

# Women Of A New Era

*Series, Exhibit Profile Notable Women In Area History*

*Editor's note: This is the first of a series of occasional stories centered on Rockbridge Women's Histories, written by Eric Wilson, executive director of the Rockbridge Historical. Related exhibits will be on display at the RHS Museum this summer: Saturdays noon to 4 p.m., or by appointment. See RockbridgeHistory.org for more details.*

AT TOP RIGHT is a childhood portrait of Ruth Anderson McCulloch (1876-1971) taken by Michael Miley.



ELLEN ANDERSON GLASGOW (1873-1945) is shown above, along with a sash she wore in New York City's 1911 Suffrage Parade.

**NOTES FOR WOMEN**

On the heels of Women's History Month, dozens of local and regional walkers strolled the streets of downtown Lexington, on a Rockbridge Women's History Tour, led by the Rockbridge Historical Society, and several partnering peer museums.

With representatives from Jackson House, Washington and Lee University Museums, and the Marshall Foundation, the two-hour sweep surveyed four centuries of cultural, economic, and political life, seen through the lives of leading women from this area. In a welcome surprise, a fifth-great granddaughter of Mary McDowell Greenlee, and a third-great grandson of Eliza Bannister Walker joined the tour. Both of those pioneers had been highlighted in the event's associated exhibits, and featured in presenters' commentary at the six tour stops along the way.

The footprints of that enterprise now extend ahead. This multi-part newspaper series, and still-growing installations at the museum, will jointly chart many patterns and profiles that bring new perspectives to the integrity and distinctive dimensions of local women's experiences through time.

With the popularity of the "pop-up displays" installed in the museum, public library, and digital media, RHS will be amplifying those exhibits the weeks ahead, and welcoming visitors to tour them during weekends this summer (see RockbridgeHistory.org for developing details).

RHS Collections now couple nicely with some crowdsourced suggestions for further investigation and tribute. Among those women suggested so far have been Dolores Kostelni, "The Happy Cook"; Dorcas Campbell, Miss Virginia 1963; and noted opera singer Polly Leyburn, who played the first piano owned in Lexington (ca.1800), heard through the open windows at her family home, where Haywood's now stands ... with its own piano bar. More suggestions are welcome through the RHS website.

Visitors to the museum will note several connective themes, spotlighting girls' experiences at local schools, back into the early 1900s. Other touchstones highlight "Women and War," exploring a range of service, sacrifice, and support in World War II, as well as the American Civil War.

Several displays also point to the impact of women's writing; and often, its deployment for political activism and social organization, the focal point for this series' first installment. The following are portraits of three women featured in the museum exhibits and tour: all born within three years of one another, in that first decade since the end of war, the arrival of emancipation, and new responsibilities.

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RHS' Rockbridge Women's History walking tour pauses outside Lexington's historic courthouse to hear Marshall Foundation librarian Melissa Davis discuss pioneering codebreaker, Shakespeare scholar, and international security analyst Elizebeth Smith Friedman (1892-1980). (photo by Eric Wilson)



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# Women

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## RUTH McCULLOUGH

Ruth Anderson McCulloch (1876-1971) lived nearly a full century here, and certainly left her mark.

Like all women and men, it's hard to reduce McCulloch to a singular, representative frame. But her range of cultural leadership and organizational skills make her a fit avatar for what would come to be called "The Age of the New Woman." The early 20th century brought a flourishing wave of social, educational, and political opportunities through which women shaped the public sphere. Among them were a striking rise of clubs, charitable groups and publishing platforms that stretched beyond traditional if vital modes of church-work, missionary service, and neighborly sociable circles.

McCulloch's legacy is still variously recognized today, including a Righteous and Rascals Story Stone fittingly right outside the RHS Museum (see RRRockbridge.org for other biographies from this Women's History Walk). Still-active groups like the Blue Ridge Garden Club and the literary "Ignorance Club" continue to credit her founding roles. Crucially, she was also one of the lead figures in driving local preservation efforts that directly led to the establishment of the Rockbridge Historical Society, itself, in 1939.

As a local historian and author, she delivered several talks through the Society's first three decades, capped by two posthumously published volumes of "Mrs. McCulloch's Stories of Ole Lexington." Her sleek, lively vignettes are laced with what's sometimes, condescendingly, called "local color." But the distinctive details she recorded still provide key touchstones, and spurs, for further research at RHS, and its collaborations with local students and faculty. Perhaps most memorable in the wide-ranging McCulloch archive is an interview recorded in her hallowed, gravelly voice. As part of RHS' recently digitized oral history collections at W&L

Special Collections, her recollections will soon be accessible to current and future generations of residents and researchers who are keen and curious about those portals to local history.

## ELLEN GLASGOW

One of McCulloch's more broadly noted contemporaries, bearing her own ties to Lexington, was Pulitzer-Prize winning author Ellen Glasgow (1873-1945).

Born in Richmond just one year earlier, Glasgow left her own narrative legacy, and a profound sense of place scripted across Virginia landscapes. A celebrated chronicler of women's lives and perspectives, she sometimes stands in the "regional shadow" of more "cosmopolitan" writers like Edith Wharton. But in the sweep of 20 novels, Glasgow's fiction traffics the social and cultural rhythms of both authentic rural and urban landscapes.

Her familiarity with Lexington and Rockbridge is evident in the settings of two of her novels: "Barren Ground" (1925) and "Vein of Iron" (1935). The latter is grounded in locally familiar valleys and creeks around Timber Ridge, and elevates one of the Shenandoah Valley's most distinctive peaks, House Mountain, to even more divine register.

In the novel's early lyrical flights include this passage:

*"The child lay on the flat rock and watched the road that climbed through the small valleys within the Great Valley.*

*"God's Mountain, father said, was the oversoul of Appalachian Virginia. Whenever she gazed at it alone for a long time, the heavenly blue seemed to flood into her heart and rise there in a peak. That must have been the first thing God created, and blue, she supposed, was the oldest colour in the world ... she could see the comfortable farmhouses, with roofs of red painted tin or grey weather-beaten shingles ... Shut-in Valley was not really shut in except at the farther end."*

Glasgow is also the source for one of the most visually arresting



DISPLAYS at the RHS museum focus on the experiences and leadership of Rockbridge women, from the 18<sup>th</sup> into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Guiding themes include girls' education and athletics; women and war; women and politics; and women authors and historians who shaped public understandings of the local past (photo by Eric Wilson)

artifacts on show at the museum: a boldly-blazoned sash calling for "Votes for Women" that she wore in May 1911 while among the 3,000 activists marching in New York City's suffrage parade. In preceding years, she'd stood as an international ally by joining England's groundbreaking marches in 1909, while also serving as a noted member of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia. Through her circle of friends in Lexington, this iconic banner would be bought at the R.E. Lee Episcopal Church bazaar, and donated to the local chapter of the League of Women Voters. The league would later donate it to the Rockbridge Historical Society for preservation and educational outreach, like this very exhibit.

## ELIZA WALKER

By complement, Eliza Bannister Walker brought her own stamp to local, state, and national politics (born squarely between Glasgow and McCulloch, 1874-1939).

As president of the Rockbridge Chapter of the Virginia Federation of Colored Women, she organized a 1931 rally and fundraiser at Lexington's First Baptist Church for Chicago Congressman Oscar De Priest. Despite the seeming distance, she mobilized her political clout and local networks, and even printed campaign poems to help reelect the first Black U.S. Representative to be elected outside the South.

Three years earlier, Walker had published in the Lexington Gazette a more locally targeted poem, heralding the communal dimensions of a major shift in national politics (scripted in dialect, and directly addressed in the second-person, her bouncing, colloquial couplets intentionally differ from her more reverently voiced spiritual poems, sold to support local charities).

Calling a 1928 meeting of Lexington's "Colored Democrats" to her elegant home atop Green Hill, Walker excerpts a stanza from her longer 100-line poem warning that 15,000 Black voters across Virginia are poised to abandon the growing indifference of the party of Lincoln and Grant (the "Publicans") and the unfulfilled promises of Reconstruction. This, in the pressing shadow of the seismic presidential election between Republican Herbert Hoover and Democrat Al Smith.

A few years later, that calculated turn was further reckoned in a handwritten manuscript praising the economic relief of The New Deal (again, her visible hand-edits reveal a persona, emerging in still-drafting dialect):

*"Rusevelt dun just what he sayd/When we was hungray he gave us bred ... He grabbed this Countray in his fist/And turned it around without a miss/He started the wheels to running fast/Then the people a new hold did grasp."*

The colored Democrats of Lexington are requested to meet at the residence of H. L. Walker Friday, Nov. 2, at 8:30 p. m.  
You think we all is Publicans,  
But let me get you told,  
Dis new Negro you's dealin' wid  
Can't fool him like de ole;  
Mammy used to tell us  
De Publicans sot us free,  
But dey's all gone to heaven  
And dead as dey can be.  
MRS. H. L. WALKER.

THIS IS A STANZA from a longer political poem written by Eliza Bannister Walker (1874-1939), voiced in rhyming dialect published in rhyming the Lexington Gazette in 1928.

In and beyond their writings, Glasgow and Walker help bring visibility to women's political protest and leadership. These are inviting, if often-overlooked, glimpses of work ahead of, and in the still-unfinished wake of, the 19th Amendment: ratified in 1920, and granting many but not all American women the full opportunities to vote. Absent from the beneficiaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment were women of color, as emphasized in the famous 1915 NAACP essay, "Votes for Mothers," written by Coralie Franklin Cook, another nationally recognized suffragist who was born enslaved in Lexington, a decade before the peers she is flanked by in the RHS Museum exhibits.

Even without a representative voice of women holding legislative office, their political par-

ticipation, like men's, emerged through many different forms of activism and social networks, through both national and community-based efforts. Here in Rockbridge, women were not elected to local governing bodies until 1979, when Nanalou Sauder became the first woman elected to the county Board of Supervisors. Susan LaRue and Margaret Updike soon followed on the city councils of Lexington and Buena Vista.

For more information about exhibits at the RHS Museum (now open by appointment, with more regular hours in June) or to suggest other women or gendered perspectives to highlight in local history, past or present, send an email to Director@RockbridgeHistory.org.

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