



Volume 19

Summer 2019

Issue 2

Strasburg, Virginia

NEWSLETTER

[strasburgvaheritage.org](http://strasburgvaheritage.org)

## ***Strasburg and Baseball: A Community and Valley Tradition***

***Presenter: Dennis Stickley***

Join us for a presentation to be made by Dennis Stickley, photographer and baseball enthusiast, about the history of baseball in our community. Dennis will begin the program with some local history, photographs, and stories from baseball in the area. But the program is meant to be a “come & share” afternoon. He urges folks to bring pictures and share stories about baseball in Strasburg and the area over the years. Also, he has pictures that he needs people to help identify who, where, and when!

We will have scanners on site to make copies of information that will document baseball's history in the community and that can become a part of SHA's archives.

***Sunday, June 23,  
2-4PM***

***St. Paul Lutheran Church 193 W. Washington St. Strasburg***

Free. The public is welcome. Refreshments follow.

# President's Message

## *Tim Taylor*

---

I wanted to share a story with you that transpired over the last couple of weeks. It is a true testament of our association fulfilling one of its principal missions. I received an email from an individual (A.W.) that was seeking information about a log cabin that he knows was part of his family history. He shared a picture with the email and gave a general area where he felt it may or did exist, but was not sure of the exact location. He hoped to visit the location if given permission by the current landowner.

After receiving the email, I replied that I would contact our SHA Board Members to see if anyone could assist. (I included Gloria Stickley, as well) Within minutes of sending out an email to Board Members, I received replies from several people offering ideas or people to contact that may be able to assist. Nick Racey took the lead gathering a lot of core information, and then with the help of Billy Henry was able to locate the remains of the cabin and the current owner contact information. A.W. is extremely grateful and plans a visit this month. I feel this is a classic example of the great people on our Board and in our community who are willing to assist others to learn about their heritage. When I was thanking Nick for the work he did to assist A.W., of course, his reply was, "No problem and besides it was fun!"

So, I hope everyone enjoys your summer, help others find their personal histories and above all, "Have fun!"

Sincerely - Tim Taylor - SHA President

\*\*\*\*\*

### UPDATE ON THE HOLIDAY HOMES TOUR

By Joan Williams

The Holiday Heritage Homes Tour will be presented Saturday, December 14th. Five heritage homes, within walking distance in our Historic District, will be offered for your viewing pleasure. This year our homes are located on High Street, Holliday Street, Massanutten Street, and Washington Street. Refreshments will be served at our High Street location. Come out and join us to get into the Holiday Spirit. Detailed information will be provided in future newsletters but make certain to mark your calendar now.



### SHA Board of Directors

2019

\*\*\*

*Tim Taylor*

President

*Laura Ellen Wade*

Vice-President

*Sue Foster*

Treasurer

*Barbara Adamson*

Secretary

*Kathy Kehoe*

Newsletter Editor

\*\*\*

*Dee Keister*

*Nick Racey*

*Marie Spence*

*Carla Wallen*

*Joan Williams*

*Linda Williams*

*Polly Wilson*

## ***A Little Folk History*** **The Beacon Light** *by Kathy Kehoe*

*"I remember as a child how magical that beacon light was." -- Bobbi Walker*

Our town is surrounded by the Appalachian and Blue Ridge mountain ranges. If you stand in the middle of town and look westward, you will see North Mountain where you can cross over into West Virginia. Looking east, you can see Massanutten Mountain. On the tip of Massanutten, where it starts to slope downward, is Signal Knob. If you grew up in Strasburg and you are over sixty years old, you remember looking up at Signal Knob and seeing the continuous rhythm of the Beacon Light.

Growing up during those years, the Beacon Light was a source of stability in the night sky, continuous, constant, and hypnotic. You could watch it all night and meditate on it, like watching the flames of a campfire in the darkness. As mystical as the stars and the moon, the light was steady and stable. As sure as you knew the sun would rise in the morning, you also knew the beacon light would pulse all night long. It's rotation was the heartbeat of the town. My generation took the beacon light for granted. We didn't think about why it was erected in the first place, or that modern technology would someday replace it. "I remember the beacon light and waiting for it to make its revolutions. I felt a sense of being protected and that the light kept watch on us in the Valley." said Donna Campbell.

Signal Knob got its name because it was a signal station during the Civil War. Both the Confederates and the Union Army used flags, mirrors, and lanterns to send messages in code to warn of troop movements. In the history books before the Civil War, the knob was called Three Top Mountain, or sometimes Three Sisters, because east of the mountain the view showed three cascading ridges. Mike Kehoe recalls reading that when Confederate General Ramseur's daughter was born, he received the news by code from the knob. Stephanie Chapman, Interpretive Specialist of the Lee Ranger District of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests sent me an undated account, written by a forest ranger, called "Forest Talk": "The site served both the South and the North as an observation post and a signal station. Wig-wag flags were used in the daytime and lanterns at night. Information on the opposing sides' movements and positions was sent up and down the Valley and even across the Massanutten and the Blue Ridge to Richmond by a series of signal stations on the high points."

"Forest Talk" also mentions how Confederate General Early sent a message to himself from Signal Knob, "on October 16, 1864 in the hopes the Federals would see it. It read-'Be ready to move on Sheridan as soon as my forces join you and we can crush him', signed J. Longstreet." {Confederate General}. History tells us that the Northern Army believed the message to be true and recalled the troops sent to reinforce General Grant at Richmond, which had a direct impact of the outcome of the October 19<sup>th</sup> battle.



Signal Knob from  
Strasburg Town  
Park

In the 20th century, the knob served as a beacon to warn airplanes. Like lighthouses on the ocean shoreline warning sailing ships in the night, the beacon towers guided the flight paths above the mountain of the newly invented airplanes that were multiplying in the night sky.

*"In a strange way that revolving light was both comforting and mesmerizing."*

—Bobbi Walker



According to the Forest Service Interpretive Specialist archives, "The tower was originally constructed by the Federal Aviation Agency for an aircraft beacon. The beacons were used as navigation aids by airlines before the modern navigation devices now used were invented." In later years, "WVPT, our regional public television station, broadcast from a tower located a few hundred yards from the original Civil War signal station." (Stephanie Chapman, Interpretive Specialist, Forest Service, George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Lee Ranger District). In Hanover County, Virginia, the Department of Historic Resources erected a sign describing a tower and beacon light. The inscription reads: "Airmail service was initiated by the U.S. Post Office and the Army on 15 May 1918. Because of the danger night flying posed, airway beacons such as Studley were erected along the airmail routes between the East and West Coasts and Georgia and New York. By 1922 towers with flashing beacons were placed along designated civil airways. Studley was the site of "Delta Airmail Beacon #47" erected circa 1927, one of 50 in Virginia on the Atlanta - New York Civil Airways Corridor. The Studley beacon was dismantled in the mid-twentieth century. The Historical Marker (HMdb.org) in Hanover County, Va.

Nicholas "Nick" Racey has researched his family genealogy. His family lore centers around his grandfather Griffith L. Racey (30 Sept 1906 - 10 Mar 1941), who "worked along the East coast down to Georgia installing beacons - no one remembers the construction company name or specific dates. He died when my dad and aunt were young. He spent long months away from home working, at different trades, master of all." Oral history passed down through the family was that "there was nothing he couldn't do." They remember that Griff "carried all of the equipment for the beacon up most of the mountain by hand and changed the beacon light when necessary. Nick believes that Mr. Carl Brown would turn the beacon on at the depot every night. His daughter Ginger Brown Aliotti does not recall this and remembers no family stories about it, "but it may have been so" says Ginger. It remains unclear when or how this was accomplished. In researching other beacon lights throughout the U.S., many of them had generators at the foot of the tower. Workers like Mr. Racey maintained the towers.



Griffith L. Racey, circa 1937, holding his son, wearing his work clothes.

A trail to Signal Knob used to lead from Rt. 55 East, a steady incline upwards for the first hour, then another hour of zig zag path of switchbacks to the top. At the peak, hikers overlook the beautiful lower valley and the town. It was a two hour hike from Rt. 55 but that way is no longer accessible. The hike from Ft. Valley takes about four hours but is a much easier path. Because the soldiers of both sides used the signal station for almost the entirety of the war, rock barricades and evidence of their occupation can still be found on top of the mountain.

Mike Kehoe has made many hikes to Signal Knob. Once he found a used beacon light bulb in a thick pile of leaves at the base of the beacon tower. It was surrounded by many broken bulbs that had been dropped when changing bulbs on the tower. "I remember it was very bright, after a while it would hypnotize you." -- Debra Huntsberger Winkler



View from Signal Knob 2010

"I, and several of my friends spent the night up on the tower one night. It was awesome to see the light hitting the mountains to the west each revolution. On a clear full-moon night the valley was beautiful". -Jim Campbell



Old Beacon Lightbulb from top of Signal Knob from Mike Kehoe collection

Mike Kehoe and his siblings grew up on the family farm at the base of Signal Knob. The beacon light shone across their yard a section at a time, like the hands of a clock, light, then dark, then light again. In summer after dark they and the neighborhood kids would play a game they called Freeze. The goal was to outrun the light. If they were caught in the light beam, they would have to "freeze" or stand perfectly still until the light came around again and "freed" them. The kids called the light the "death ray"; if you got caught in it, you were "dead" until it came around again, when you could spring to your feet to run from the light. Sharon Bly Ferguson remembers that "we used to play hide and seek with the light. When the light came to the front side, we'd hide and when it came back we would seek to find the ones hiding. Linda Meloni, who grew up near the Kehoes, said that "Terri (Davison Shrader) and I sure do remember the Beacon Light. We played at night, running and then falling down before it came around again."

Larry Allamong lived on Washington Street. He remembers how the the light would "shine in my bedroom window every night when I was trying to get to sleep. It came around every 40 to 45 seconds flashing like lightning." As an adult, Larry often rode his horse to the top of Signal Knob. The Beacon Light was this generation's night light. "It shone in my bedroom window until my brother John and I switched rooms. That, and the sound of the wheel filling with water and turning, (The Old Mill Restaurant) put me to sleep all through my childhood. My Chi Rho group hiked up to it a couple of times." Said Belinda Pappas Palmer. Gary "Mike" McGowan said, "I remember when the light used to come in my bedroom every night and light up the whole room." Diane Artz Furlong also remembers "watching from my bedroom window on Brown Street."

Strasburg native Henry Himelright, class of 65, remembers writing an essay on the beacon light for Mrs. Rickard's journalism class at Strasburg High School. Henry's bedroom window on Capon Road faced the beacon light and he remembers how the light would "put me to sleep". His recollection was that the light went dark before that and he wrote about the end of the blinking, when the beacon stopped turning and the light went out.

Johnny Painter, who grew up in Strasburg, said "The beacon light was how you knew you were home. When our family went on a trip when I was a little boy, when I saw the light on the mountain, I knew we were close to home. It was the light of home."

## A Little Town Legend The Painted Rock

"I remember it was a Sunday morning when we all began noticing it." --Diane Artz Furlong

A little folk history from around 1966 is the story of the Painted Rock. Larry Allamong remembers how some boys had somehow been convinced that it would be a fun idea to trek up the mountain carrying cans of orange paint. Ricky Rinker remembers his brother Rocky was one of the boys who painted a rock outcropping bright orange. "They walked back down through town covered in orange paint" said Ricky, and they bragged about their joke. "They weren't shy about it" said Ricky, so "everybody knew" who had painted the rock. We don't know if the boys realized that orange was the color used as a distress signal for aircraft, or if it just happened to be the color the friend's father had in his garage. But the next morning, townspeople noticed the bright orange rock outcropping on the mountain they had not noticed before. There are no secrets in a small town. Ricky said his mother laughed and his father "didn't say much". He said it is a fond memory of his brother and it is ok to use his name in this story. Rocky died in a hunting accident in 1967 but he is remembered as a fun, unique and creative guy who had a great sense of humor.

Friends and neighbors discussed the mystery. "Is that a plane?" they asked each other. Larry Allamong remembers it was thought it might be a parachute of a downed pilot. Concerned it was a plane crash reflecting in the sun, or someone in danger, a search party of residents and members of the volunteer fire department and rescue squad made their way up the mountain to investigate. Leading the way was Jake Hammond, the head of the local Civil Air Patrol. The search party was both relieved and angry when they found only a freshly painted rock and the paint cans the boys had left there.

Larry remembers in the chaos the next day, he was questioned by Paul Neal, the town police chief to see what he knew about it. Larry's response was, "Do you think I'm going to carry a can of paint up the mountain?" But as it was, the boys tattled on themselves. This generation had yet to see the movie *Alice's Restaurant*, but they knew instinctively, that even if there were 8x10 glossy photographs with circles and arrows, as Larry said, "there's no law against painting a rock." But since word had gotten around, the boys were made to hike again up the mountain, this time with cans of gray porch floor paint, to repaint the rock a color that would blend in with the mountaintop. In addition, they had to carry the empty paint cans, both orange and gray, back down the mountain. This was the 1960s version of "community service".

"Those boys immortalized themselves in the history of Strasburg lore forever" by painting that rock, said Larry Allamong.

Folk history is made of people's memories and sometimes people don't remember the same things so there are a few different accounts of how many times the rock was painted. Larry Allamong remembers two different boys who painted the rock and he believes Rocky's was the second time the rock was painted. A couple of years later Rocky's brother Ricky Rinker and a friend also painted the rock, this time silver which they thought would appear from town as a UFO. Ricky said that no one seemed to notice though, like they did when it was painted orange. Larry Allamong says he remembers how that silver rock shone on the mountain, and "you could see it for years!" Larry clarified the location of the rock was not on top of Signal Knob but lower, three fourths of the way up Massanutten Mountain from the town reservoir. He and a friend used to hike up to that rock after football practice to explore and to rest on the rock where they could see the town. He described it as a "rock garden" where his friend could find lizards and mice for his pet snake. The rock was "very visible" from town when it was painted said Larry.

Some fifty years later, there are some people still chuckling about the Painted Rock, (And probably a few older people still grumbling). "Every town has its legends" said Larry Allamong. And so this is one.



Photo by Sharon Bly Ferguson

***To Our Readers: If you have memories to add to folk histories, please contact Kathy Kehoe by emailing [strasburgheritage@gmail.com](mailto:strasburgheritage@gmail.com), calling 540-465-4185 or contacting any SHA Board Member.***

# Strasburg Heritage Association

PO Box 525

Strasburg, A 22657

## Strasburg Heritage Association

[www.strasburgvaheritage.org](http://www.strasburgvaheritage.org)

### Membership Application

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

MEMBERSHIP: \_\_\_\_\_ Cost is \$20.00

Additional Donation: \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL ENCLOSED: \_\_\_\_\_

Please Mail Completed form to:

Strasburg Heritage Association

PO Box 525

Strasburg, VA 22657