

Strasburg Heritage Association



Volume 5, Issue 1

Winter 2005

Strasburg, Virginia

Next meeting - Barbara Adamson

Please join fellow SHA members, guests and interested citizens for our annual meeting to be held Sunday, February 13, 2005 at 3:00 p.m. at Strasburg Town Hall. Among the business to be conducted at the meeting will be the election of our Board of Directors.

We are pleased to have as our speaker Ray Wright, Curator of Historic Buildings at the Frontier Culture Museum in Staunton. Mr. Wright's lecture and slide presentation is entitled "The Past and Present Historic Bowman House, a Valley Pioneer's Fiuerkichen Haus." He will focus on this historic house, built north of Timberville in Rockingham County in 1773 and now part of the Frontier Culture Museum. Mr. Wright will share information about George Bowman, some of whose descendants live in Shenandoah County, and about the building's history and German-style architecture. He will highlight how the Bowman family conformed to the 18th Century migration and settlement patterns occurring at that time in the Shenandoah Valley. Mr. Wright has a BA degree in History and a Master's in Historic Preservation and has worked in building and architectural restoration at the Museum for 14 years. He is an enthusiastic and knowledgeable speaker and welcomes questions and comments from the audience.

Refreshments will be served at the meeting and the public is cordially invited. Just in case, we have set Sunday, February 20 as a snow date at 6:00 p.m. at Town Hall.

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President's Message - Babs Melton

I've often said that Strasburg Heritage Association has the best Board members I've ever had the privilege to work with. As a result of their efforts, SHA can claim justifiable pride in its accomplishments. In 2004,

- Tim Taylor, Treasurer Don LeVine, Shirley Maxwell, and Dee Keister devoted considerable effort to revising the Historic District Ordinance into a more user friendly document.
- Vice President Carla Wallen developed plaques to identify the town's most historic homes.
- Doug Cooley and Mike Whittle made a photo inventory of Strasburg's historic structures.
- Tim Taylor and Kathy Kehoe continued to record Strasburg folklore in the Oral History project.
- Sarah Mauck not only coordinated the refreshments for every SHA event but also wrote the application to Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation (SVBF) that resulted in a \$5,800 grant to upgrade the town's walking tour signs, building upon research originally done by Virginia Cadden.
- SHA Secretary Barbara Adamson did a phenomenal job chairing the Fisher's Hill Commemorative Veteran's Picnic, partnering SHA with SVBF, Shenandoah County Tourism, Shenandoah Preservation League, Shenandoah County Historical Society, and Stonewall Jackson Museum at Hupp's Hill.
- Donna Huntsberger coordinated the myriad details of the 2004 Holiday Heritage Homes Tour, which brought the greatest number of visitors to town in t'

event's four-year history. Our partner, Massanutten Garden Club, again gave invaluable help with decorations and refreshments.

- The team comprised of reporter Kathy Kehoe, editor Babs Melton, and publishers Diane and Leon Smith produced quality newsletters and brochures.

To you mentioned above and to the numerous volunteers you drafted, I offer my heartfelt thanks for your tireless efforts in making these programs so successful. You're the best!

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2004 Homes Tour- Donna Huntsberger

The 2004 Strasburg Holiday Heritage Homes Tour, sponsored by the Strasburg Heritage Association in partnership with the Massanutten Garden Club, was a resounding success! We sold over 300 tickets and took in \$3,047. According to Don Levine, Treasurer, this is an increase over the 2003 homes tour of approximately \$1,000!

Anyone who attended previous homes tours could tell we had a much larger turnout this year. It's difficult to say if the outstanding turnout was due to the beautiful weather we had that day; the fact that our homes tour was held on the same day as the Strasburg Chamber Business Open House; or, if our success was due primarily to the beautiful homes we showcased this year. What we do know from the comments we've received and the smiles on faces of those touring the homes is that we continue to improve upon our successes.

It's also apparent from the huge turnout that the citizens of Strasburg and the surrounding communities enjoy and appreciate this event.

As in any special event there are a number of people whose assistance is crucial. In our case the success of our homes tour is entirely dependent upon the generosity of the homeowners, volunteers and business leaders. It is imperative that these people be recognized.

Of course first I need to thank our homeowners, Lori and Dick Ryan, Judith and Woodie

Wordsworth, Mari-Anne Fowler and Rick Burnette, Maggie and Tim Maloney, and Liz and Jack Schillinger. Without kind and generous people like yourselves, who opened your hearts and homes to our community, this event would not be possible. Thank you very much for being such wonderful people!

I also need to thank the innumerable volunteers who helped serve as docents, sold tickets, and assisted with parking and a host of other logistical issues necessary to the success of our homes tour. While I would like to mention you all by name the volunteer list is happily, quite long. This is a testament to the community spirit that continues to thrive in Strasburg. Please know that I greatly appreciate the assistance each of you gave.

And of course members of the Strasburg Heritage Association, Massanutten Garden Club, Strasburg Library and businesses such as the Strasburg Hotel, First Bank and The Old Mill, Stonewall Jackson Museum, Virginia Memories, The Three French Hens and the Chamber of Commerce cannot be overlooked for the contributions of time and effort they gave to support this event. Our homes tour is truly a community effort, put on for the enjoyment of community members.

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Walking Tour - Sarah Mauck

The Walking Tour of Historic Strasburg is to be completed by Mayfest. John Adamson and Sarah Mauck have been hard at work finishing the text for the tour signs and finding appropriate photos. The Town has agreed to help with installation. Initially the brochure may be a simple guide to enhance the tour, but plans are being made to have an elaborate and more informative "booklet" made.

We are excited to have three Civil War Trails signs included on our tour. They are made possible by a grant from the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation. One will be positioned at the Strasburg Museum; one at the corner of Holliday and Washington Sts.; and the grand finale, just above the Presbyterian Church on S. Holliday St. with the spectacular view of the

Valley. We are grateful to Richard Kleese for assisting us with his wealth of knowledge about Civil War history. Also, we are grateful to the Strasburg Rotary Club for a very generous donation that will help make this project a really wonderful addition to the community.

Our schedule is to have the Civil War Trails sign at S. Holliday St. dedicated at 11:00 am on Saturday, May 21st as part of the Mayfest activities. Mitch Bowman with the *Virginia Civil War Trails Program* and Sherman Fleek with the *Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation* will be on hand for the "unveiling" as well as members of our own *Strasburg Guard, SCV*. Mark your calendars!

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New Bronze Plaque for Historic Buildings - Carla Wallen

We are excited to announce that a new bronze plaque is being created for our historic homes and buildings. The design celebrates Strasburg's heritage and is beautifully and meticulously crafted. These special plaques will be offered to everyone living in Strasburg or the Davis District who has a property that is at least 60 years old. It will include the date your property was built and its designation as an historic building. Real estate surveys have shown that this kind of historic designation can increase a property's value. As our town experiences growth and adds many new buildings, we are so pleased to have a way to identify our historic buildings and make them stand out. More information on the new plaques will be available at our General Membership Meeting on February 13th!

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The Strasburg Silk Mill

- Kathy Kehoe

Mattie Cameron was a quill winder at the Strasburg Silk Mill from 6:00 a.m. until 2 p.m. After work, she walked home out towards The Branch on the West End of town with her niece, Kathleen Robinson. At its peak, the Mill employed 125 people, all adding their part in operating the large looms, and after the warmth

of the Mill, Mattie was enjoying the cool winter air. Once home, Mattie went upstairs to rest and lie across her four poster bed for a nap before starting supper. In the kitchen, Mattie put on her apron, pausing at the blue crock to mash the sauerkraut by twisting the wooden kraut stomper, placing her hand on the familiar stamped name on the crock. Needing something fast, Mattie hurried down to the cellar and chose two blue quart jars of vegetable soup the family had put up in late summer. Back upstairs, she took off the zinc lids and poured the soup into a large cast iron kettle, stirring it with a red trimmed white enamel spoon. Reaching for a match from the tin near the stove, she lit the kerosene stove and soon the aroma of the soup filled the air, luring the rest of the family to the table. After supper, her son would fetch a bucket of water from the spigot out back and the girls would heat the water to add to the enamel dishpans, one with lye soap and one to rinse. Then she would work on the white silk dresses she was making for her daughters for May Day. The town festival was still months away, but now that her brother in law has given her the silk from the mill, she started working on them right away.

Now if you walk through the 1.4 acres of what was once the Strasburg Textile Mill, you will find many of those household items Mattie used in her kitchen. Now those items are antiques, on display and for sale and part of The Great Strasburg Emporium. Boasting "more than 200 dealers," they bill themselves as "the largest selection of antiques in the Shenandoah Valley." You'll see the blue jars, the enamel dishpans and spoons, the cast iron kettles and maybe a Strasburg crock.

Kathleen Robinson Stickley worked at the Silk Mill for eighteen years, starting out at fifty cents an hour in 1947. She worked as a "banker" she recalls, "putting cones on and tying them together, transferring to the other cone and then putting on another." Kathleen kept two machines going in this way and she recalls there were 36 cones on one side and 48 on the other. Kathleen later became a quill winder, winding thread from a spool onto a spindle that fit onto a loom that held 10-12 spools.

There are few facts written about the Strasburg Textile Mill, commonly referred to as the Silk Mill, but a number of people contributed to this story, telling what they personally remembered about working there or recalling stories about relatives who were employees. Some of the information consists of town stories, small town gossip about the great Silk Mill Robbery, about how the union was voted out, or sometimes just simply about how loud and hot the Mill was. This article is a small collection of their memories about this significant part of their lives.

Except during World War II, when the plant produced parachutes for the military, the workers made silk casket linings. Charlie Platt and his son Nathan owned the Mill. Georgianna Hines remembers that Charlie bought the Mill from Fred Bertschinger, Roy Bertschinger's father. I talked with Roy's daughter, Linda Bertschinger who remembers that her grandfather Fred was from Switzerland. The family folklore is that Fred was the only son out of 8 or 9 daughters, of a Swiss textile mill owner, whose dream was for his only son to take over the business. But Fred's dream was to be an American cowboy and he left home to travel the Wild West. When Fred returned home to Switzerland sporting his new cowboy hat and refusing to take over the family business, his father sent him off to make his own fortune. Somehow Fred ended up in Strasburg where he married and started a mill of his own which he sold to the Platt's. An article in the Northern Virginia Daily about Charlie Platt's 100th birthday states that the Platt's bought the mill in 1933. It is not known why Fred sold the mill but he later lived in Orange County where he passed away. We also don't know why Fred migrated to our little town, but at least we know why he chose a mill to make a living, since it was what he was raised to do. Linda says Fred had some patents on looms or parts of looms that he'd invented. Perhaps he was disillusioned by his cowboy dream or found a German blonde in Strasburg who could not leave her mother.

Everybody remembers that the Mill was hot and noisy. Kathleen Stickley remembers telling her Aunt Mattie on her 18th birthday walking home from work that it was the hottest day she'd ever spent, working inside the Mill. Sarah Kehoe Mauck and Terri Davison Shrader remember visiting Terri's Aunt Cookie (Lou Davison) at

work. The warping machines, the big wheels that ran onto a loom and the "slasher" machines that wove material, Kathleen remembers all contributed to the noise level. Several people report hearing loss or nerve damage: Lou Davison, Nina and Buddy Sherman and others. Earplugs and ear protective gear, Nina tells us, were not used in those days and she remembers "you had to holler in there." Terri says her father, Dick Davison, didn't work there long enough to damage his hearing, because he went into business for himself in 1958. Buddy worked there as a mechanic until it closed.

"Two girls came to work there once and they told Mr. Platt it was too loud and he said, 'After a couple days, you won't even notice it.' They left for lunch and never came back" says Calvin Ritenour, who worked there 29 years. "Big thunderstorm would come up and we didn't even know it was going on 'cept the lights blinkin', and fire trucks would go out and we didn't even know it." Calvin tells us with a chuckle. "You'd get used to the noise after awhile and could talk over it."

The Great Silk Mill Robbery is remembered by several people, including Kathleen Stickley and Calvin Ritenour. Neither of them worked there that early, but the date of the theft is believed to be sometime in the early 40's or late 30's. Charlie Platt was robbed of the entire cash payroll as he was carrying it from the office building on Massanutten Street to the factory building in the back when he was hit over the head. The location was somewhere in the vicinity of "downstairs of where the Moose used to be." (1960's) Calvin remembers that "they put your pay in an envelope and give it to you in cash." The robber lived in the Strasburg "high-rise", the building where People's Drug Store now stands. The building was at that time a boarding house, says Kathleen and the robber was reportedly behind in his rent and other bills. (The upper stories of the building were removed in later years as is seen today) After the robbery, the suspect "went around paying his bills and that's how they caught him." The Mill started using checks after that.

Somewhere in the 1940's, union organizers campaigned for a union at the Mill, but it lost by two votes, remembers Kathleen. Calvin says the

"vote was real close." Kathleen said she and her father voted against the union because they believed the plant would shut down completely and "there was no place else to work back then." Georgianna says that the Mill wasn't "a big company so didn't have a big bunch of rules. It was a small operation and couldn't afford to have a union."

The working conditions of the Mill, though not up to today's standards, were considered average for that time period. Calvin tells us that he started at 50 cents an hour in 1948 and 29 years later when the plant closed, he was making \$3.10 an hour as a mechanic. There were no vacations in the early days and the only paid holiday was once a year on Christmas day. Kathleen, as a quill winder started at 50 cents an hour in 1946. She was making 75 cents an hour when she left in 1964 for a job at the new Aileen plant for \$1.25 an hour. There were three shifts: 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., 2-10 and 10-6.

Each person I talked to remembered the names of other people who worked at the Mill, some living and some deceased. Kathleen describes the "bigwigs" as Frank Smith (Marie William's brother and Gloria Stickley's father), Guy and Lymon Scott and Norvell Nicklaus. Her father Luther Robinson was a foreman who worked with Harry Grim. He started in 1928 and left after Nathan Platt died. Terri Davison Shrader's father Dick and Aunt Lou, and Mattie, mother of Patsy Rutz and Tommy Cameron are some of those remembered. Kathleen remembers Byrd Bockey, "Jimmy's daddy" and also describes how Cecil Millers father "cleaned the quills using a brush and bucket so they could be re-used." Buddy Sherman was a mechanic and his wife Nina a machine operator, Ada Morris worked in the office and Johnny & Georgianna Hines worked there as warpers, Johnny as foreman. Jack Jenkins left Edinburg Aileen to work on the Mill's new knitting machine and Calvin Ritenour drove from his home in Ft. Valley each day, "when gas was a lot cheaper." And of course, there were the owner/managers, Mr. Charlie Platt, and his son Nathan.

The date the plant closed is of great debate. The year 1977 seems late, but Sarah Mauck remembers working there in 1979 when the building first began in the antique business.

Nobody seems to remember the exact year the mill closed. Kathleen and others report that the mill closed "when Nathan Platt died." Georgianna Hines remembers her husband Johnny worked for Fred Bertschinger when the Mill started and he was laid off when the plant closed. He was only off work for two weeks, she recalls, when she and Johnny both began work at the Front Royal Avtex on July 7, 1977. Nina Sherman is not sure of the exact year, but she says her husband Buddy retired from Chemstone at the age of 62. He left the Mill when it closed and worked eleven years at Chemstone. He was born in 1926 and is now 78 years old, which would mean the Strasburg Textile Mill closed in 1977.

I am Mattie Cameron's granddaughter and I remember very little about her because she died when I was four. But I have a very vague memory of being very short, my arm extended in the air, holding my mother's hand and looking up at my Mema who was standing beside a large machine. It was very loud and she and my mother were yelling above my head. It was my mother, Patsy Rutz, who remembers the silk dresses her mother made her and her sister Lucy (Fultz) every year for the Mayday festival from left over silk Uncle Luther Robinson got from the mill. The history of the Silk Mill remains a part of the heritage of many families in the town of Strasburg.



Picture of the Old Silk Mill - courtesy of Gloria Stickley

STRASBURG HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

P O Box 525

Strasburg, VA 22657

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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Telephone Number () _____

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Membership: **Cost is \$20.00**

Additional Donation: _____

Total Enclosed: _____

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