

News & Views

on the preservation issues
that affect our historic
Rockbridge county.

SUMMER 2022



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NATIONAL PRESERVATION MONTH

In the spring of this year Historic Lexington Foundation focused its attention on a little discussed subject—the reality of slavery in Rockbridge County. We felt it was time to “Put a Human Face” on the topic as well as frankly and openly discuss it. The result: the complex, meaningful, and diverse look of five former slave quarters in the Brownsburg area. The tour proved to be one of the best-attended activities in many years and was greatly appreciated by those in attendance, many of whom came from outside the area.

Five former slave buildings were highlighted. The Preservation Month events began on May 7 with **Still Standing: Brownsburg’s Slave Houses**, which provided the public with a unique opportunity to visit five sites in the Brownsburg area with extant slave houses. The event was undertaken in partnership with the Brownsburg Museum and followed cooperation with Virginia Humanities and the organization “Saving Slave Places” to document the five structures. They were generally well preserved, but some were more “modified” than others. Artist and board member Bruce Macdonald pre-visited them and provided a pastel painting of each to the owners of the properties who had preserved the former quarters.



John Friedrichs demonstrates masonry techniques outside the slave house at Whitehall.



HLF continued to explore this historic period with an interesting and enlightening talk by Lucia “Cinder” Stanton at First Baptist Church in Lexington. Ms. Stanton is the former Shannon Senior Historian for Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello estate, as well as author of a popular book on the subject. The talk was entitled **From**

Little North Mountain to Lexington: The Enslaved Families of Monticello and Beyond. Stanton’s remarks drew on the result of a thirty-year oral history project to shed light on life in the cabins and workshops of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. The oral history project she directed revealed the remarkable strength of family bonds in the face of the realities of slavery. Of special interest was Lexington’s John Jordan’s brick work at Monticello. While there, Jordan convinced Jefferson reluctantly to sell one of his slaves, Brown Colbert, to Jordan for use in his building effort in Lexington. Stanton also told of Betty Brown, who was one of twelve children of Elizabeth (Betty) Hemings, a sister of Sally Hemings. Members of the Hemings family also found their way to the Lexington area where their descendants still live today.

Charles Dew, retired professor of American History at Williams College, concluded the Preservation Month Activities with a talk at Falling Spring Presbyterian Church. It was a packed event with much interest, reflected in the fact that while Dr. Dew said he’d only talk for 45 minutes—with questions and comments—he talked for one and a half interesting hours. This highlight concluded the HLF Preservation Month activities with a presentation around his research in writing the acclaimed book ***Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge.*** The event was followed by a book signing and a tour of the slave houses at Buffalo Forge.

The masters at Buffalo Forge were William Weaver and his nephew Daniel Brady, both from Pennsylvania. The enslaved included Sam Williams and Garland Thompson, who worked the iron-making facilities at Buffalo Forge. While it did not make the institution of slavery any less evil, Dew describes that the workers at the forge were paid if they surpassed their work quota. One worker even had a bank account in Lexington.



Finally, as summer moves inexorably into the slow, lovely days of beauty, we are facing a move. Our offices, formerly on Main Street, will go to 15 South Jefferson Street. It is good space, light and attractive, but moving won’t be fun.

