduates and cadets between ages 18-40 served in some capacity. A photographic collage of tombstones in Lexington’s Evergreen Cemetery also bears witness to the number of local African-American men who served in Europe and in the United States. Their service was critical for both

the French and American armies, even as they struggled with the constraints of segregation and Jim Crow.

In RHS’ newly constructed display cabinets, some especially arresting artifacts include sidearms carried by both American and German soldiers, and the Doughboy and *Pickelhaube* helmets they wore; uniforms worn and banners borne by the 80th Blue Ridge Division; diaries and postcards sent home by enlisted men to their

Rockbridge families and sweethearts; a gas mask, razor kit, lighter with trench art, and treasured tobacco; colorful U.S. Victory Medals and Croix de Guerre duly awarded by both American and French armies; and a vivid first-person account of the Armistice cease-fire, as recorded by Covington’s Homer Simpson.

On the home front, original propaganda posters brightly flog War Bonds during and Victory Loans after the war, along with templates for speeches to be given by

“Four Minute Men” who were recruited to publicly promote and sell bonds in Rockbridge. One section draws on a previous RHS program detailing the 1918 influenza epidemic (Buena Vista was especially hard hit), as well as medical interventions and local public health measures to manage the outbreak, which claimed 100,000,000 lives around the world.

Other wartime items represent the War’s shadow over different county, city, and African-American schools, alongside local activist Eliza Walker’s “Colored Soldiers Appeal” (postcard reproduced on Page 5), a campaign selling memorial blocks to help fund the “Old Folks Home and Orphanage” for Lexington’s African-American children and elderly. Paired with an early 20th Century telephone, its ear cone silently waiting for news, these everyday mementos testify to citizens’ commitments and care for Rockbridge generations ahead.

This exhibit will continue through the first half of 2019, 100 years since most area soldiers had returned to Rockbridge and the signing of the Treaty of

*See WWI exhibit, Page 4*



**Nov. 11, 1918: Members of the W&L Ambulance Corps read news of the armistice in French newspapers. (Kinnear Papers, RHS Collections)**

## **Picturing the Weinbergs: Images of Lexington's Jewish Histories**

In 2009, the Rockbridge Historical Society published a volume in Arcadia's popular "Images of America" series. Chosen for its cover was a 1909 photograph (below) taken on Lexington's Main Street, affording a glimpse of the town's unpaved street, a newfangled automobile next to a still-needed horse wagon, and the recent commercial innovations of plate glass windows. Posing for the picture is a mixed-race public in outfits ranging from fine hats to shoelessness, revealing a community spanning different social classes at the turn of the "modern age," in the midst of the Jim Crow era, and on the eve of World War I.



Proudly standing in front of the car is Isaac Weinberg, bow-tied and erect outside of his thriving store near the corner of Main and Nelson Streets. Just a few years after immigrating to Rockbridge, Weinberg owned the largest department store in Lexington; on arrival, he bought a house on Lee Avenue, for the significant sum of \$9,000, where he lived with his wife, Rebecca, and three children. Though 19th Century records can be hard to locate and interpret, Isaac appears to have been Lexington's first Jewish merchant (at least as owner of a brick-and-mortar establishment). He was certainly one of its most respected businessmen, sitting on the Board of the First National Bank.

Regularly featured in newspaper advertisements of the time, Weinberg's Store stocked ready-to-wear clothing, millinery, toys, musical instruments, and sheet music. Isaac also brought Hollywood to Lexington, managing the popular Lyric and State Theaters. Eventually, his sons expanded the enterprise to a chain of movie theaters extending through the Shenandoah Valley and into the family's native Frederick County. Isaac himself was one of ten children, with his brother Leo also living for a time

in Lexington, graduating from Washington & Lee's Law School in 1906.

In 1997, RHS received from the Weinberg family a gift of portraits of Isaac and Rebecca Weinberg, shown on Page 4. Born in 1874 and 1877, respectively, both look to be painted later in life, perhaps based on studio photographs in the 1940s. Another photograph in the Arcadia volume shows the couple inside their store in 1904, flanking several of the female staff who handled the stream of customers. Interestingly, many of these young women bore names indicating Central European or Jewish descent: Boehm, Illig, Klicker. Perhaps they followed the Weinbergs from Maryland's multicultural communities for new work opportunities; perhaps some of their descendants still live in our region today.

A 1910 book, "History of Frederick County," notes that Isaac's father, Samuel, emigrated to Baltimore in 1850 at the age of 16, part of the growing wave of new American citizens arriving from Europe. Isaac's mother, Amelia (nee Loewenstein), was also born to German Jewish immigrants in Baltimore, and would be glowingly described as a paragon of religious devotion, domestic care, and volunteer civic service, "full of the milk of human kindness."

I recently found my way back to this familiar book cover, and the less familiar oil portraits, from a somewhat surprising cue. During our Apple Day festivities with "The Soldiers for the Union" and "The Ladies for the Union," one of the first-person interpreters portrayed Miss Rebecca Moss, a historically researched Philadelphia resident. As portrayed by Mira Form, Moss faithfully demonstrated the characteristic roles women played in Civil War relief societies, North and South alike, sewing clothing and medical supplies for soldiers. Her materials on "The Ladies' Hebrew Association for the Relief of Sick and Wounded Soldiers" reflect illuminating ties to the city's Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, which remains the oldest continually-operating Jewish charitable society in the country. While getting dressed in her costume at Campbell House, Mira looked at the Weinbergs' newly displayed portraits and the pictures of Weinberg's store. She remarked how much those photographs reminded her of the general store that her father ran, where she helped when growing up: his own Jewish establishment in small-town Tennessee.

I began wondering once more as to what other models of local Jewish history Rockbridge might frame.

*See Picturing the Weinbergs, Page 4*

## Picturing the Weinbergs

*Continued from Page 3*

In the 19th Century, the most familiar touchstone has been Moses Ezekiel, first Jewish VMI cadet, veteran of the Battle of New Market, and likely the first Jewish Mason in Virginia; RHS recently acquired the historic ledgers of Lexington's Mountain City Masonic lodge, dating to 1857, one of which records Ezekiel's election in 1866, shortly after graduating from the Institute. From this foundation, Ezekiel would become an internationally renowned sculptor, winning the Prix de Rome, and helping found the American-Italian Red Cross in Rome during World War I. Locally, he is best known for the 1903 statue of "Virginia Mourning her Dead" near VMI's Jackson Memorial Hall. He was also the sculptor of the 1910 statue of Thomas Jefferson in Charlottesville, just north of the Rotunda and target of the torch-lit "Unite the Right" rally of 2017. But for all Ezekiel's fame, how might we examine the contributions of other Jewish students, businessmen, artists, families and others who stayed here?

The Weinbergs' influence on our community offers one avenue through which RHS is beginning to explore more fully some of the histories of Jewish residents in Rockbridge, including its even less-chronicled Jewish women. Along with educational, commercial and professional histories, our research will add to new considerations of religious diversity within the region's predominantly Protestant traditions. Washington and Lee's Hillel House has already offered some valued insights, and we hope that local university students may find this inviting terrain for original research.



Portraits of Isaac and Rebecca Weinberg (RHS Collection).

As ever, we also count on you to share your own images, papers, artifacts, and oral histories that may flesh out more aspects of the Weinbergs' family and religious life, their commercial influence, and other aspects through which Jewish histories contribute to the past and present of our Rockbridge community, within our colorful cultural quilt.

— Eric Wilson

## WWI exhibit

*Continued from Page 2*

Versailles on June 28, 1919. Additional events through the winter, spring, and summer will include a new themed walking tour of relevant "Righteous and Rascals of Rockbridge" sidewalk pavers. Another initiative is shaping a cross-generational film series centered on WWI, including "Sgt. Stubby," a recently released animated children's film celebrating the first dog to be given rank in the U.S. armed forces after his exploits on the Western Front in France; and "Wings," starring Gary Cooper, the first movie to win an Academy Award for Best Picture thanks to its groundbreaking sequences in capturing early military aviation. We'll further affirm our educational outreach through a panel sharing perspectives from VMI history faculty, staff from the Institute's Center for Leadership and Ethics, and cadets who honored their VMI predecessors through panels now hanging in our Remsburg Gallery.

As we welcome visitors to this centennial exhibit, we also invite your own contributions. You can help enrich RHS' mission and legacy by sharing conversation and keepsakes, or even contributing to their preservation in our archives. Your own photographs, letters, and stories from local families with ties to WWI will add new perspectives as we rotate materials in the months ahead, as can period artifacts that illuminate the habits of everyday life in Rockbridge during the 1910s and the years in the Great War's wake.

Now free and open to all, we first advertised the exhibit and event to our digital audiences, in appreciation of that online engagement. We encourage even more interactive, efficient response from our supporters as we advance our capacities through our new website at [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org), our Facebook page, and email communications. To join our email list for regular updates, historical features, and partner events, please write us at [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org).

## Letter from the President

### These have been a busy and productive four years!

I'd like to say a few words about my presidency of the Rockbridge Historical Society over the past four years. First of all, I have been blessed with a bright, energetic Executive Director, as well as board members and volunteers ready to help our Society become more relevant to our core constituency, the residents of Rockbridge County. To that end, we have established and extended new outreach to local schools with frequent presentations of the Lewis and Clark Discovery Trunk and the Histories and Arts of Diamond Hill; and we have established the Rockbridge History Bee as a way to further engage high school students with their county history to complement their other studies. All of these activities will continue into the future.

We changed our quarterly programs from Monday evenings to Sunday afternoons, more than doubling average attendance. Our focus on easily overlooked areas of the county surely contributed to this increase. We also embarked upon other interactive events like archival and walking tours. The Campbell House Gardens and their new interpretive features are increasingly attractive, drawing more local and out-of-town visitors for investigation and leisure.

We constructed three new mobile display cases, giving us the ability to display smaller artifacts throughout the County at libraries, schools, banks, churches and other sites. They are presently in use in our Remsburg Gallery in support of our newly installed exhibit on World War I. The Gallery itself has been rehabilitated, with a large, lockable glass case to display individual photographs and memorabilia in a secure but spotlighted context.

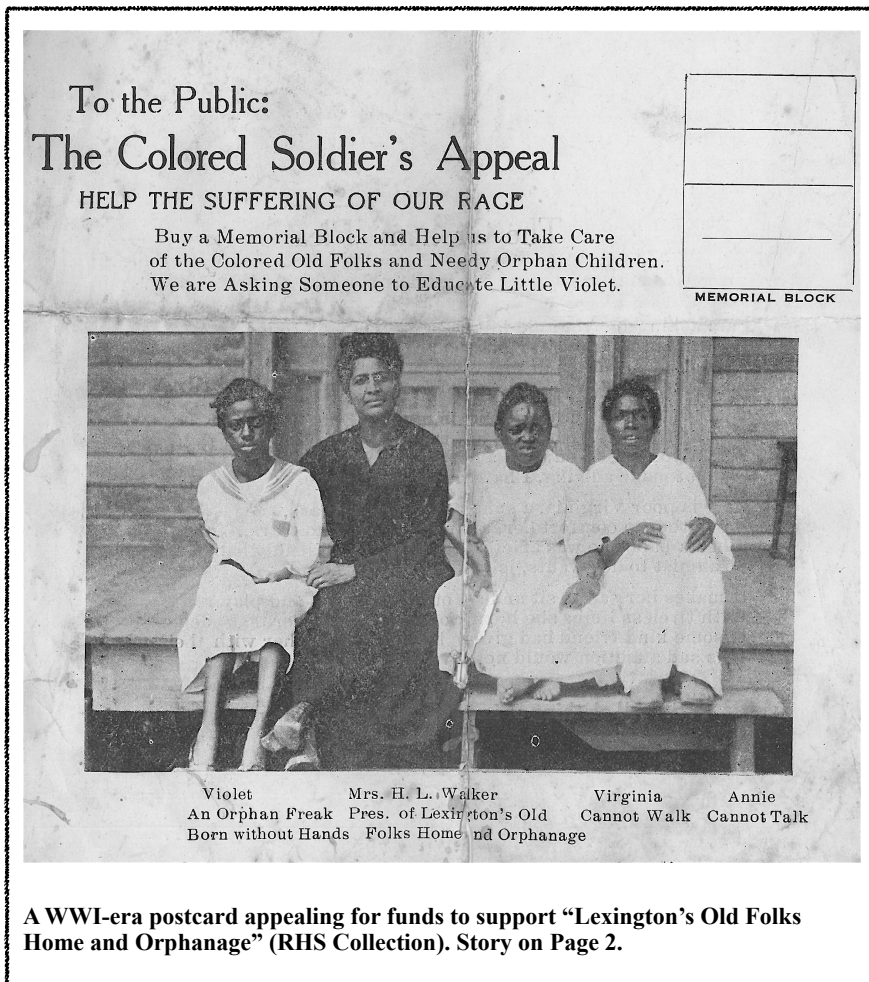
Given the extent of our artifact collection, display equipment, cases of books, and overflowing storage areas in the Campbell House, your Society has purchased property on Sycamore Avenue in Buena Vista which will allow us to

consolidate all of the above in a single space that is climate-controlled, something critical to protecting our more sensitive pieces of furniture, textiles, and small artifacts. Our historic papers and photographs will remain securely vaulted, catalogued, and accessible to the public thanks to our partners in Special Collections at W&L's Leyburn Library.

Crucially, this will open more space in the first floor of our headquarters in Campbell House, across from the Visitor Center, to begin designing a newly conceived 'Rockbridge History Center.' We are excited to renovate our museum spaces, and to support interactive encounters that can more comprehensively tell the stories of Rockbridge over time. Your continued support will help us feature relevant themes, singular artifacts, an orientation video, and new, digital media to reach all ages.

All in all, I am proud of our progress. I plan to continue volunteering on some RHS Committees, which I hope you will consider doing, as well. I look forward to a new administration that will extend the Rockbridge Historical Society's legacy and carry it to new heights.

--Stephen D. Beck



A WWI-era postcard appealing for funds to support "Lexington's Old Folks Home and Orphanage" (RHS Collection). Story on Page 2.

# Rockbridge Historical Society

## Board Members and Officers

President: Stephen D. Beck  
VP and Educational Outreach:  
Mary Harvey-Halseth  
Secretary: Paul Barron  
Treasury/Finance: Richard Hubbard  
Programs: Reed Belden  
Membership: Pat Gibson  
Volunteers: Anne Herring  
At Large: Harper Donahoe  
At Large: Greg Frederick  
At Large: Peter Simpson

## Board Member Ex-officio

Archives: Tom Camden

## Trustees

Peggy Webster Hays  
Seth McCormick-Goodhart (Collections)  
Dick Rathmell

**Executive Director** Eric Wilson

**Newsletter** Sally Nunneley

**Telephone:** 540-464-1058

**Email:** [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org)

**Website:** [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org)

Campbell House  
Washington & Randolph Streets  
P.O. Drawer 1409  
Lexington, Virginia 24450-1409



NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
PERMIT #25  
LEXINGTON, VA  
24450