



## FARMS, MILLS AND SHOPS

### RHS Program Explores Early Rockbridge And The Valley

On Sunday, May 22, at 2 p.m., the Rockbridge Historical Society invites all area residents to another of its free, community-based history programs, in-person once again.

Dr. Kenneth E. Koons, professor emeritus of history at Virginia Military Institute, will share an illustrated slideshow entitled, "Farms, Mills & Shops: Economic Activity in Rockbridge and the Shenandoah Valley, 1750-1860." Designed to welcome general audiences and curiosities, the program will be held at the Gillis Theater in VMI's Marshall Hall with ample parking in the adjacent lot.

Originally scheduled for May 2020, the sweep of Koons' program further advances RHS' commitments to provide both geographic and thematic perspectives on local histories. For this slideshow talk, to be followed by questions and answers, Koons will detail economic development and innovation in the region at large, while using Rockbridge as a familiar focal point. His survey reaches from the conditions of the mid-18th-century (even before this county was formally carved out of Augusta and Botetourt, in the 1770s), leading up to the precipice of the Civil War.

As the RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson stresses, "Programs like this continue to couple the long run of experiences and institutions of Rockbridge in comparative Valley contexts. By fronting connections between this county and its neighbors, presentations like this can provide instructive, complementary lenses to explore the past, rather than more insular perspectives. Together, the couplings we're eager to frontline in our programs and communications illustrate diverse patterns of growth and decline, while also allowing us to engage both iconic figures and underrepresented voices."

Koons' own overview highlights regional networks and interwoven modes of production: "In examining economic activity in the Shenandoah Valley, historians have focused upon agriculture as the main driver of the regional economy. Although their accounts



AT TOP AND ABOVE are two of the illustrations drawn by David Hunter Strother (aka Porte Crayon) from his "Virginia Illustrated: Containing a Visit to the Virginia Canaan" (1857). Strother's antebellum images of Valley farmscapes and labor preceded his service as a topographer for the U.S. Army, when he helped lead the raid on Lexington in 1864; after the Civil War, Strother served as adjutant general of VMI.

have greatly improved understandings of the region's agricultural operations through time, concentrating on the history of farming has also obscured the importance of manufacturing and the provision of goods and services to the long-term economic vitality of Rockbridge, and the region at large. This presentation helps to correct this imbalance by illustrating histories of manufacturing in the Shenandoah

Valley, from the frontier era through the early Republic and late antebellum period."

Koons' slideshow will offer portraits of everyday life and labor that illuminate this rich terrain. They draw from written records, period drawings, historic photographs, and a breakdown of jobs and professions that he's catalogued from the Rockbridge census.

Topics to be discussed include mining and light processing industries such as grist mills, sawmills, iron furnaces and tanneries. He'll also assess the wide array of goods and services provided by artisanal craftsmen who inhabited the villages and towns of the region, such as blacksmiths, coopers, wagon makers and harness makers.

Speaking from years of research, teaching, and exhibit development, Koons said, "These most recent explorations were especially surprising because – despite agriculture's central historical role in developing the Shenandoah Valley's economic foundations – the region's manufacturing sector was, by far, the largest and most heavily capitalized among rural regions of Virginia. It's important not to overlook how significantly manufacturing activity contributed to the success of the Valley's regional farm economy."

In 2020, Koons retired from VMI as General Edwin Cox '20 Institute Professor of History, after 38 years teaching at the school. His popular, signature course for cadets was "The History of Everyday Life." Other classes related to this talk included a research seminar on the social and economic history of the Shenandoah Valley, and a wide-reaching course on "Food and Hunger in History."

Koons' publications focus on commercial wheat farming, manufacturing activity, and on slavery and its aftermath in the Shenandoah Valley. Among those he's published for RHS, see his essay on "Social Life and Leisure in the 19th Valley of Virginia," at <https://tinyurl.com/Valley-Life-Leisure>.

Most recently, with Augusta Historical Society Past President Nancy Sorrells, Koons co-curated the Brownsburg Museum exhibit, "Grain into Gold: Milling and Distilling on the Dividing Waters." Jointly centered on Rockbridge and Augusta, its richly illustrated cata

See *Early Rockbridge*, page B4



GLENWOOD FURNACE, built in 1849 for Judge Francis T. Anderson, still stands in Arnolds Valley as a relic of an era when iron furnaces and forges were critical to the needs of the local economy and vital suppliers to larger ironworks. (photo from Virginia Department of Historic Resources).



RED MILL near Natural Bridge was one of a number of mills that served area residents in the 1800s. Although the millwheel no longer stands, it can be faintly seen running here, in this undated photograph. (courtesy of Washington and Lee Special Collections)



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AT LEFT, the 1883 "Carmichael Map" of Rockbridge County illustrates local farmsteads, mills and furnaces, including McCormick's Mill near Midway. (Library of Congress photo) ABOVE, linen production in the 18th-19th century Valley dressed cultivated flax into spinnable fiber with simple tools. (photo courtesy Frontier Culture Museum) AT LEFT IN STORY is the company seal for the Howardsville and Rockfish Turnpike Company, whose toll road would connect in 1853 with the Brownsburg-Middlebrook Turnpike. BELOW is a poster based on a painting by N.C. Wyeth, commissioned by the International Harvester Company for the centennial of the reaper's 1831 debut at the McCormick farm. (Wisconsin Historical Society).

## Early Rockbridge

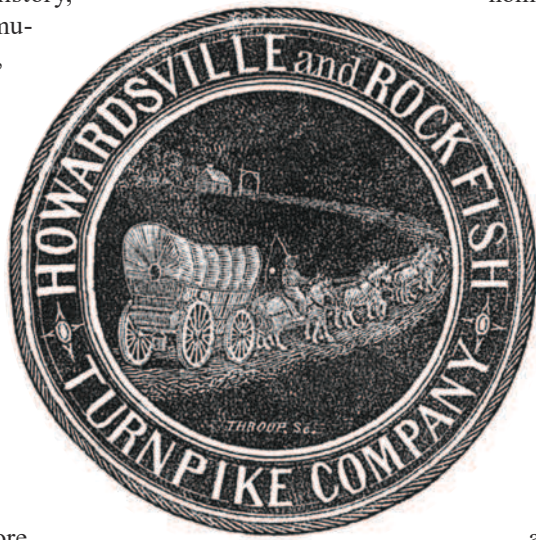
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logue will be available for purchase before or after the program, along with other RHS publications, and historic area maps.

In his own commitments to public history, Koons has served as a consultant to museums, government agencies, law firms, and nonprofit organizations on issues relating to the history of agriculture and rural life. Locally, he also serves on the Leadership Council of the historic McCormick Farm's Research and Extension Center in Steeles Tavern. He keeps bees and raises sheep in Spottswood, an even more personal stake in some of the work and traditions that he'll be discussing.

Wilson emphasizes the event's broader importance: "Ken's program covers so many bases: its geographic sweep, and attentions to many of the core economic conditions that led to the founding and growth of Rockbridge County. It's great terrain to explore anew, as we welcome back our standing supporters and new audiences in scale, still building on our recent return to smaller presentations in schools, libraries, walking tours, and digital programming. The size and

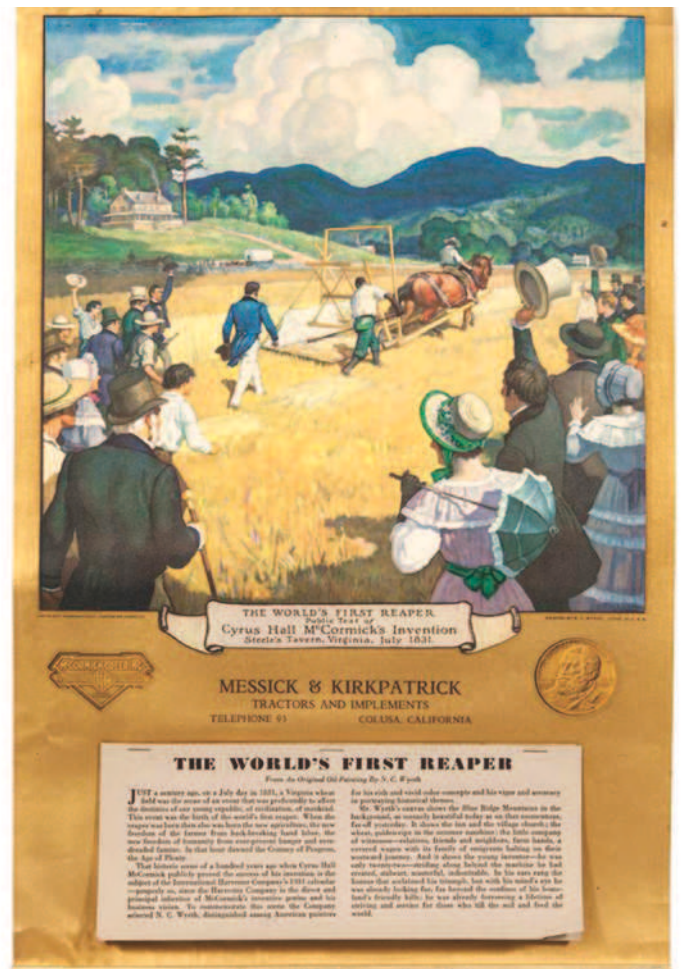
technical capacities of the Gillis Theater offer our guests an accessible and comfortable arena for Koons' wide run of projected illustrations, as well as complementary RHS displays - and free books to take home!"



Masks are not required, but VMI protocol will apply, if conditions change.

RHS has worked with the George C. Marshall Foundation to align the afternoon's timing, so that attendees can also enjoy some of the neighboring events celebrating the Foundation's anniversary. Before or after RHS' 2 p.m. Gillis Theater program, attendees can enjoy a range of activities next door from 1 to 4:30 p.m. See [MarshallFoundation.org](http://MarshallFoundation.org) for more information.

For more details on related RHS programming, and other resources exploring early, rural Rockbridge histories, see [Rockbridgehistory.org/events-2/#Past](http://Rockbridgehistory.org/events-2/#Past).



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