

NOL PUTNAM



FILE PHOTO BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

IN APPRECIATION

Rappahannock bids farewell to beloved artist-blacksmith

BY TIM CARRINGTON | *For Foothills Forum*

For half a century artist-blacksmith Nol Putnam transformed one of the Earth's hardest and most unyielding substances into flowing forms, such as leaves, stems, tendrils and seed pods.

His forge was loud, fiery and dangerous, and though he made his work seem plausible and ordinary, his mutations

See **NOL**, Page 13

RAE ANN



A thousand a

BY

Rae Ann Gae
At Natur
benefits, fu
practiced her m
divided between

NOL

From Page 1

were nothing short of miraculous. James W. Shepherd, director of preservation at Washington National Cathedral, where Putnam's masterpiece Columbarium gates are installed, called it "magical" that "something so strong and hard can be shaped to be something so delicate."

Last year, the forge in Huntly was dismantled, the equipment sold to a younger artisan, and this year, Rappahannock's beloved blacksmith imitated art by becoming something else: His death on June 11, following a brief illness, turned the strong, sinewy iron worker into air and light, love and memory, connection and creativity.

Collectors, neighbors, old friends and new friends are mourning an irreplaceable presence in the county.

Putnam delivered part of himself to those who collected his sculptures. Dick Raines remembers the artist raising a glass to say that "one of the best parts of the project was getting to know Nancy and me." Raines adds: "This sounds self-serving but the point is that Nol had a deep interest in the people he worked with."

When the sculpture, named "West Wind," was moved, Putnam re-engaged and rechristened the work "Sirocco" or "southwest wind." Nancy Raines says that the piece will always be "Sirocco."

Putnam embodied the rare blend of artistic vision and an ever-expanding human connection. He could work in solitude for hours, and in minutes he could turn acquaintances into friends. Before taking up the anvil at 39, he taught history to teenagers at the Lenox School for Boys in the Berkshires. Some of his former students — now in their 70s — participated in regular Sunday afternoon email dialogues with Putnam.

Putnam's introduction to Rappahannock County came in 1976 at an arts fair. He liked the other artists, and soon settled in, buying land in 1991, constructing a house in 1995, and building his forge in 2001. The works in iron multiplied, but in parallel, so did a remarkable network of friendships with people of different ages and backgrounds.

"Our friendship grew during the pandemic when most every week, through every season, Nol drank coffee on my porch," recalls Miranda Hope. "He was so knowledgeable, a voracious reader of history, art, psychology. We talked about Black Lives Matter. We talked about loneliness. We talked about chickens. Wherever the conversation wanted to go, we went, as though following a thread out of a maze that we hoped to never exit, while, in the warmer months, my dog slept with her head on his dog's belly in the shade of the poplar tree. And so, for me, his greatest art and inspiration was how he lived his life."

As his friendships multiplied, so did commissions and inspirations. By 1980, he was selling sculptures and functional architectural pieces up and down the mid-Atlantic. In the mid-1980s, he began working on drawings for gates for Washington National Cathedral. A succession of commissions followed.



FILE PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Nol Putnam at his Huntly forge in 2021. Among his many creations is a distinctive entrance gate on Tiger Valley Road (below).

Putnam's Folger Gate in the Cathedral Columbarium is filled with floral ornamentation. In a place where people are tucked in their final repose, the gate depicts an unstoppable beauty. Putnam could expand on the symbols of rebirth and continuity, but he deeply enjoyed the hard work of making such a statement in iron. He noted that the Folger Gate weighed 1,200 pounds and took 1,200 hours to assemble.

Putnam's forge was a must-see stop on the county's Fall Art Tour. Streams of visitors admired the iron sculptures and fixtures, but they were mesmerized by the live drama of seeing the artist-blacksmith light the fires and begin

hammering the iron bars into pleasing shapes from nature or imagination.

"Nol forged steel into art, and he also forged life into our community," said Matthew Black, president of the Rappahannock Association for Arts and Community. "My admiration for his presence, energy and talent is only matched by the loss I feel without him."



After stripping the forge, Putnam explored artistic avenues through drawing and writing — not so much about himself, but, as he liked to state it, the way "art is a basic component of the soul as we look out into the world." He also worked on planning a new house that would be simpler and safer for an 89-year-old.

In the winter, some balance problems set in, resulting in a temporary but painful injury from

a fall in his kitchen. Friends offered support, and he accepted it. His dog Jack, whom he claimed was part Alaskan husky, part wolf, was a constant companion. After his injury, Putnam said he was worried that Jack was becoming excessively worried about him.

The move to a simpler house never happened. In early June, Putnam sensed trouble and sought medical advice. A diagnostic trip to Charlottesville revealed signs of pneumonia but a more devastating report of Stage Four lung cancer. A rapid decline set in, and friends helped organize hospice support.

An artist's memoir remains only partly written. "The title of his book would be *Learning to Dance*, after a time as a boy when he danced with the sculptor Alexander Calder," says Mary-Sherman Willis. "Nol was a philosopher and a romantic, read widely and embraced people with an open heart and the soul of an artist. And he was a great dancer!"

Putnam leaves art made out of iron, plus art made out of living life as it should be lived. Miranda Hope sees it this way: "It just seemed that Nol woke up and got to the work of growing, learning, teaching, listening, reflecting, laughing, supporting, connecting, reaching, questioning, creating, and showing up, despite the forces to skip all that. Or maybe, because of them."



Putnam's Folger Gate in the National Cathedral Columbarium weighs 1,200 pounds and took 1,200 hours to assemble.

BY HENRY EASTWOOD, 1992