

The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County: Excerpts from an Imagined Textbook

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To explore the possibilities of and make a case for LGBTQ+ representation in the formal K–12 curriculum of small-town Rockbridge County, Virginia, the authors have imagined a history textbook called “The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County.” The excerpts from this imagined textbook, created to represent what local LGBTQ+ curriculum could be, are both an exercise in creative writing and design as well as a collection of concrete stories and experiences from our home county. With the help of input from Rockbridge County High School’s flagship LGBTQ+ Alum Network (gathered via survey, email correspondence, and online focus groups), the authors designed textbook pages that provide a window into the people, places, and practices central to LGBTQ+ survival and life in Rockbridge County. Although this textbook does not exist (yet) as a complete standalone work, these pages may serve as a foundation for future projects about LGBTQ+ life in our home county and in other similar rural communities. By referencing traditional textbook aesthetics and providing a small glimpse into a rich local LGBTQ+ history, these excerpts illustrate both the costs of our erasure and the possibilities of our inclusion in formal K–12 curricula.

When you step foot in Rockbridge County, it might not initially resemble a typical “safe space” for LGBTQ+ people. Nestled in the Shenandoah Valley of southwest Virginia, Rockbridge appears to be more like a stereotypically conservative, rural community than a queer mecca. Civil War history (with an emphasis on the Confederacy) features prominently in the local tourism industry as well as in named institutions (e.g. a local university named for Confederate general Robert E. Lee). Agriculture is

a part of the landscape and a source of income for many residents. Christian churches (which are almost exclusively Protestant) serve as the most available community centers for people living in the county and in the county seat, the city of Lexington. Embedded in the lush landscapes and fraught Southern heritage of Rockbridge County, however, are decades-long traditions of LGBTQ+ placemaking and storytelling. We know, because some of these histories are our own. This yet-untold history of LGBTQ+ life in the place we call home inspired the textbook excerpts you see in this piece.

What would it look like for local LGBTQ+ histories to be represented in Rockbridge County schools’ formal curriculum? What impact could such representation in formal schooling have on our community? To begin to answer these questions, we combined a community-engaged research process with graphic design to create a series of pages “ripped” from an imaginary textbook titled *The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County* (Figures 1–5). Although we created these textbook excerpts as a pair of individual authors, this project emerged from the collective work of the Rockbridge County High School (RCHS) LGBTQ+ Alum Network. This grassroots group (of which

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we are members) formed in 2022 after an oral history project that Carrie conducted (and in which Charlie participated) that resulted in a zine about the LGBTQ+ history of RCHS (Hart, 2022).

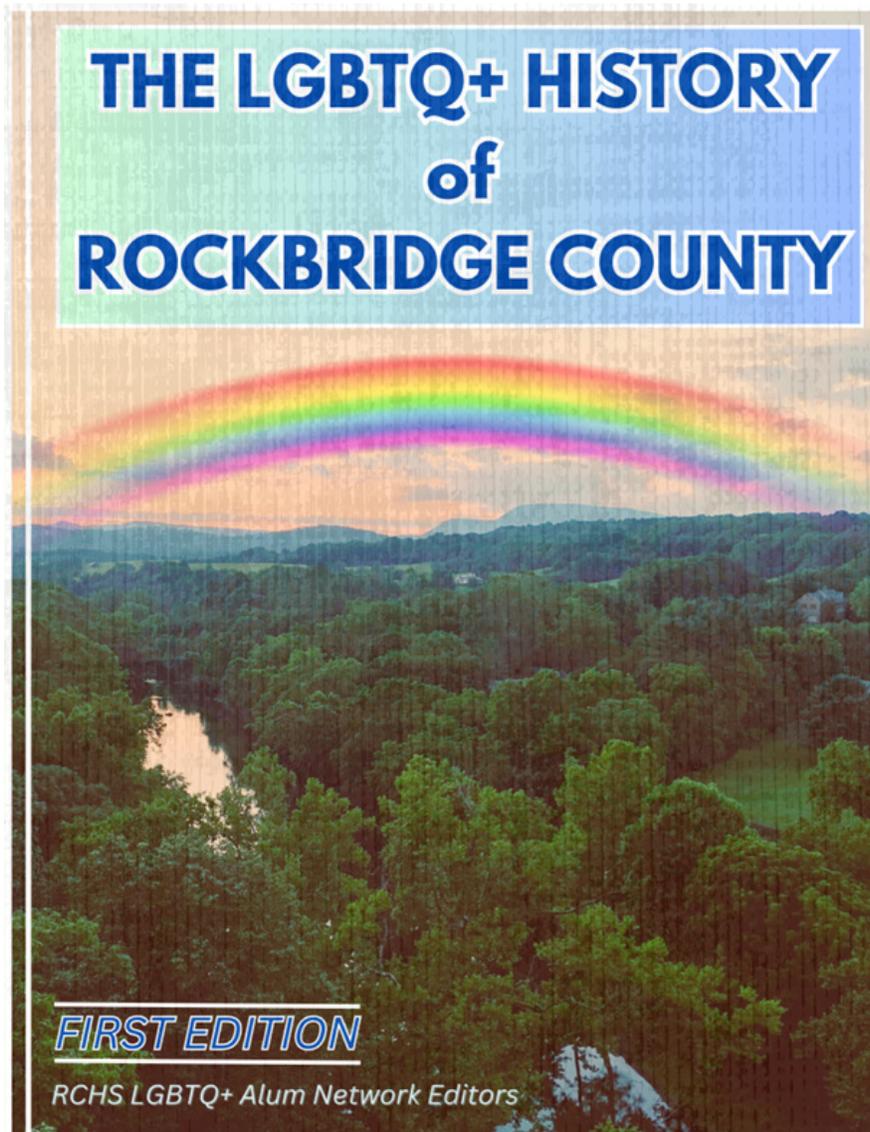
Since then, the goals of the Alum Network have been to foster community among its members and to be in solidarity with LGBTQ+ students who currently attend Rockbridge County schools. The Network's membership includes alums from over two decades of graduating classes. This makeup facilitates one of the Network's key goals: sharing knowledge between generations about queer survival and joy in the sometimes hostile environment of Rockbridge County. Through participation in this group, we have noticed intergenerational patterns of LGBTQ+ exclusion from school curricula that inspired us to explore these kinds

of stories through the medium of a high school history textbook.

The excerpts from our imagined textbook represent both an exercise in creative writing and design as well as a collection of concrete stories and experiences. The project is an exercise in imagination and hope because this learning resource about Rockbridge's LGBTQ+ history does not exist (yet) beyond the pages included here. In designing these pages, we attempted to reflect LGBTQ+ life in Rockbridge County accurately, as any textbook authors would do, and we also imagined what material life such a textbook could have in a future in which it exists as a material object that is taught in (and carried around) Rockbridge County schools. We imagined the textbook becoming scuffed and worn in school lockers and overstuffed backpacks at Rockbridge

Figure 1

Cover of The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County Imagined Textbook



County High School, its pages becoming ripped over the years as students flip through them to study for quizzes and complete their homework. Though we created these pages digitally, we dreamt a tactile life for them, particularly in a geographical area where internet access (and therefore access to digital resources) is not a given. Although the

pages are fragmented and imagined, they contain real names, places, and themes relevant to LGBTQ+ life in Rockbridge. To add to the sense of place, we incorporated original photographs taken by Charlie of the rivers and mountains of Rockbridge County. We identified the chapter themes (Figure 2) and index terms (Figures 3 and 4) by

Figure 2
Table of Contents of The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County Textbook

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INTRODUCTION: LGBTQ+ Histories of Rockbridge County, Virginia.....	1
CHAPTER 1: City and County: LGBTQ+ People in the Rural/Urban Divide.....	3
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combining our own knowledge and by incorporating Alum Network members' input through an online survey, email correspondence, and online gatherings.

As of now, most young people growing up in Rockbridge see little (if any) mention of gender and sexual diversity

in their formal schooling. Rather, their history, literature, health, science, and language classes center a heterosexual and cisgender norm that can leave LGBTQ+ students feeling like they have no place in the broader world. This erasure is representative of a nationwide trend in rural education. As

Figure 3

The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County *Textbook Index (A-L)*

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band, high school (110)

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flamboyance (124)

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Goodwill (115)

Goshen Pass (34)

Gorman, Linda (68)

The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County, Virginia

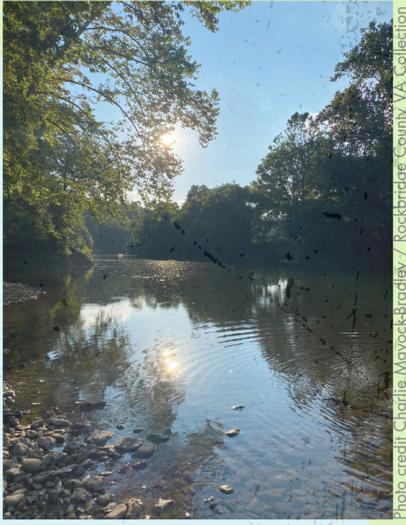


Photo credit: Charlie Mayock-Bradley / Rockbridge County VA Collection

GSA/SAGA (62)

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Lady Wildcats (258)

Lee, Robert E. (194, 276)

legacy (2, 185)

Lexington (2, 3, 25)

Lexington High School (28, 257)

Lexington Presbyterian Church (201)

Lexington City School Board (253)

RCHS LGBTQ+ Alum Network Publishing

the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network reports (GLSEN, 2022), students in small-town schools are the least likely to have LGBTQ+-related resources, as compared to students in urban or suburban schools. Indeed, students attending primary and secondary schools in Rockbridge County likely learn little local history at all, LGBTQ+ or otherwise. We hope that our imagined textbook could begin

to address these gaps in curriculum and public knowledge, particularly if the resource were ever to be expanded and a full version of it were to become a reality.

Projects that center LGBTQ+ stories in rural education are especially urgent given the uptick in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the United States over the past few years. Much of this legislation specifically targets school curricula

Figure 4
The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County *Textbook Index (L-W)*

<p>309 INDEX</p> <p>LGBTQ+ visibility (98) <i>LGBTQ+ RCHS Alum Network (126)</i></p> <p>Lime Kiln Community Theater (110)</p> <p>love (36, 99, 184)</p> <p>Luder, Rose (60)</p> <p>Mann, Sally (99)</p> <p>mascots (253)</p> <p>Maury River (35) <i>Maury River Middle School (263)</i></p> <p>MLK Jr. Community Parade (290)</p> <p>metronormativity (126)</p> <p>mountains (32) <i>Big House Mountain (34)</i> <i>Jump Mountain (36)</i> <i>Little House Mountain (34)</i> <i>Hogback Mountain (39)</i></p> <p>mutual aid (64)</p> <p>narrow-mindedness (130)</p> <p>Natural Bridge (52, 193)</p> <p>non-discrimination policy (65)</p> <p>The News-Gazette (67)</p>	<p><i>The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County, Virginia</i></p> <p>Project Horizon (130)</p> <p>pronouns (64)</p> <p>prom (268)</p> <p>queer joy (129)</p> <p>radicalization (17) <i>adults radicalized against children (62)</i></p> <p>Ramsey, Liz (68)</p> <p>Read, Kirk (99) <i>"How I Learned to Snap" by (99)</i></p> <p>redneck (9)</p> <p>The Red Hen (236)</p> <p>The Red House (81)</p> <p>Rockbridge County <i>Rockbridge Community Festival (129)</i> <i>Rockbridge County High School (59)</i> <i>Rockbridge County School Board (92)</i> <i>Rockbridge Regional Library (99, 197)</i></p> <p>Rockbridge Justice Coalition (136)</p> <p>role models (162)</p> <p>Rude, Jesse (88, 170)</p> <p>safe space (62)</p> <p>sexuality (62) <i>sexual orientation (62, 223)</i> <i>Sexual Orientation Week (65)</i></p> <p>Sheetz (220)</p> <p>solidarity (19, 86, 182, 300)</p> <p>survival (124, 161)</p> <p>Southern Virginia University (23)</p> <p>STAND (Student Association for Non-Discrimination) (63)</p> <p>Stonewall Jackson Hospital (276)</p> <p>substance misuse (17)</p> <p>tokenization (15, 261)</p> <p>tolerance (130) <i>Tolerance Awareness Month (65)</i></p> <p>trauma, religious (170)</p> <p>Twombly, Cy (99)</p> <p>vibrant (37)</p> <p>Virginia Military Institute (82, 275)</p> <p>Wal-Mart (218)</p> <p>Washington and Lee University (80, 280)</p>
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RCHS LGBTQ+ Alum Network Publishing

and LGBTQ+ students and teachers. For example, a report by PEN America shows that school book bans targeting books with LGBTQ+ characters and/or characters of color increased drastically in the 2023–2024 school year as compared to previous years (Meehan et al., 2024). This trend is present in Rockbridge County, too, as we have seen attempts to ban certain books containing LGBTQ+ stories from school libraries and proposals for club policies that would discriminate against the high school’s Sexuality and Gender Alliance (Spivey, 2023). In response to this increasingly unwelcoming school environment, our Alum Network has sought to support students through LGBTQ+ book drives, campaigns to contact our local school board, supportive advertisements in local newspapers, and now the textbook project that we present here. By seeking input from the Network’s members about key people, institutions, places, and concepts in our area’s LGBTQ+ history, we were able to make the content of our textbook as accurate as possible while also uplifting local queer and trans voices in the face of institutional hostility.

The full scope of our textbook is outlined in the table of contents page (Figure 2), which lists our imagined chapters, as well as in the index pages (Figures 3 and 4), which articulate the main people, places, and ideas that the textbook would explore. With the help of the Alum Network, we identified 10 chapter topics that are key to the LGBTQ+ experience in our area, including student activism, connections to local geography, and navigating gender and sexuality in the workplace. The end-of-chapter review (Figure 5) excerpt we chose to flesh out corresponds to the imagined fourth chapter, which would focus on arts, creativity, and queerness. Although this chapter (like the textbook itself) does not exist in full, the review allows us to delve more deeply into what it might be like for students to have key terms and discussion questions for formal study.

We chose the arts topic because many queer people in Rockbridge use dance, theater, painting, photography, writing, and other artistic mediums as means of expression, survival, and community building. For example, a notable artist mentioned in the excerpt is Cy Twombly. Born in Rockbridge in 1928, Twombly painted abstract works that allowed him to express himself in ways that his “Southern and queer and closeted” life did not (Lacey, 2018). More recent visual artists in Rockbridge, like photographer Sally Mann, have also used art as an outlet, portraying moments of violence and intimacy within rural Southern landscapes (Boxer, 2018).

Performance artists, too, have played a role in translating local queer stories into art. Halestone Dance Studio has provided a safe space for several generations of young dancers. Theatre performances (like a local university’s controversial 2018 production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *The Musical*) similarly provide

opportunities for self-expression while communicating LGBTQ+ experiences to the county’s wider public (Drohan, 2018). Given this wide array of artistic people, places, and practices, it was a natural choice to focus on this topic in our portrayal of LGBTQ+ life in Rockbridge County.

So far, we have discussed the need for and content of our excerpts, but what about the form? To understand why we opted to create an imaginary history textbook, visualize the standard textbooks used in U.S. history classes across the United States. Textbook authors’ aesthetic decisions about what concepts and imagery to include shape how young people understand and imagine history. We took specific inspiration from the popular U.S. history textbook *The American Pageant* (Kennedy et al., 2001). The stylistic choices of the textbook’s designers emphasize a patriotic vision of the United States, including stars-and-stripes imagery and blue and red text. Chapters like “New World Beginnings (33,000 B.C.-A.D. 1769)” and “Testing the New Nation (1820-1877)” frame U.S. history as linear and inevitable while downplaying some of its more violent realities (Kennedy et al., 2001).

We kept these choices in mind while designing our textbook, opting to center our framing of history around the personal experiences of those in our group as well as an ideological commitment to the existence of LGBTQ+ people in rural spaces (and our rural home place specifically) in recent history. We do not seek to emulate the whitewashed tellings present in *The American Pageant* and the rest of the U.S. history curricula with which many of us grew up. Rather, we recognize the power of textbooks’ aesthetics and framing to shape young people’s perceptions of history. Through our imagined textbook, we aim to wield this storytelling power to offer an alternative way to understand Rockbridge County history. Instead of the stars-and-stripes graphics of *The American Pageant*, our text is framed by pride and rainbow imagery. We traded red, white, and blue motifs for greens and blues that represent the mountains and rivers that many Rockbridge folks hold dear. Charlie’s original photos of local landscapes emphasize the connections that LGBTQ+ people like us feel to the rural places we call home. Through these aesthetic choices, we hope to encourage readers to rethink their notions of who belongs where and to create a bit more space and recognition for LGBTQ+ students in Rockbridge County—past, present, and future.

For now, the textbook is only fragmentary, with the selected pages ripped and frayed at the edges, as if we (or an imagined future student) had pulled them out of an existing work. We hope, however, that this project will have a longer life within our county and beyond. Locally, an LGBTQ+ history textbook would make a valuable addition to school curricula and local libraries’ collections. Perhaps students in Rockbridge and in neighboring counties

Figure 5

End-of-Chapter Review for “Arts, Creativity, and Queerness in Rockbridge County” Chapter

127 | CHAPTER 4 Arts, Creativity, and Queerness in Rockbridge County, 1980 - 2023

END OF CHAPTER REVIEW

This time period saw a general cultural shift toward more acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in the United States. The increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people in creative fields (e.g. movies and television) contributed to this shift, which some may argue made public support for policy changes protecting LGBTQ+ people more possible. As a microcosm of U.S. culture, Rockbridge County saw some of these shifts as well, though LGBTQ+ visibility was not necessarily always as overt. For many LGBTQ+ people living in Rockbridge County, creative practices were a form of both expression and survival. Spaces like Halestone Dance Studio and Lime Kiln Community Theater provided some degree of safety, though even havens like these were not entirely insulated from homophobia and transphobia. Importantly, even when creative spaces were not overtly LGBTQ+ friendly, LGBTQ+ people living in Rockbridge often found ways to utilize art as a method of self exploration and actualization.

While many formal opportunities for creating and witnessing art existed (and continue to exist) in the town of Lexington through established performance venues, opportunities for cultivating creative practices were also available in the more rural areas of Rockbridge county, albeit in potentially less visible or formal ways. From experimenting with personal style with clothing thrifted from Goodwill and the Stonewall Jackson Hospital thrift shop to writing poetry in the privacy of their own bedrooms, LGBTQ+ people living in Rockbridge County have always utilized creativity as a way to understand the world, learn how to survive in hostile conditions, and affirm themselves.

As a place known for the natural beauty of its mountains and rivers, the landscapes of Rockbridge County have at times offered inspiration to LGBTQ+ artists of all ages; concurrently, a social environment informed so staunchly by historical ties to the Confederacy and exclusive forms of Christianity has often sent signals to LGBTQ+ people that they do not belong in Rockbridge County. Particularly because of this confluence of factors, creative expression has played a significant role in affirming LGBTQ+ Rockbridge residents’ access to self expression, healing, and affirmation of their sense of belonging in a sometimes hostile climate. ✦

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Considering what you learned about Rockbridge County geography in Chapter 2, what role do the mountains and rivers of the region play in inspiring LGBTQ+ art?
2. LGBTQ+ themes were not always obvious in the art that community members produced in this time period, yet LGBTQ+ people sometimes found a sense of belonging through artistic practices. Why do you think that is?
3. Based on what you have learned in this textbook so far, what do you think the future of art for LGBTQ+ people in Rockbridge County might involve?
4. While some notable artists (Sally Mann, Cy Twombly) have made their homes in Rockbridge County, many younger LGBTQ+ artists leave and seldom or never return. Why do you think this is? How do you think Rockbridge County would change if more LGBTQ+ artists stayed?

KEY TERMS & FIGURES

- authenticity** (101)
- assimilation** (105)
- embodiment** (117)
- drag** (120)
- Halestone Dance Company** (117)
- Kirk Read** (99)
- LGBTQ+ visibility** (98)
- Lime Kiln Community Theater** (110)
- Mauri Connors** (118)
- metronormativity** (126)
- Ryan Burke** (120)

Next chapter: A Question of Visibility: A History of LGBTQ+ Pride and Other Community Festivals in Rockbridge County

could lead book clubs or share excerpts online. Should we find a way to distribute the book widely enough, a series of local “LGBTQ+ histories” accounts representing rural communities could even emerge across the country, as we firmly believe that each rural place has its own LGBTQ+ histories to explore and share.

This exercise in imagination may seem far-fetched in this current climate of book bans in schools; threats to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; and attacks on the very existence of trans youth. Nevertheless, a guiding principle for us, and for our collaborators in the Alum Network, is that imagining a better world for queer and trans youth is a necessary step to making it a reality. By aesthetically referencing existing textbooks that exclude marginalized groups while retelling our county’s history through an LGBTQ+ perspective, we hope these textbook excerpts can illustrate both the costs of our erasure and the possibilities of our inclusion.

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