



Unison Preservation Society

NEWSLETTER

Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside

Photo by Dara Bailey

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• SUMMER •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

William Benton—From Silk Breeches to the Motor Car—with a Pause to Construct Unison’s Methodist Church

By Mitch Diamond

In July of 1881, wealthy Loudoun builder and farmer William Benton—at the ripe age of 93—was killed when an unbroken colt he was riding ran him into a tree.

Benton was born in Lisbon, Lincolnshire, England in the age of kings, powdered wigs, candlelight and silk britches. He came to Alexandria in the new United States in 1802 by sailing ship at age 14, traveled to Loudoun County on horseback and became friends with a future President.

He lived to see the nation through two wars and covered by railroads from sea to sea. He saw the telegraph and telephone in regular use; the seas conquered by iron steam ships; heard about the inventions of the phonograph, the light bulb and other wonders of Menlo Park and, just as he died, the first gasoline-powered motor cars.

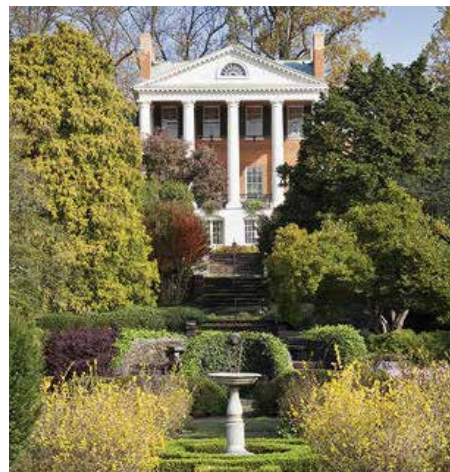
And, during his long life, he oversaw the building of many of Loudoun’s finest buildings, including Oak Hill, President James Monroe’s new house; Huntlands, where Dr. Betsee Parker now lives—and Unison’s own United Methodist Church.

Benton’s story was the story of America. Arriving as an immigrant just 26 years after the new nation was proclaimed, he came to know future president Monroe in the War of 1812 and later moved to Loudoun County to manage Monroe’s farm. During the 1820’s, Benton lived on Monroe’s property with his new wife, Sarah Hyde,

and the first of his eight children. In the early 1820’s, he supervised the building of Monroe’s new house.

But soon after receiving an inheritance from some relatives in Wales, he found his calling as a major farmer and landowner. He left Monroe’s farm, buying 250 acres of his own near the Pot House, the old brick-making site between the Goose Creek and the newly named village of Union (before it became Unison).

Over the next several decades he continued to buy land. He was listed as holding 600 acres in 1844 and by 1860 he was one of the largest landowners in the County with more than 1000 acres in cultivation. By the time of the Civil War he



Oak Hill, President James Monroe’s house located in Aldie, Virginia.

had become one of the wealthiest people in Loudoun, and one of its most significant landowners and farmers.

But Benton’s most lasting contribution to Loudoun was as an architect, brick-maker, mason and builder. After overseeing the building of Oak Hill, he went on to design and build his own house, Spring Hill (which still stands on Pot House Road and is now called Benton) in 1831. He then built New Lisbon next door (now Dr. Betsee Parker’s home named Huntlands), and in 1834 he built the two-story brick Unison United Methodist Church to replace “Old Bethesda,” the older home of that congregation.

He then went on to build Foxcroft Manor House, the Middleburg Episcopal Church, the town’s Baptist Church and its Methodist Church. It is also thought he built the old stone bridge crossing the Goose Creek between St. Louis Road and Middleburg—called Benton’s Bridge. Many of his buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places

Much of his farming and his building was carried out by slave labor. He was listed on the 1830 census as owning 16 slaves and, by 1860, he was shown as holding 29 slaves. But he had mixed feelings about slavery. He taught his slaves to read and write during the 1840s in direct violation of Virginia law. As the Civil War loomed, he wrote that he was not a supporter of



Spring Hill (Benton's house).

slavery, but acknowledged that his sons may want to defend their state. And at Huntlands, a well-constructed tunnel has been found which, it is believed, allowed fugitive slaves to enter the property and be hidden as they fled northward.

He was 77-years old at the end of the Civil War and little more is known of his activities.



New Lisbon house now named Huntlands.

What we do know is that his life spanned the emergence of this new nation from a time lit only by fire to the age of electricity; from 13 colonies to a nation reaching from the Atlantic to the Pacific; and from transportation based on the horse to one based on steam and the gasoline-powered motorcar.

For residents of Unison, he will be



Unison Methodist Church.

remembered as the designer and builder of our grand old Methodist Church, the finest building in the village. And, we will think of him as we drive from our village to Middleburg on Foxcroft Road, passing many of the great buildings he designed and built and then driving over the site of Benton's Bridge, the stream he crossed many times. ■

Unison Round Up

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Loudoun's Board of Supervisors continues to move relentlessly toward a state-mandated June 20 vote on the new Comprehensive Plan for the county. The Board, in a series of work sessions, has been amending sections of the plan one motion at a time since April. As of Saturday, June 1, they had been through the Urban, Suburban, Transition and Rural sections of the plan. Many of the

motions recommended by county staff have blunted the amped up vision of the county that was recommended by the Planning Commission in March and had caused an uproar throughout the county. For instance, only about a third of the thousands of new homes suggested by the Planning Commission in the Transition area are left in the plan at this time. Not clear: What the overall picture will look like in the end.

HISTORIC VILLAGES UNITE—TO MAKE A POINT

During the Comprehensive Plan work session June 1, a surprise motion requested by the Loudoun Historic Village Alliance and a 9-0 vote by the Board of Supervisors returned Unison to the list of Historic Rural Villages in the Plan. Unison had somehow been dropped between the first iteration in 2017 and the March version handed to the Board. The motion by Supervisor Tony Buffington to add Unison included Willisville, which is an LHVA member and had been overlooked by the county altogether. The oversight prompted an obviously miffed Chair Phyllis Randall to question the notable absence of historic African American villages of Loudoun. "Why isn't Howardsville on the list as well?" she said. "And Conklin?" Howardsville was promptly added and voted onto the list. Conklin will be part of a "cross-roads villages" study, ordered by Randall.

WATER AND SEWER MEETING JUNE 27

Residents of the Unison Historic District are invited to a meeting at 6:30 p.m. June 27 to discuss installing county Water and Sewer in Unison. Scott Fincham, the Environmental Program Specialist of Loudoun's Department of General Services, will explain the program and the process. Letters to eligible residents are in the mail. ■

"Loudoun 1725 Gravel Grinder" Rides Through Unison



On Sunday June 9, over 400 bike riders passed through the village of Unison for the Loudoun 1725 Gravel Grinder scenic bike ride. The event started and finished at Salamander Resort in Middleburg. From there, riders embarked along a 40, 60, or 80-mile route. The event was put on by

EX2 Adventures and 5% of the proceeds went to America's Routes—a Committee of the Mosby Heritage Area Association that raises funds to help preserve the rural roads of Loudoun County. Over \$1800 was raised. To learn more about the America's Routes project or to make a donation please visit AmericasRoutes.com.

Riders along Quaker Lane. Photo by Douglas Graham.

An Interview with Unison Artist Cathy Zimmerman

By Howard Lewis

Several years ago, we decided to do occasional interviews with some of the many talented artists and authors who live in the Unison area. In the 2018 winter issue of the newsletter, for example, I interviewed Mary Reeves Bell who had just published her new book, *The Parliament for Owls*. In this issue of the Unison Preservation Society's newsletter, we feature another local artist—Cathy Zimmerman, who is best known for her watercolor landscapes. I recently sat down with Cathy in her kitchen, which is also her studio, at Buttonwood Farm where she lives with her husband, Tad, and numerous animals.

HL: Let's start with the obvious question: when did you start painting?

CZ: I can't remember a time when I was not drawing and painting. Several of my uncles painted and encouraged me. But the person who was instrumental in me becoming an artist was Emily Sharp at the Hill School. She just "lit me up." Art and sports is what I loved in school. I also studied at the Corcoran School of Art in D.C.

HL: There may be a few Monets hanging on walls in the Unison area but I would bet there are a lot more Zimmermans. I even have a Zimmerman—a watercolor of a blue bird that I see a hundred times a day as I go back and forth in our house.

CZ: Well, I don't know the exact count but a lot of people in this area do have at least one of my paintings. In fact, one person whom I have known forever has something like 28 of my works—going back to when I was in the second grade at the Hill School!



HL: I think of your work as primarily watercolors.

CZ: Yes, it is my favorite medium. I am known for my watercolors—mainly of landscapes. Some of these I do because I was inspired by something I saw one day out riding or walking around the Unison area where the light, trees, and background are just made for a striking scene. I paint from memory. So, I come home and start painting what I saw. Others watercolors are specific landscapes (or in your case that bluebird), which various people have commissioned me to do.

HL: When we started to talk this morning, you mentioned that your art over the last several years has changed—or evolved—due to two things. Explain.

CZ: Well, the first thing was the arrival of grandchildren. I started to do what might be called "silly stuff" or "cartoonish things." For example, a Blue Heron carrying a baby wrapped in a blanket with a large following of Middleburg animals—a fox, a skunk, a horse, a pony and so on. (See below left.) Some of these are watercolors to hang on a wall. Others have been turned into cards.

HL: And the second thing?

CZ: Several years ago, I had a horseback riding accident—a serious one where I had to wear a "halo" for six weeks and was unable to turn by head at all. I thought I would be bored to death having to live with this contraption on my head, but two Unison neighbors, Maria Eldridge and Lee



Painting from memory, Cathy Zimmerman works on a new piece in her Unison studio.

Kincaid, came over almost every day and encouraged me to start doing oil paintings, which was something I hadn't done a lot of. Oil paintings are now part of my repertoire. Thanks to some good Unison neighbors, I not only learned something new, but I wasn't bored a minute during the six-weeks I had wear that blasted halo.

HL: The matting that goes around your pictures is unique.

CZ: Yes, rather than the traditional plain matting, I often incorporate part of the picture onto the matting itself. (See below right.) So, if the watercolor is a bluebird sitting on a tree branch, I will extend the branch over onto the matting. It adds interest and is different. Almost everyone likes it but if they don't it is easy enough to change to plain matting.

HL: You haven't mentioned your murals yet. In particular, what about the one you did for the room in Kim Hart's house where he has a large model train layout? It certainly adds to the ambiance of the set-up.

CZ: (Laughs.) Yes, a number of years ago, I did a mural for Kim's model train room. I have also done a mural for the Levis Hill House in Middleburg, the Morgan Oil Company, Loudoun Vet Clinic in Purcellville and the Rose Hill Vet Clinic in Flint Hill. But after my riding accident, I don't really do murals that much anymore because it hurts my neck

HL: If readers want to find out more about your work, they can be contact you by phone at 540-687-3260 or at cathyszimmerman@gmail.com., right?

CZ: Yes, that's right. ■

Photos by Michael Zuckerman.



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How to Support the Unison Preservation Society (UPS):

UPS depends upon contributions from people living in our community who want to preserve our historic village and the countryside surrounding it. Since the UPS is a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation registered in Virginia, all contributions are tax deductible. Contributions should be made to the Unison Preservation Society and sent to the post office box listed above.

Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters. If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org.



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Preserving a Part of Unison's African-American Heritage

By Kim Hart

A few years ago, three Methodist churches in the southwest part of Loudoun County were consolidated into one church in Purcellville. The Austin Grove Church, started by freed slaves in 1872, was part of this consolidation. The "Home" church, built in 1911, was closed with the future of this historic property near Unison very much up in the air. This year, however, the Austin Grove Preservation Foundation was established and has been leasing the church, which is located about a mile west of the village of Bloomfield, while funds are raised to purchase and preserve this important part of our community's heritage.

The original 1872 building served as both a church and a school. That building was replaced in 1911 with the stone church building that remains today. The church and religion played a vital role in African-American life. When freed slaves



Austin Grove Church.

established small communities such as Howardsville, Rock Hill, or Willisville after the Civil War, the first things built were a church, schoolhouse, and a cemetery. Many members of Austin Grove congregation, who still live in our community, can trace their roots back 145 years to the men and women who established the church in 1872.

For more information on the Austin Grove Preservation Foundation and its work to save this important part of our community's heritage, please email Kim Hart at kim@goodworksva.com. ■



An Epic Drop-in

Unison's Tom Hopkins and his two sons, Patrick and Tom, dropped into the nation's D-Day celebration's in France this month—quite literally. The three joined a re-enactment of the remarkable nighttime parachute jumps of the fabled Pathfinders behind the lines in Normandy to light the way for the D-Day invasion on

June 6, 1944. All the re-enactors wore the M42 WWII paratrooper uniform and jumped from an actual C-47 that flew over Normandy 75 years ago. The opportunity to join the reenactment came up just a month before and it all seemed "too good to be true," said Tom, a former member of the legendary 82nd Airborne and a one-time Pathfinder himself. No injuries, just a lot of smiles in the aftermath. Unison artist Laura Hopkins, mother and wife of the jumpers, also attended but was firmly planted on the ground along with daughter, Kate, and Tom Jr.'s fiancé, Kumiko.



Tom Hopkins and his sons Patrick (l) and Tom (r) happily on the ground at the drop zone.