

Rugby: 125 Years of History

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The literal meaning of Utopia – no place – certainly did not fit Rugby, Tennessee, in its 1880s heyday. It became one of the largest towns on the sparsely populated Cumberland Plateau and was attracting prospective colonists and tourists from both Britain and America.

The meaning doesn't fit today either because Rugby is a rarity in the realm of 19th century intentional community building. Not only have the entire original town plan and some 20 original buildings survived, but Rugby has also remained a living and pristinely preserved community . . . and today's residents and supporters still aspire to some of its founder's Utopian goals.

A Brief History

Famous British author, social reformer and statesman Thomas Hughes was instrumental in the founding of Rugby in 1880, initially with Boston industrialist and fellow idealist Franklin W.



Figure 1: Hughes Public Library in Historic Rugby

Smith. Known and beloved world-wide as the author of the semi-autobiographical young people's classic, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Hughes also achieved prominence as a strong proponent of Christian Socialism, the cooperative movement and trade unionism in Britain, and as leading British champion of the Union cause during the Civil War in America.

It was during an 1870s speaking tour in America arranged by poet and long-time friend James Russell Lowell that the idea for Rugby emerged. Hughes was fascinated by what he saw in America, especially by the possibilities that its vast, undeveloped land might hold for citizens of his own increasingly crowded country. As he toured the northeast, speaking primarily on the need to "heal the breach" between the North and the South and America and England after the war, he became convinced that "immigration to America, under the right circumstances," was the best course many of his countrymen could follow.

While long a champion of Britain's working class, Hughes was also especially concerned about the plight of younger sons of Britain's upper class families who by tradition did not inherit but were nevertheless expected to "live like gentlemen rather than engage in labor or trade that was beneath them."

As the idea for the prototype colony in America, peopled with British immigrants, grew in Hughes' mind, he saw an opportunity for "these two great nations, sharing the same heritage as well as the same language, to work together," forging stronger ties. When Rugby officially opened in 1880, Hughes intended it to be a class-free, agricultural community based on cooperative enterprise, cultural opportunity, religious freedom and strict temperance. "Our settlement is open," he declared, "to all who like our principles and our ways."

During its first decade, hundreds of people immigrated from the British Isles to America's Rugby and hundreds more came from other parts of America. Some stayed only briefly, some for years and some for life. More than 60 cottages, villas, and commercial and institutional buildings of distinctive, rural Victorian styles were constructed during Rugby's first decade. Periodicals and newspapers in both England and America followed the ups and downs of Hughes' "distant Eden."

Farming efforts were perhaps not pursued as avidly as other community building efforts. Colonists started many cultural and public service organizations including the Thomas Hughes Free Public Library, Rugby Public Purposes Association, the Rugby Social Club, the Rugby Drama Society, Ladies Church Working Society, Rugby Horticultural & Agricultural Society and the Rugby Masonic Lodge. Christ Church Episcopal, still holding services today, was dedicated on the colony's opening day.

At its height in the mid-1880s, Rugby's population was around 300. Most of the gentry, farming and working class residents were of English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh extraction. Some were the hearty Scots-Irish peoples who already had small homesteads in the area, and who certainly understood better than most newer colonists how to live off the land. There were also a few

Germans and a small number of African Americans. Some younger sons of gentry remained as valued colonists, though many had left for other parts of America or returned to Britain. Rugby for a few years seemed to be thriving and achieving Hughes' hope for a "class free, cultured society willing to work with their hands."

A window on life in 1880s Rugby is taken here from *The Rugby Handbook*, published by the Board of Aid to Land Ownership, of which Hughes was chairman, in the summer of 1884. The Rugby site is very picturesque and striking, occupying broad ridges at a point near the junction



Figure 2: Newberry House at Historic Rugby

of two mountain streams – the Clear Fork and the White Oak. The roads are cut out of the forest, but not laid down upon the right-angle plan of American cities; many of them named after English localities, familiar to the Hughes family. Christ Church [Episcopal] on Central Avenue, is a large and quite handsome frame building, surmounted, with a neat belfry, from which a good-toned bell peals over the surrounding forest.

The Hughes Free Public Library is justly esteemed the "lion" of the place. This valuable acquisition of 6,000 volumes was presented to the town by the publishers of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, as a token of respect for Thomas Hughes.

Rugby has an excellent hotel, The Tabard, named from the old Tabard Inn in Southwark, London. The Rugby Gazette, published every Thursday, is a live and energetic recorder of all that passes of a public interest to Rugbeians, and the very wide circle of outsiders. Rugby Road, the station for Rugby, is seven miles from the village, and on the Cincinnati Southern Railroad, also known as the Queen and Crescent Route.

The houses of the residents, a visitor will at once notice, are not the ephemeral buildings too generally 'run up' in the rush attending new settlements, but, with few exceptions, roomy and elegant, and surrounded by well-tended lawns and gardens, and the little rural knick-knacks the lover of home influences is ever apt to devise.

The Lawn Tennis Club has excellent grounds on Allerton Road – grounds almost as famous and as well-known as the Coliseum at Rome. The Rugby Social Club has been very successful in securing local talent and support. They occasionally give public dramatic entertainments, when full houses attest full appreciation.

The Rugby Cornet Band, composed of some ten or eleven gentlemen, has well maintained its position, acquiring quite a reputation for musical ability.

The bathing facilities afforded by the Clear Fork stream are excellent and much appreciated. Fishing, hunting and shooting are largely followed, deer, turkeys, quail, and squirrels, in their respective seasons, being quite plentiful.

The public school recreation ground, neatly fenced, and fitted with swings, vaulting bars, strides, &c., all presented by the kind thoughtfulness of Mrs. Hughes, is a safe and a happy resort for the younger Rugbeians.

In the woods around Rugby are opportunities for studying geology, botany, entomology, zoology, and, in fact, all the ologies few other places can more abundantly give. The walks and drives around Rugby, with quiet scenes of primeval forest life, touched by distant peeps of mountain ranges, all give an ever-recreative strength to mind and body.

Rugby did not live up to its founder's Utopian goals for many reasons. Early difficulties with land titles and overseas management, unusually severe weather conditions, a typhoid epidemic, less fertile soil than first thought and the failure of the Cincinnati-Southern Railroad to build a promised spur line all contributed, as did the unsuitability of many of the colonists to a pioneering lifestyle. The charismatic Hughes, due to family and business pressures, could visit the colony only annually.

Thomas Hughes was much the poorer for his community building effort in America when he died in England in 1896. One of his last letters to the colonists, however, showed his unflinching belief in the effort. "I can't help feeling and believing" he wrote, "that good seed was sown when Rugby was founded, and that someday the reapers, whoever they may be, will come along with joy bearing heavy sheaves with them."

Rugby never became a ghost town. By the turn of the century, some 125 people still lived in the Rugby area, though the mix was more Appalachian than British. Fortunately for future generations, some were determined to preserve Rugby and its cultural heritage.

Restoration Begins

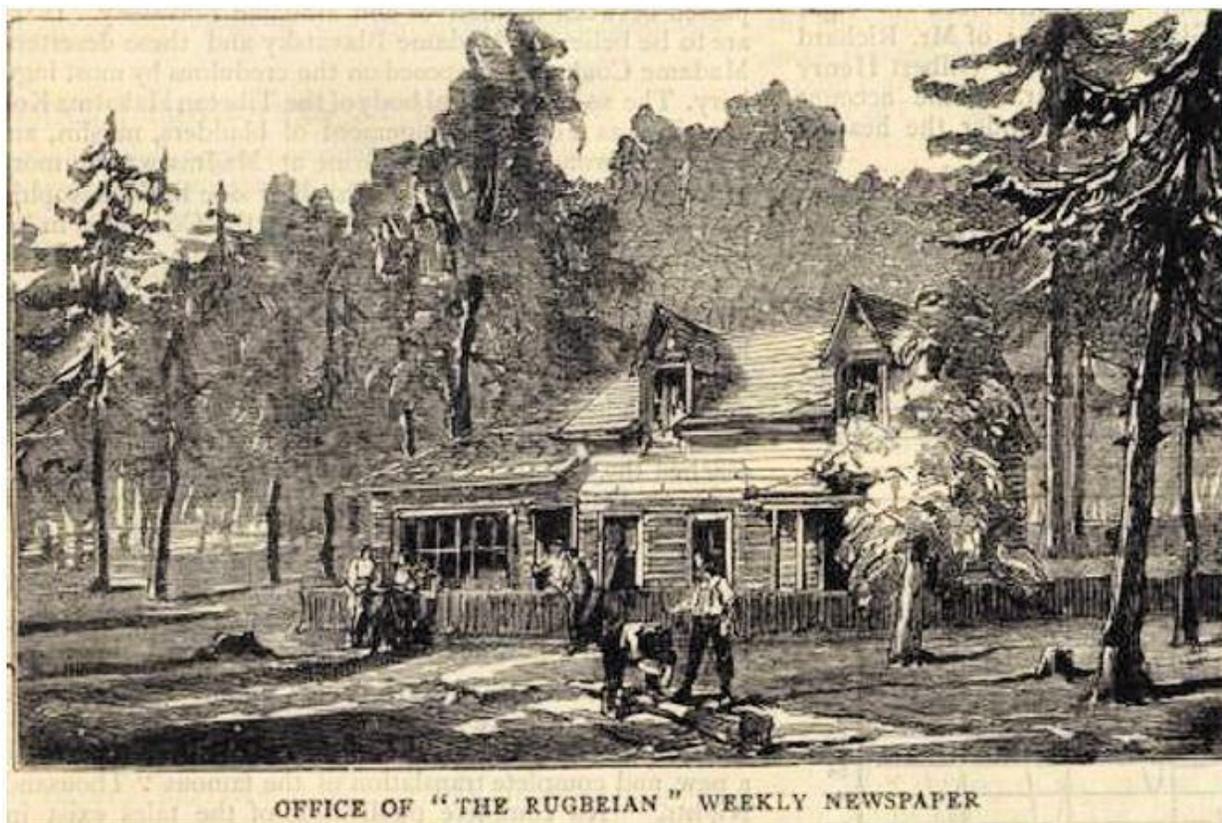
From the 1920s through the 1950s, surviving colonists, their sons and daughters and others lovingly cared for Rugby's public buildings, river gorge trails and cemetery, even as private residences were sometimes lost to neglect or fire. Extensive media attention was paid to the need to restore and preserve Rugby. Finally, in 1964, 16-year-old Brian Stagg, from nearby Deer Lodge, became deeply interested in Rugby. Helped by many area and Chattanooga residents with Rugby ties, the non-profit preservation/museum organization known today as Historic Rugby was founded in 1966. Early restoration work focused on the remarkably unchanged 1882 Thomas Hughes Library and its original furnishings and collection; Hughes' rural Gothic home, 1884 Kingstone Lisle (taken directly from a design in Andrew Jackson Downing's *Architecture of Country Houses*); and Christ Church Episcopal, a Carpenter Gothic gem.

Historic Rugby will celebrate its 40th year in 2006, and has been working within the small rural community to preserve, restore and interpret more of Rugby's built and natural landscape and its cultural history. The entire 2,000-acre townsite and surrounding woodlands has been a National Register Historic District since 1972.

Today, twenty historic buildings remain where built. Undisturbed sites of some 40 significant buildings no longer standing have been documented by archeologists. The cemetery remains on a promontory above the still free-flowing rivers surrounding the townsite. Six-acre Beacon Hill park, surrounded by a circular public walking and carriage path, is still in place. Trails built by the colonists down to the "Gentlemen's Swimming Hole" and "Meeting of the Waters" have been open and in use since 1880 and are now protected by inclusion in the Big South Fork National River & Recreation Area.

The site of the lawn tennis grounds, one of the earliest in America, is undeveloped, as is the 50-acre tract that was designated in the original plan as the "English gardens," an area where an agriculturist raised demonstration gardens to instruct incoming settlers. The elegant, three-story Tabard Inn site is undisturbed, its foundation still visible. The original town pump is still in place. Roadways and side lanes remain on their original rights-of-way. Original plant materials established by the early colonists still thrive. And Rugby is slowly growing again as new "colonists" buy lots in Beacon Hill, part of the original town plan, and build historically compatible homes.

Rugby's founding, early years and ongoing history is perhaps more extensively documented than any other intentional 19th century community in rural America. Among the Rugby Archive & Research Centre, the Tennessee State Library & Archives, the Morris L. Parrish collection at Princeton and several other collections are hundreds of historic photographs and drawings, letters



written by Hughes and other colonists, business and financial records, plans and maps, deed records, memoirs, wills, inventories, all seven years of weekly newspapers published in Rugby from 1881 through 1887 and much more.

In recent years, Historic Rugby has historically reconstructed the Board of Aid land office as a permanent home for the Rugby Archives and Research Centre and the original cooperative Commissary as a museum store; restored Newbury House and Pioneer Cottage for unique overnight lodging; restored the Rugby Printing Works and the schoolhouse, where exhibitry traces a century of Rugby history; built an architecturally compatible restaurant to serve visitors and established many history and arts programs such as week-long Elder hostels, traditional craft and outdoor workshops, school programs and year-round special events like the May Festival of British & Appalachian Culture. Interpretive tours are given daily year-round except for major winter holidays. In 2004, some 60,000 people visited Historic Rugby from every state and 18 foreign countries.

Historic Rugby and the current and new residents of the community continue to work toward new arts and educational goals and toward significantly expanding endowment so that the future of the organization and the village can be more assured.

Envisioning Tomorrow

Historic Rugby is currently nearing completion of a \$1 million Legacy Campaign which is

providing funds to build a new visitor centre and theatre, produce a new Rugby history film, restore Uffington House, the original home of the founder's aged mother and niece as a living history site and develop outdoor exhibits at the Massengale Homeplace, where visitors can learn more about the Appalachian folks that lived in the Rugby area.

After 25 years of lobbying, plans to reroute busy and dangerous State Highway 52, which bisects the community, are now underway. The long-dreamed historic reconstruction of several important buildings like the Tabard Inn and Perrigo Boarding House will be more feasible once the bypass is in place.

National Historic Landmark status is being sought for some or all of Rugby's buildings. What some have called the last British colonization attempt in America is undergoing a continuing and carefully controlled revival of which founder Thomas Hughes would surely be proud. Good seed was indeed sown when Rugby was founded.

2005 Information

Open daily year-round, except winter holidays, with tours, museum store, full service restaurant, walking trails, lodging and more than two dozen special events and craft and outdoor workshops.

Hours:

Schoolhouse Visitor Centre – 9:00 to 5:30; with tours going out until approximately 4:45.

Commissary Museum Store – 10:00 to 6:00 Monday-Saturday; 12:00 to 6:00 Sunday

Harrow Road Café – 8:00 to 6:00 Sunday-Thursday; 8:00 to 9:00 Friday & Saturday. Open with shorter hours in January & February

Spirit of Red Hill Art & Oddiments Shop – [the article ended here]