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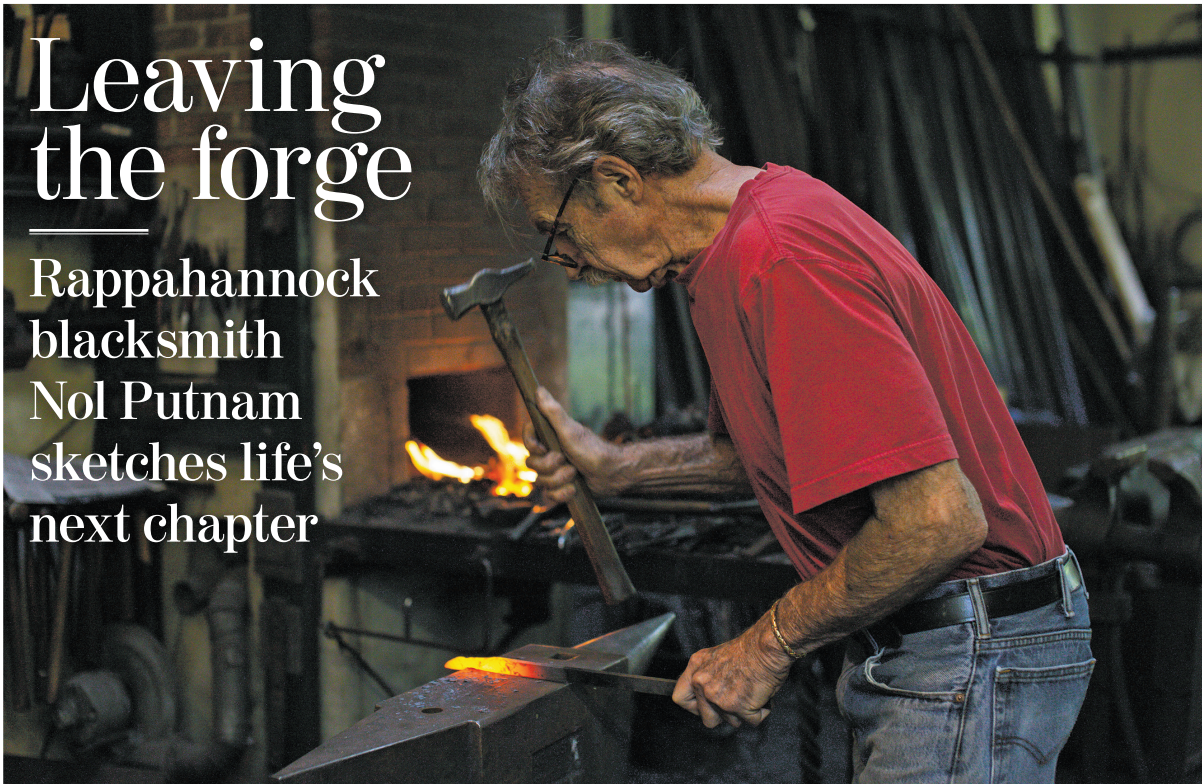
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VOTER'S GUIDE

INSIDE



Leaving the forge

Rappahannock blacksmith Nol Putnam sketches life's next chapter

BY TIM CARRINGTON
For Foothills Forum

In the way he would plan in pencil a creation to be rendered in iron, Nol Putnam is sketching out his own transition.

Rappahannock County's celebrated blacksmith, now 87, is preparing to leave his forge in Huntly, and perhaps, depart the county where many of his sculptures grace the landscape and where memories and friendships proliferate. For now, he

is hard at work on what he has concluded will be his last commission: a piece of power and simplicity, consisting of three crosses to be housed in the Washington National Cathedral's Columbarium, where he earlier installed what many consider his signature works, three commemorative gates.

See **PUTNAM**, Page 12

► **RAAC'S ART TOUR IS COMING BACK** • PAGE 13

Supervisors allocate \$65K to Water and Sewer Authority

Public hearings set on slew of potential fiscal actions

BY JULIA SHANAHAN
Rappahannock News Staff

At their monthly meeting on Monday, the Rappahannock County Board of Supervisors approved \$65,000 to the Rappahannock County Water and Sewer Authority so they can begin working on improvements and studies to evaluate how parts of the system are operating.

Cheri Woodard, chair of the sewer authority, asked the board for \$470,600 from the county's \$1.4 million allocation in federal pandemic relief aid, saying it's the first time since the authority's creation that any member has requested funding from the county.

See **SUPERVISORS**, Page 8



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Former Rapp deputy dies COVID-19 complications

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PUTNAM

From Page 1

Tackling the transitions

Putnam has managed transitions before, and trusts his capacity to navigate the next one. At 39, having taught history to teenagers at Lenox School for Boys in the Berkshires, he moved to a farm in the area, and in addition to animal care and tapping maples, he began working — largely untrained — with anvils and hammers. He was delighted to discover the near magic of transforming black bars of metal into spirals, tendrils, leaves and apples.

He moved to Virginia a couple of years later, and after different living and working arrangements in Madison and The Plains, he participated in a 1976 street fair in Rappahannock, where he encountered local artist Jeannie Drevis, when smoke from his blacksmithing demonstration poured into her tent. A friendship with Drevis was born, and a larger relationship with the county and its artists. Putnam settled in Huntly; the current forge went up in 2001.

His vocation as a blacksmith was informed by dozens of books on the ancient art of ironwork, but more importantly by repeated exertions in the forge.

“From the first day, your body begins to build up the muscle memory,” he says. That helps him know from which angle and with how much force to strike the hot iron.

Six-to-eight hour days at the anvil generated a variety of works, increasingly complex over time, and buyers and commissions flowed in. “It took me a year to figure out what I was going to do,” he recalls, “and it took me five or six years to make an adequate living.” An earlier stint in the U.S. Army left him with a capacity for discipline, and a willingness to accept physical discomfort.

With commissions, Putnam would promise delivery without a date, sensing that a fixed deadline would lead to artistic compromises. For example, one of the three Columbarium gates for the Washington National Cathedral involves a cruciform design with four panels. Well into the project, Putnam inspected it and immediately felt a wave of dissatisfaction. “I ripped it out and started over,” he says, happy with the work he eventually delivered. For each commission, he tried to learn something new and thus extend his range.

The battering art

Whether the Putnam productions are functional (hooks, hinges, railings and banisters) or pure artistry, the work itself is invariably hot, loud, and physically battering.

“The obvious physical dangers are burns,” Putnam explains, “which can occur daily— minor irritations from hot scale, burning coke, the early mistake of trying to catch a piece of falling red hot iron.”



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR Foothills Forum

FROM INK TO IRON Nol Putnam creates his last commission: three crosses to be housed in the Washington National Cathedral’s Columbarium.



ceilings give space for moving around long iron bars. A jib crane assists with lifting the many ironworks that outweigh the ironworker. The floor is composed of four inches of reinforced concrete.

Daily sessions at the anvil over 48 years have toughened the sinews of Putnam’s hammering arm and even thickened his underlying bone structure. His Folger Gate at Washington National Cathedral is a burst of floral ornamentation, but the iron contains a hidden symmetry: it weighs 1,200 pounds and took about 150 workdays to assemble.

Putnam’s body is a mix of unusual strength and palpable fatigue. “I have an idea of doing things with my hands that are less taxing,” he confesses.

Putnam moves with caution around his property, where a path leads from his house through patches of trees and across a creek to the forge. His dog Jack— part Alaskan husky, part wolf, he claims— is a quietly watchful companion. Two flourishing fig trees are laden with fruit to be enjoyed in his kitchen with strong coffee and freshly baked scones. For Putnam, it’s been a good place to enjoy a good life.

Art after iron

History is marked by experiences of great artists who enjoyed breakthroughs despite, or perhaps because of, aging bodies. Matisse, disabled after a painful colon cancer surgery and subsequent complications, retired from painting canvases but discovered bold creations with colored paper scissored into irregular shapes and pasted onto large white surfaces. Georgia O’Keefe suffered from macular degeneration, and spent more time on ceramics, though she could still count on strong distance vision for mountain landscapes; her artistic productions continued through to the end of her

99 years. Rembrandt found age to be both a subject and a perspective from which to contemplate life’s mysteries; masterful as his early self-portraits are, his late-life self-portraits are mesmerizing, and widely considered the crowning works of a life in art.

Putnam enjoys pondering art after iron. “Obviously, I have an artist’s sensibility, and I have an artist’s way of thinking,” he says, “How do I continue to pursue that when my medium, and my skills to do that medium, is disappearing?” In the past, the germs of new ideas have floated in through dreams or slow walks with Jack, and he hopes they will continue that pattern.

He has exhumed, with surprised admiration, more than a hundred preparatory drawings associated with the iron sculptures and architectural components he produced in the forge. He knows they’re fine drawings, and he may compose others.

He also experiments with water colors. “I don’t think I’ll be a landscape painter; I may be an abstract painter,” he says, showing an iPhone image of red shapes dancing through space in an undulating line. The new image seems to echo earlier “lines in space” composed of iron (this phrase titles one of two books Putnam authored about his work.)

Leaving the forge for another creative platform is inevitable, given the nature of blacksmithing. But leaving the county — if that happens — will be a function of the special challenges Rappahannock presents for the over-eighty elderly. Hospitals and specialized care are essentially an hour’s drive away, working physicians are down to two individuals, and simple, one-floor houses are costly and rarely on the market. Real estate agents, likely busy with urban remote workers and recent retirees, “don’t return my calls,” Putnam says. ➔

Solitude and connection

➔ Putnam, who is divorced and single, manages solitude naturally. “Being an artist is a strange and often lonely occupation,” he reflects. “There is something that drives us, yet no one offers us a seat at the table. We have to fight our way there and sink or swim by the force or power of our work — regardless of medium.”

Comfortable solitude isn’t the same as isolation. Putnam says he is “blessed by many wonderful acquaintances, and a small handful of friends for whom I would give my life.”

On Sunday afternoons he assembles a group of seven friends, in different parts of the country, from diverse walks of life, to join in an email chat on topics of shared concern. Often, they discuss the state of the world.

He laments that “I’m 87, and for 56 of those years, we’ve been at war.” Scion of a large and prominent New England family, he notes that cousins held influential positions in Washington, and helped shape the U.S. war in Vietnam, a venture he wasn’t bashful about criticizing. The current political turmoil disturbs Putnam, who

finds the contemporary debates shadowed by “big lies and magical thinking.”

With age, the chapters of Putnam’s life seem less disjointed. Virginia was something new for him, but he realizes the family history encompasses Virginia ancestors, including a great-great uncle who served in the Confederate Army. His life as a teacher, and later, an artist appear to be divergent, but as he ponders the two, he senses they come from the same root within himself. Both involve putting something into the world that might change people. Some former students—now in their 70s — remain in touch.

Gates between worlds

Putnam’s three gates dominate the Columbarium at the crypt level of the Washington National Cathedral, below the enormous nave that appears on



screens around the world when former presidents are eulogized or new presidents begin their terms in prayer. The area forms the western border of the Chapel of Joseph of Arimathea, which is dominated by a stunning mural by the Polish artist Jan Henryk de Rosen. Against a gold background, the painting depicts a group of ordinary looking people bearing the body of Jesus to a tomb following his execution. The mood is somber, but not morbid, and the faces, drawn from the painter’s various models, seem both down-to-earth and contemporary.

The Columbarium opposite the mural houses the remains of bishops and prominent musicians, but also those of some ordinary Americans who suffered extraordinary travails. Helen Keller is one. Another is Matthew Shepard, brutally murdered for his homosexuality, and later

brought to the Cathedral for a safe repose. On and around the altar are stacks of cards bearing the names of Americans who died of Covid but were deprived of any formal funeral or memorial because of lockdown protocols.

The three Putnam gates mark the passage to spaces dedicated to urns and burial vaults. The iron suggests permanence while the shapes of branches and leaves bring in a sense of seasons and change.

Putnam’s forge will eventually be dismembered, the machinery and tools sold off and repurposed. And Putnam will reimagine his art. Part of him has already traveled from Rappahannock County and settled for good into this quiet heart of a vast public space.

“There is always the scariness, the fear of creating from the depths of my mind,” Putnam admits, “revealing my innermost self for you to fuss over, pore over. In smithing, I am able to fudge that somewhat by retreating into the tried and true of fireplace tools, or hinges, or hooks. But ask me about my larger sculptures or some of my gates that comes close to the essence of me.”

Rappahannock Fall Art Tour — reimagined and rejuvenated — reclaims its November slot

BY TIM CARRINGTON
Special to Rappahannock News

Rappahannock’s Fall Art Tour — reimagined to incorporate cautions in the age of the pandemic — is taking shape to debut in November with a mix of new artists and established names, online elements and in-person visits to 40-some studios and galleries.

The return of the Tour next month blends last year’s virtual gallery adaptation with the ever-popular in-person studio and gallery tour. This hybrid reflects a resourceful pragmatism that is helping countless companies, schools and organizations manage risks in COVID-19’s new reality, which is safer than before — because of vaccines and masks — but still subject to reasonable worries of transmission.

The Rappahannock Association for Arts and Community (RAAC), will once again produce the Tour — but without pretending that risks no longer exist.

The result: RAAC’s flagship Nov. 6-7 Art Tour will offer a free self-guided studio and gallery tour, offer online viewing and pre-visit planning, and offer maximum flexibility to participating artists and visitors. Ten galleries, concentrated in Washington and Sperryville, will participate in the tour. These offer works by artists in the county and elsewhere, and will provide a rich mix of processes, materials and expressions.

Matthew Black, RAAC’s board chairman, said the hybrid formula represents “an accommodating twist on the traditional. We achieved critical flexibility by converting our physical HQ Gallery into a virtual one, and making our tour guides and maps available online. That has allowed all of us to flex with the virus.”

The design emerges from consultation with participating artists, points out Heather Wicke, head of the Art Tour Committee. “We surveyed 43 artists and galleries,” she said, “and the vast majority said they would participate in an in-person tour as long as conditions remained the same.” But, she added, “a closer look revealed lots of uncertainty, anxiety about Covid risks.” Given the unknowns, the best path was

to maximize flexibility, for both artists and visitors, allowing each to fashion an experience that is both satisfying and safe.

Artists and galleries will have three options, and will indicate a choice by Oct. 25:

- ▶ Open up to visitors from 10 a.m. till 5 p.m., Nov. 6-7, subject to masks and crowd control.
 - ▶ Welcome scheduled visits that must be arranged in advance.
 - ▶ Display work online, with no in-person visits.
- Visitors also will see changes:
- ▶ There will be no central gallery in Washington and no ticket sales. The tour will be free.
 - ▶ Visitors will go online to www.fallarttour.org to peruse works by participating artists, and map an itinerary.



- ▶ Studios may offer drinks and snacks, but these will be located outdoors.
- ▶ Studios will also require masks, and some may request that visitors be vaccinated.
- ▶ Studios and galleries will avoid crowding inside, and will maximize ventilation.
- ▶ A reception for artists and Fall Art Tour sponsors will not be held.

The bottom line, said Black, is that “we will welcome hundreds of visitors to celebrate the visual arts safely and enjoy the beauty of Rappahannock County.”

Nol Putnam, Rappahannock’s esteemed ironworker, plans to open his forge to visitors — possibly for the last time, since he is planning an artistic shift from the physical demands of the anvil, and perhaps to a new location. In addition to his various works in iron, Putnam will be exhibiting

a number of preparatory drawings and original architectural renderings. Putnam’s Huntly studio will also feature paintings by Darien Reece; her works are rendered in casein, an ancient paint composed of earth and mineral pigments using milk solids as a binder. The paintings draw from archetypal inspirations and all convey a dream-like quality, emphasizing shape-shifting forms that originate in the natural world.

Ruthie Windsor Mann, a popular oil painter who lives just outside Washington, said she’s pondered the best way to handle the tour this year and is planning in-person participation, abiding by Covid-safe precautions, and emphasizing interactions just outside the studio entrance where mountain views are spectacular. Her works include paintings of

animals, landscapes and vegetation as well as recent semi-abstract works. Windsor Mann plans to bring out a book this fall — “A Painter’s Musings” — that will be available for purchase at her studio on Tiger Valley Road.

For the planners and artists, the weeks of thinking and rethinking the event have been taxing. The emergence of the easily transmissible delta variant had generated dread of a new round of lockdowns and cancellations, with acute concern that the beloved Art Tour would be sidelined for a second year. But once the community coalesced around the hybrid approach — with maximum flexibility built in — there was a sense of both relief and anticipation.

“If you feel a little more excitement than ever in the fall air for the 16th Annual Art Tour weekend, it isn’t your imagination,” Wicke said. “It’s due to the joyful retrieval of the popular tour in the face of the continuing pandemic challenges.”

Visitors can tap into an updated online view and begin planning their tours on Nov. 1 by going to: www.fallarttour.org.

The writer, while also a regular Foothills Forum contributor, serves on the board of RAAC and will open his studio to visitors on the tour.