

DAVID RUFFNER
Schoolboy, Businessman, Statesman

by Betty Lou Gaeng -- Ruffner Family Association Historian

During the year 1775, many events in our country's history unfolded. In March, Patrick HENRY made his stirring "Give me liberty or give me death" address to the Virginia convention. To the north in Massachusetts in April, Paul REVERE and William DAWES rode to alert the Patriots that the British were on their way to Concord to destroy the arms. The first volleys of gunfire were heard at Lexington and from old North Bridge in Concord, touching off the American Revolution. The Continental Congress in June named George WASHINGTON Commander-in-Chief. In July, the first postal system was established with Benjamin FRANKLIN named as postmaster general.

While important history was being made elsewhere, in the Shenandoah Valley along Hawksbill Creek, to the west of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Colony of Virginia, what was foremost on the mind of 8-year-old David RUFFNER, was school. School was so important to him, that some 60 years later, sitting at his desk, David wrote what are now called David Ruffner's Notes. A large part of these Notes were devoted to David's remembrances of his early school days, and book learning.

Following their marriage in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 1739, David's grandparents, Peter and Mary (STEINMAN) RUFFNER, travelled to the Shenandoah Valley, to make their home on land deeded to them as a wedding gift by Mary's father Joseph STONEMAN. Here, they remained, adding more acreage to their holdings, raising their family, living to old age, and finally to be buried on their home property.

The RUFFNER land was located in the part of Virginia that in 1831 became Page County. This is where David was born in 1767 and lived surrounded by his grandparents and other family members until 1796 when he moved further west to Kanawha County to join his parents, Joseph and Ann. Following the Civil War, Kanawha County became a county of West Virginia, but in 1796, it was still part of the state of Virginia.

At his desk one day in the 1830s, David wrote down some of the history of the RUFFNER family and his memories of his early school days. His remembrances give us the opportunity to learn how important education was to a young boy in frontier times. David describes his enthusiasm for learning--a rare opportunity in his time. In our day education is taken for granted and often little appreciated. However, for David, school was very special.

The original of David's Notes and some of his other writings are held in the West Virginia Archives, West Virginia University Library in Morgantown.

Following, copied from his own hand-written notes are David's remembrances of his school days, and his book learning. When David speaks of the Dutch, he is referring to the German (Deutsch) people who almost exclusively inhabited the area where the RUFFNERS lived.

"When I was about 8 years old I was sent to a (Dutch) school kept about a mile off, and so well pleased and delighted was I and my mind so much taken up with it, that I would have started every morning before day (strange as it may appear) had not my parents restrained me. At night I would have breakfast set apart and my dinner for the next day put into my knapsack, and I would go to bed early that I might rise early; accordingly I would be up two or three hours before day, have a good fire in the stove, eat my cold breakfast and ready to start to school, but my father would generally restrain me from going until dawn of day, much against my inclination. One morning however I slept off and got to the house before the dawn of day (the school was kept in Mr. HERSHBERGER's dwelling house), hearing the good woman making a fire in the house I stood on her porch

till she happened to come out, she then invited me in to her fire. One other morning for some cause I started later than usual. I happened to look back when on my way I saw the sun shine against Massanuttin mountain. Then I began to cry and ran with all my might because the sun arose before I got to school. That was probably the only time during the whole winter that I did not get to the school house before sunrise.

"It may be proper to state the manner in which the schools among the Dutch folk were arranged and conducted. On the one side of the house there was a long table and a bench next to the wall and the table so near that scholars could rest their books on the table before them. On the opposite side of the house another table and bench in the same manner. The one for the boys and the other for the girls; at one end of the room the Master had his table and seat, and a stove in the middle of the house.

"The scholars were all classed, when the school commenced, the Master would have the scholars all try by themselves at Spelling (in the book). The best scholar would be placed at the head next to the Master's Table and the next best next to him and so on till to the lower end. Each scholar to keep his place in the ranks untill the next trial day which would be once in two weeks, when the best would again be placed at the head and so on in succession. The lowest seat was called the Cat's bench, each of the little ones would try to get above that.

"Every morning when the school would take up and on the evening when it was let out the Master would sing a few verses with his scholars and each of the scholars would say a short prayer, which they would soon get by heart. Everything would go on as regular as 'clock work.

"Among the Germans the schools would always begin on the first of December and end the last of Feb.; then the children would stay at home and go to work. The price of tuition was a dollar a month. I think I went four winters to school to learn German and I went only one winter to learn English and that to a German (George KOONTS) who was himself, but a poor English scholar. Say 15 months in the five years, all the Schooling I ever got I suppose cost father about fifteen dollars. When I left and at School my only Stock of books was a Spelling book and a Testament, next I believe was Aesops Fable, then the Young Mans Best Companion and Baileys Dictionary, then I thought I had a pretty good library. By that time I was probably 18 or 20 years old. And next I subscribed for the Fredericksburg Herald. Soon after Mr. John MUNDALL set up a store near my father's house when I got some books I wanted. My whole heart was set upon books and acquiring Knowledge. I would always be reading when I had leisure. I have now stated the means and opportunities I had of qualifying myself for the various Stations I have filled in Society."

While still a young man in Shenandoah County, David served his community as Justice of the Peace. In 1796, when with his wife and their first three children, he moved to Kanawha County, he again became Justice of the Peace. In Kanawha County, David also served as ex-officio Judge of the County Court, which had jurisdiction in civil and criminal cases. For many years he also served as the presiding justice of that court and would eventually spend approximately 53 years of his life as a magistrate. Because he was a Colonel in the County Militia, he was awarded the title of Col. RUFFNER.

David RUFFNER for many years represented Kanawha County in the General Assembly of Virginia. He also served as one of the river commissioners and as a school commissioner.

In addition to his judicial and legislative duties, David RUFFNER was a successful businessman, active in the manufacture of salt (his family's business) until 1823 when he turned the business over to his youngest son

Lewis. During the time David spent in the salt manufacturing business, he made many improvements in the procedures.

David never gave up his love of reading and gaining knowledge. He accumulated a large personal library. He was never able to attend college himself, but he made sure that his two sons each had a college education.

In religion, David was a Presbyterian and took an active part in providing meeting places for services. He donated land in Charleston for the establishment of the First Presbyterian Church there, and also for Mercer Academy, which became very important in the field of education in the area, eventually merging into the public school system.

David RUFFNER led a very full life of family and community involvement. He died in February of 1843. After his death, the County Court of Kanawha adopted a series of resolutions in appreciation of David RUFFNER's service as a member of the court avowing that Col. David RUFFNER "discharged his duties with diligence, ability and impartiality."

David's never-ending quest for knowledge was an inspiration for his eldest son Henry. Henry RUFFNER was born in 1789, before the family moved to Kanawha County. He graduated from Washington College (later known as Washington & Lee University) in Lexington, Virginia in 1817. He then went on to teach at Mercer Academy for two years. He studied theology at Washington College, was licensed as a Presbyterian minister in 1819, and that same year he was appointed as a professor at Washington College. In 1836, Dr. RUFFNER was elected president of Washington College, and remained in that position until 1848 when ill health forced his resignation. Through the years he also continued his "preaching" and writing. Dr. Henry RUFFNER died near Malden, Kanawha County in December of 1861.

David RUFFNER's influence regarding the importance of education continued on to his grandson, Henry's eldest son, William Henry RUFFNER. William Henry was born in Lexington, Virginia in 1824. He obtained his A.B. from Washington College in 1842. He then studied theology at Princeton. He was a writer and editor. Dr. RUFFNER served as chaplain at the University of Virginia 1849-1851, and pastor at the Seventh Presbyterian Church, one of the largest Presbyterian churches in Philadelphia, from 1851 through 1853. He was a trustee of Washington & Lee University and wrote a history of the university. Dr. RUFFNER's contributions to Virginia's school system are unmatched. He authored the present public free school system and was the first State Superintendent of Public Instruction in Virginia 1870-1882. He was one of the leaders in establishing free education for women, and was principal of the Normal School in Farmville, West Virginia 1884-1887.

In addition to all his accomplishments in the field of education and religion, Dr. William Henry RUFFNER was a well-respected geologist. He contributed to many scientific works in geology, examining and reporting on coal mines and quarries, and when he retired from the education field in 1887, he did many surveys for large corporations in several states.

Because of William Henry RUFFNER's contribution as a geologist to the history of our own Washington Territory, in 1890 a street in the Queen Anne/Magnolia area of Seattle was named for him. In 1885, the Seattle, Lake Shore & Eastern Railroad Company was incorporated as a solution to the problem of connecting Seattle to the Canadian border. In 1887, the company built a railroad from Interbay in Seattle to serve the coal fields of Issaquah and Newcastle. At this time a group of New York investors became involved and along with some local businessmen, called upon Dr. William Henry RUFFNER to do a geological study on the railroad's possibilities. Dr. RUFFNER spent several weeks in the Seattle area and other parts of the Territory. Along the Raging River near Preston, Dr. RUFFNER even established his own coal mine, naming it Ruffner's Mine. At the conclusion of his railroad study, which was extremely prophetic in nature, Dr. RUFFNER's A Report on Washington Territory was published in 1889.

Through the years, the Seattle, Lake Shore & Eastern Railroad Company had problems, including bankruptcy. Several mergers followed, and eventually the whole system was taken over by Burlington Northern. The major portion of the old Seattle, Lake Shore & Eastern line was abandoned in the 1970s and developed as the Burke-Gilman Trail from Lake Union to Woodinville.

In 1891, Dr. RUFFNER returned from his home in Virginia to what had by then become the State of Washington, to examine property in the Cascade Mountains for a Richmond, Virginia syndicate. Dr. RUFFNER died in North Carolina in 1908.

David RUFFNER, as a little 8-year old boy, so eager to attend school and read his books, probably never imagined he would be so influential in inspiring his own son and grandson to excel in the field of education. What a truly remarkable legacy he left to them, and to all of us.



For this article I am indebted to the Ruffner Family Association (Mark Flasch, president); RFA's publication, "Ruffner Roots & Ramblings" (Pam Flasch, editor); Dr. William Henry Ruffner's A Report on Washington Territory; as well as the family history Peter Ruffner and his Descendants (Second Edition) 2007 -- and especially the original writings of David Ruffner himself. Publication of this article in The Sounder was approved by Pam (McNeely) Flasch, a descendant of Joseph, David Ruffner's father, and by Mark Flasch on behalf of the Ruffner Family Association. This article in its present form has not previously been published. The Ruffner House in Luray, Va. was built ca. 1739 by Peter and Mary Ruffner, and was expanded to its present size in 1840. It is now owned by Pam Flasch's uncle and aunt, Jim and Judy McNeely, descendants of Joseph Ruffner. Today it is a bed and breakfast inn.