

Something's Fishy

By Reed Belden

“A sight to delight. Yes, indeed, it must delight any man that beholds it. It may be seen in Schoen’s window, corner of Main and Eleventh streets – lovely little minnows from the State fish-hatchery at Lexington. They are young Salmon – California Salmon – sent by Colonel McDonald, Fish Commissioner, and were hatched at the house under his direction.”

– *Richmond Daily Dispatch*
April, 18, 1879



OR AS LONG AS I lived here, I had wondered about the history of the brick house on the east side of North Main Street just beyond the Virginia Military Institute athletic buildings. Now I know: The building is a remnant of the fish hatchery.

Therein lies a story.

In 1778, the state legislature situated Lexington so as to include a water supply. This included a “branch” at Randolph Street. That branch still exists, now routed under the VMI athletic buildings and football field. It emerges at Hook Lane across from the brick building. In 1875, this branch provided the water necessary for the fish hatchery.

The story of the fish hatchery is the story of Marshall McDonald (1835–95), professor of geology and mineralogy at VMI under Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson until the outbreak of the Civil War. McDonald was commissioned as a lieutenant and engineering officer on Jackson’s Staff. He was taken prisoner at Vicksburg in 1863. He was paroled and returned to VMI, where he became chair of the science departments. McDonald, who established the VMI Museum, taught at the institute until 1872.

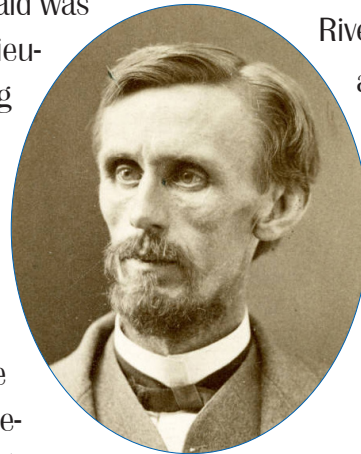


y 1870 the streams up and down the Shenandoah Valley were becoming depleted of fish – so much so the State elected to form a fish commission, and McDonald was selected to be the first commissioner. McDonald invented the fish ladder in use to help fish bypass dams and major rapids in flowing rivers.

As one of his first actions as State Fish commissioner he established a

fish hatchery in Lexington. He brought 180,000 salmon eggs, which, once hatched and developed, allowed him to deposit 120,000 salmon in various tributaries of the James and New Rivers. Unfortunately, as we all know, the salmon did not flourish.

McDonald established a trout hatchery near Wytheville in 1879. A year later he accepted a position with the United States Fish and Game Commission, and in that same year



*Marshall McDonald, 1867.
Michael Miley photo.*

the Lexington fish hatchery closed. McDonald moved through a number of positions in the Fish and Fisheries Commission and in 1888 he was appointed its commissioner. He died in office in 1895 and is buried in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Belden has lived in Rockbridge since 1993 and has been a leader in both Historic Lexington Foundation and the Rockbridge Historical Society. He is a historian interested in the “lost villages of Rockbridge.”