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Historical society hosts Bucknell waterway historian



Dr. Claire Campbell and John McWilliams speak before her presentation.

BY MATT STULBERG
The Standard-Journal

MILTON — “Even the streams that flow through our small Pennsylvania towns will eventually flow to the sea,” observed Dr. Claire Campbell, addressing members of Milton’s Historical Society on Thursday evening.

Campbell was the guest

speaker at the Milton Historical Society’s annual Gov. James Pollock Memorial Banquet, held at the Wynding Brook Golf Club in Milton. Her talk, entitled “The Connections of Water: Learning About Milton’s History from Limestone Run,” explored the physical and cultural history of the borough’s waterways.

Campbell, who has a doc-

torate in environmental history and works as a professor at Bucknell University, said her field deals with the ways that humans have interacted with the natural environment throughout history and how we have come to shape one another.

There are two facets to environmental history,

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Historical

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Campbell explained. One half focuses on physical changes to the landscape, areas like migration, population and the evolution of transportation. The other side looks at the ways in which people conceptualize our relationship with the natural world and the non-human.

Campbell’s talk was centered around three angles from which the history of local waterways, specifically Limestone Run, can be examined: Channelization, which deals with the physical ways in which water has been controlled and directed; compartmentalization, which examines how different groups use and compete for a waterway and its resources; and commemoration, which looks at how the community thinks about, acknowledges, and remembers its waterways.

“One of the things that I find really interesting as a framework is that both Lewisburg and Milton have Limestone Runs,” said Campbell, whose studies interrogate the similarities and differences between how the two towns interact with their fresh water courses.

“There’s a lot of ways to examine

how the town aspired to be urban, how it aspired to grow, and how these changes in industrialization affected the water,” she said, touching on the ways in which climate change factors into her work. “A lot of this has to do with the introduction of fossil fuels.”

As part of her presentation, Campbell displayed a number of maps of the area and its waterways dating back to the 17th century that she was able to obtain through a digital archive.

“Maps to me are kind of the perfect way of understanding environmental history,” she said. The information these maps provide, both explicitly in the geographic lines they trace and implicitly in the choices made in their creation, gives a window into how the documented landscape was viewed by the populations interacting with it.

“Maps, as we’ll see, document human intervention, but also human ambition. They are records of intention and action: What we say we’re going to do, what we want a place to give us, and how well that turned out.”

Campbell, who moved to Pennsylv-

ania from Nova Scotia nine years ago, said part of her personal journey here has been finding a home within the community and that learning about the systems of water around her played a key part in that.

“One of the great things about subjects like water is you can make connections outward.”

She explained that since the pandemic shifted her focus to more local geography, one of her guiding principles while researching Limestone Run has been “The idea of looking around the place where you live and realizing that, even if it’s familiar, it’s important.”

Campbell also emphasized her desire to hear the stories that society members had to share about their own experiences with Limestone Run. John McWilliams, who invited Campbell to speak and introduced her at the banquet, spoke about his own childhood memories of catching minnows and cooling off on hot summer days in a nearby creek.

The historical society used to be the canal society prior to its acquisition of the Cameron House, according to retiring Vice President Joan Nunn, so it was fitting that Campbell

be the speaker for the night.

Tim Bittner, president of the historical society, said he was glad the group was able to host its first banquet since the pandemic forced it to be missed the previous two years.

“Exciting to be back after three years. 2019 was our last one so it’s nice to be able to do this again.”

Bittner highlighted two sections of the society’s bylaws that he wanted to emphasize as part of the banquet: First, the goal of bringing together people interested in the history of Milton; and second, the mission to educate people about the history of Milton.

By the same token, Campbell expressed her desire to have the Bucknell Humanities Center work more closely with Milton organizations like the historical society.

“There’s so much environmental history and I really hope that people get interested and excited about it.”

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