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Rocky Mount Museum Brings Pioneer History to Life

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn.—At the foot of the Appalachian Mountains in Piney Flats, Tenn., a rich history and heritage is alive at the Rocky Mount Museum and Living History Site. Rocky Mount Museum, through daily tours, educational programs and special events, transports visitors into the 18th century to experience the daily lifestyle of frontier settlers and takes them deep into the lives of the original settlers, the Cobb family.

“It’s amazing to see how our culture, heritage and history has evolved since its beginnings,” said Brenda Whitson, executive director of the Johnson City Convention and Visitors Bureau. “Not only has the Rocky Mount Historical Association preserved the house and land, but they are also working to demonstrate the daily life of a frontier family at this particular point in our nation’s history and settlement.”

An early settlement beyond the mountains from the original 13 colonies, Rocky Mount dates back to the 1770s, when William Cobb built his family a two-story log home prior to the Revolutionary War. The area became known as the Southwest Territory, governed by William Blount. Blount, appointed governor by George Washington, lived with the Cobb family from

1790 until 1792, designating Rocky Mount as the first Territorial Capital of the Southwest Territory, which became the State of Tennessee in 1796.

In 1795, Cobb moved to Knoxville, leaving Rocky Mount to his daughter, Penelope, who married Hal Massengill, and the house continued to pass through each generation of the family. In 1958, Pauline DeFriece, a family cousin, wanted Rocky Mount to be preserved by the state of Tennessee to honor the heritage of the area, leading to the establishment of Rocky Mount Historical Association, the organization that operates the site, and the purchase by the state.

On April 1, 1962, Rocky Mount officially opened to the public with a small Visitor Center and 5,000 square feet of gallery space. In 1979, the Visitor Center expanded to include a museum and in 1993, a 175-seat auditorium was added, including a library and five classrooms. Other significant changes added to the historical experience of the Cobb land include a kitchen, springhouse, slave cabin, barn, orchard and gardens that demonstrate each activity a frontier family faced.

Today, colonial living is showcased to Rocky Mount visitors through tours that travel through the lifestyles, customs and artifacts of the 1790s. On daily tours, costumed interpreters, portraying Cobb family members, servants and neighbors, lead visitors through colonial life, from the historic buildings to surrounding gardens.

“Our tour guides offer guests a lot of interaction by carrying on a full dialogue in first person. For example, if something happened on May 11, 1791, they would mention that event,” said Gary Walrath, executive director of the Rocky Mount Museum and Living History Site. “Rocky Mount is one of only 23 living history sites in the nation that does full-time, first-person interpretation.”

Interpreters lead tour guests through the main house, discussing artifacts and sharing information about the family, Indian affairs or the Governor, and through the kitchen, demonstrating the methods the Cobb family used while cooking, including dishes and tools. The gardens display typical 1790s plants that were used for tasks such as medicine, dye or cooking.

“Rocky Mount is placing an emphasis on heritage. In the gardens, we only grow vegetables that would have been grown in the 1790s,” said Walrath.

The Massengill Overmountain Museum, the Rocky Mount site museum, exhibits artifacts that have been collected from the land over the years. Tour guests can also explore the site freely, including the barn, blacksmith shop or heirloom garden.

“Throughout the years, Rocky Mount demonstrates what frontier families dealt with as they developed the area, from the spring months of planting and animal births, to the food harvest and winter preparation and how families celebrated the holidays and festivities that took place in the 1700s,” said Walrath. “The educational programming at Rocky Mount, which offers numerous programs and opportunities for school teachers and children, really works to make or create an interactive learning experience for students by presenting information in a way that allows it to come alive for the students and experience frontier life.”

Rocky Mount educational programs include a living history tour with costumed interpretation and living history demonstrations, emphasizing traditional 18th century crafts. For preschool or kindergarten aged children, the preschool program presents the Cobb family through stories, games, costumes, farm animals, crafts and an adventure tour.

Other outreach programs are designed to appeal to all ages, including schools and senior or group tours. Outreach programs include family life, frontier medicine and voices from the past.

Annual special events are also held at Rocky Mount that offer additional opportunities to experience the area’s heritage. Special events include Woolly Day, the celebration of spring and the shearing of the sheep, and Spirit of the Harvest, a time to celebrate the food harvest and winter preparation. The Raid on the Watauga event is a re-enactment of skirmishes that may have taken place around 1777. Candlelight Christmas celebrates a traditional 18th century Christmas in pre-statehood frontier Tennessee. Graveyard Tales, a partnership with the Jonesborough Storytellers, centers around traditional and original stories, featuring the area spooks.

Additional special programs, as well as education opportunities, offer both a learning and interactive experience. The Student Apprentice Program, a summer day camp, allows children to live as 18th century children and experience the work, games and clothing. Twice a year, Rocky Mount hosts a home school day and invites home school children for a living history tour, as well as crafts, activities and picnics.

Rocky Mount Living History Museum is located in Piney Flats, TN, five miles from Johnson City. From March to mid-December, Rocky Mount operates from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Tuesday to Saturday. Admission is \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors over 60 and \$4 for children ages six to 17. Rocky Mount also offers AAA and AARP discounts. For more information, please visit www.rockymountmuseum.com, or call (423) 538-7396.

Johnson City is located in Northeast Tennessee and is the fourth largest metropolitan city in the state. Set in a region known as America's First Frontier, Johnson City is “Where the Pioneer Spirit Began”—a historically significant and culturally rich community surrounded by an abundance of unspoiled natural beauty. Johnson City has a history, which dates back more than 200 years, and its culture embraces individual creativity and encourages innovation through expression. The area is world-renowned for its modern and traditional Appalachian and bluegrass music, art and cuisine, and outdoor recreation for the whole family throughout all four seasons. For more information on Johnson City, please visit www.visitjohnsoncitytn.com or call (423) 461-8000 or (800) 852-3392.

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