



RIDGE AND RIVER NEWS

The Newsletter of Rockbridge Conservation

Winter 2026 * Fifty Years of Conservation

Thanks to our 2025 donors and partners: See their names on the accompanying insert.

History of Rockbridge Conservation, 1976-2026, Part 1 of 3

Foundation as RACC and Early Accomplishments

In the early 1970s, with Interstate 81 reaching the area and construction of a large manufacturing plant, a group of local residents became concerned about the impacts of traffic and industry on the rural character of the Rockbridge area. Until then, local land use was described as about one-third agriculture and two-thirds forest, while the two cities occupied a very small part. The inevitable changes that the interstate would bring encouraged local residents to focus on protecting key characteristics of this unique region while taking advantage of new economic opportunities.

Founding as RACC in 1975

In 1975 that group of residents obtained a grant to introduce the people of Rockbridge County to land use planning. The following year, they created the Rockbridge Area Conservation Council (RACC), a non-profit organization now renamed Rockbridge Conservation (RC). It quickly became a volunteer-driven, grassroots organization composed of concerned residents, landowners, farmers, merchants, teachers, tradespeople, students and others who wanted to protect and preserve the unique and healthy rural/town character of the area. Its original mission was “to promote the wise stewardship of natural resources and cultural heritage through education, advocacy, and action in order to protect and enhance the quality of life for present and future inhabitants of Rockbridge.”

Over the past 50 years, the volunteers who shaped RC have taken up many issues and questions related to local conservation. They researched and analyzed potential threats to air and water quality, land development patterns, energy use and waste disposal; volunteers also provided information and ideas to the Rockbridge community and, where appropriate, advocated for thoughtful and effective approaches to environmental challenges.

Preserving Our Extraordinary Natural Beauty

The work of protecting the natural beauty and health of our environment began with an understanding of the critical features of the community that should be preserved and protected as changes inevitably take place. Because most of RC’s members are local residents, they have a good sense of

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Community Cleanup

March 21-29

You can help! See how on Page 3.

Uncas trail gets even better!



RC people celebrate the completion of improvements to part of the Uncas Trail in East Lexington. From left to right: back row Brian Wolford with Heath, Bruce Dwyer, Sam Allen, Chris Wise with Willie; middle row John Maluski, Bob Biersack, Cinder Stanton; front, Jamie Goodin.

Conservation History, Part 1

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what those critical features are. Over time, RC has worked on protecting resources at the local, state, and national levels. Protecting land that has high conservation value has always been a priority, since once land is developed, it is often impossible to reclaim what is lost.

Any discussion of the most distinctive and important physical characteristics of the Rockbridge area begins with House Mountain. The dominant feature of the western horizon from Lexington, the two peaks of House Mountain and the saddle between them have been an integral part of almost everyone's description of the county. Our sense of place is tied to the unchanging vision of this one physical characteristic. No wonder that one of the defining events in the history of RC was the effort in 1987 to purchase and protect the 800 acres now known as the House Mountain Preserve. The tireless work of many RC members raised more than \$200,000 (almost half the purchase price) from more than 1,000 donors to help the Virginia Outdoors Foundation buy this iconic land.

Identifying and Protecting Wilderness Areas

Other early RC efforts included working with the Virginia Wilderness Committee and others to identify areas in nearby National Forests to be designated as Wilderness and Roadless Areas. The founding members supported congressional action that designated as wilderness such local gems as the James River Face, Thunder Ridge, Saint Mary's, Rich Hole, Rough Mountain, Barbours Creek, Ramsay's Draft and Shawver's Run. We also advocated including the Belfast Trail area in the Old Growth Forest Network. These important public lands form a base for outdoor recreation and tourism, a significant part of our local economy.

RC also worked hard through the years to encourage local landowners to protect open spaces and forest areas that define the beauty and unique ecological richness of this area using conservation easements. Easements help to channel development into areas that already have some infrastructure and thereby help preserve the character of more rural areas.

Bob Biersack and Shannon Spencer

Have a good anecdote about early days with RACC/RC? Let us know at info@rockbridgeconservation.org.

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Sandra Stuart Honored with Bench Near Woods Creek

A bench has been placed on the Woods Creek Trail to honor extraordinary RC volunteer Sandra Stuart, who died in December of 2024.

The plaque on the backrest reads, "In Memory of Sandra Stuart. Her kindness, generosity and dedication to protecting our environment have made a lasting difference in the lives of many."

Refill Rockbridge Thriving at Lexington Farmers Market

Refill Rockbridge is a volunteer effort that helps people use less plastic and operates at the market on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of each month. There people can learn how to get household and personal-care products in refillable glass containers as well as picking up orders.

Project Coordinator Annette Green says, "We have seen a great deal of interest and excitement, with 200 people now on our mailing list and at least 30 participants. We hope even more folks will give this program a try in the coming months!"

For more information, contact annettezg@hotmail.com.

Volunteer Spotlight: Peggy Agnor

- What's a habit that reflects your environmental values? *Whether I am backpacking, day-hiking, or canoeing I try to practice Leave No Trace and Enjoy Being Outdoors!*
- What's a moment with Rockbridge Conservation that makes you feel proud? *I feel proud when I am volunteering with Friends of Woods Creek either identifying and removing invasive plant species or planting natives, and folks stop to chat about what FoWC is doing or to thank us for all our work, and they note how much better it looks along the creek!"*



Cleanup Needs Your Help!

Saturday, March 21 to Sunday, March 29

Join this year's Community Cleanup as volunteers remove trash from Rockbridge roads and streamsides. The effort is jointly sponsored by Rockbridge Conservation, Rockbridge County, and VDOT.

As in past years, cleanup leaders are David Harbor, Melody Tennant, and David Agnor.

To join the effort,

- 1) Pick a road or area that you'd like to clean up.
- 2) Go to rockbridgeconservation.org/cleanup.
- 3) Fill in a simple form to claim your cleanup area.

You and group members will be provided with large trash bags and safety vests for the activity.

And, just for fun, the group that collects the most bags of trash and/or large items will take possession of Mark Kline's Litter Cup for a year.

Celebrating Our 50th Year

- **Mar 13 & 14:** Old Growth Forest Seminar and Field Training, registration required (stay tuned)
- **Mar date TBD:** Trail Walk at House Mountain
- **Apr 1, 4:15:** Plastic pollution film & seminar, State Theater, presented by Jaimi McPeck, Legislative Director for the Virginia Bottle Bill
- **Apr date TBD:** Trail Walk at Brushy Hills
- **Apr 25:** Earth Day at Hopkins Green in Lexington
- **May dates TBD:** Water Monitoring Seminar; Trail Walk at Natural Bridge State Park

Further details will be announced on RC's [website](#) and in its email Eco-Calendar (subscribe [here](#)).

Join RC's Water Monitors

Additional water monitors are needed for both water quality and invertebrate sampling programs. Some training is required. For more information, email director@rockbridgeconservation.com.

Lee Merrill, 1948-2025

It is with heavy hearts that we report the passing of Lee Wilson Merrill, a pillar of Rockbridge Conservation since its early days.

Born in Oxnard, California, Lee studied architecture and planning at Princeton University, later serving as urban designer for the city of Annapolis, where he could indulge his love for the sea and sailing.

At about age 30, he found his way to Rockbridge and fell in love with the area. In the ensuing years, he designed projects throughout Lexington, Rockbridge, and other Virginia communities that reflected his belief that good design should serve both people and the environment.

Lee was, over the years, president, board member, and wise adviser for RC; he also served on many advisory bodies to local governments, where he advocated for community planning that would serve both current and future generations.



Thank you, Lee. It is hard to imagine Rockbridge Conservation without you.

Gregg Amonette, 1953-2026

We also note with sadness the recent death of Gregg Amonette, a devoted long-time volunteer, board member and president of RC.

“Caught Green-Handed” Award Presented to the Goodwill Store

RC recently awarded their CGH certificate to the local Goodwill Store for its many contributions to environmental sustainability and for joining the movement to stop providing free, single-use plastic bags for purchases. *Bring your own bag!*

Outreach: *RC's recent activities in the Rockbridge community*

- Continued work with local organizations to facilitate recycling at their public events
- Assumed management through FoWC of an annual race, renamed the Run for Woods Creek
- Participated in initial meeting of Lake Merriweather's Lake Management Group
- Resumed awarding Caught Green-Handed certificates to local businesses
- Pursued development of flood-alert systems through RC's Maury River Alliance
- Focussed on local forest management using online tools to identify critical areas.
- Assisted Friends of Brushy Hills in establishing their own tax exempt status
- Worked with local homeowners on septic and well systems (SWAP)
- Organized work days on the Uncas Trail and in the Sunnyside Preserve
- Supported care of bird houses at Sunnyside Preserve and Kendal at Lexington
- Joined beyondplastics.org/ to facilitate waste reduction
- Continued work with the Healthy Green Neighborhoods program

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50 Years of Conservation

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