

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



Detail of an early book illustration by Jesse Wilcox Smith for the poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas." See "The Origins of Modern Santa—A New York Invention," p. 6. Image: NYPL Digital Collections.

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Pack Horse Librarians: Ancestors to the Bookmobile

On September 20, 2022, our library lecture series featured Jeffrey S. Urbin, Education Specialist and Director of the Pare Lorentz Film Center at the FDR Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park. He spoke about the resourceful women of Appalachia who served as “pack horse librarians,” a Depression-era jobs program launched by FDR. The lecture series is sponsored jointly by the Roosevelt Island Historical Society and the Roosevelt Island branch of the New York Public Library.

As you may have learned first-hand from parents or grandparents, the Depression was a time of unprecedented hardship—economic, social and emotional. Twenty-five percent of the population was unemployed; another 25% was under-employed; farm and bank closures numbered 1,000 a day each at their peak; and factory closures just added to the burden. Among the hardest hit were Appalachia’s dirt farmers and coal miners, with unemployment there at an unthinkable 40%.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s response was the development of relief programs. The idea, according to speaker Urbin, was to provide jobs that, in turn, would yield a paycheck with which to buy goods, that would then feed money into the community and serve as an economic engine. And just by the way, the jobs would also give the downtrodden a sense of purpose.

The most successful of these programs continue to resonate today. They were the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—massive undertakings, employing legions of workers who built dams, waterworks, roadways, bridges, airports and seaports; brought electricity to parts of the rural South; and created murals for hospitals, schools, post offices and government buildings. In fact, they are responsible for half the infrastructure still in use today.

The “Book Ladies”

So, where do these traveling librarians come in? They too were a part of the WPA, but an anomaly on a couple of counts. First, the program was, and remains, little known. Second, spurred on by Eleanor Roosevelt, it hired women, not men. Over the course of its existence from 1935 to 1943,



A well dressed pack horse librarian. The Farm Security Administration regularly photographed relief programs to publicize FDR’s good works. The book ladies were informed beforehand of the photo shoots and, like women everywhere, got all gussied up. Image: smithsonianmag.com.



Image: kimmichelerichardson.com.

the initiative employed 1,000 women in southeastern Kentucky, many of whom were the sole earners in their family.

For \$28 a month, these ladies were charged with distributing Bibles, books, and magazines via horseback (and sometimes on foot) to a largely isolated rural population with only spotty access to a library. Urbin explained that the idea was not actually new. It had originated back in 1913 in Paintsville, Kentucky, where its implementation had to be cut short after only a year when its sponsor passed away. It turns out the program was remembered and re-created by its earlier organizer, one Mary Stafford. This time, though, it endured and thrived. And its success can be attributed almost exclusively to the toughness and resourcefulness of the women who participated.

Each circuit—which might be covered over several days and repeated every few weeks—was 18–20



Image: semantic scholar.org.

miles long. And, literally, neither wind, nor rain, nor sun, nor snow (all quite common) stayed these women from their appointed rounds. It helped, Urbin emphasized, that they were local women who knew the terrain and, importantly, could reference local places and people...because residents of Appalachia could be very wary indeed of those they saw as “Flatlanders.” Nevertheless, once they understood what these “pack horse librarians” (also called “book ladies” or “book women”) were offering, families often invited the travelers in for tea or a meal, or even to stay the night if it was late. The librarians picked up old books and magazines and left new ones; they might even read a chapter or two to the residents, especially if their reading skills were not strong. Sometimes the book ladies would also challenge family members to read a chapter back to them as literacy practice.

The women carried 100 to 150 books and related materials, transported in pillow cases, seed sacks, flour sacks, crates, suitcases, satchels or whatever else they could press into service. Their inventory consisted mainly of:

- Bibles—the most popular books circulated. People were familiar with the stories, even if they were not good readers. And Scripture was often used to plan Sunday school lessons.
- Children’s books—including *Treasure Island*, *Robin Hood*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. Their engaging illustration and big print were important in the context of poor literacy, poor vision care and poor light, as furnished by the fireplace or gas and oil lamps.
- How-to pamphlets—practical

applications such as “How to maintain kerosene lamps.”

- Magazines—in particular, *Redbook*, which allowed people the vicarious thrill of peering into fancy lives; *American Magazine*, covering golf, fishing and other manly pursuits; and *National Geographic*, a favorite of the librarians because the subject matter was not timely and the magazine itself was so sturdily constructed, both of which bestowed a life of many years on the publications.

Invention and Enterprise

A few seconds’ thought prompts the realization that these books and magazines did not suddenly materialize by magic. Nor did the planning and organization behind the program, the required maps, nor even the horses, which the women rented from local farmers for 50¢. Everything that was integral to the program’s success, in addition to extras the women themselves innovated, had to be done by them—all, the speaker noted, for their monthly \$28 stipend.

They met once a month in town, possibly in a church basement or the general store, to strategize, socialize and implement next steps. For example, the very first item on the agenda would have been a book drive to collect the necessary reading materials. Then they had to sort the publications and repair any that were in questionable condition. In

order to know where books were and when they would be returned, they created a card catalog of sorts, usually slips of paper stored in a shoe box or cheese box. In addition, every book went out with a bookmark made from old greeting cards or seed packets. These were not just ornamental; it was hoped they would extend the life of the reading materials by preventing users from dog-earing the pages or splaying out the spine to keep their place.

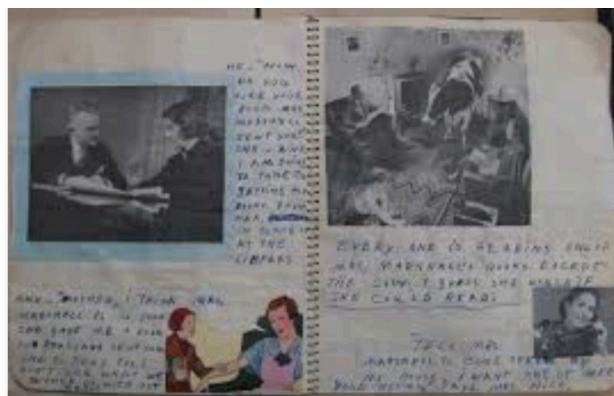
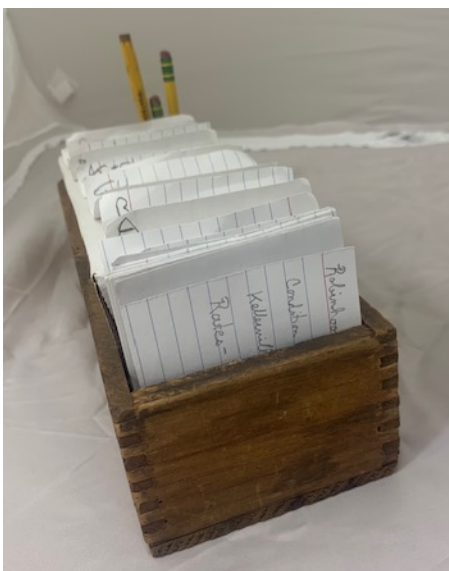
These tasks were ongoing throughout the life of the program. Sometimes a school might close for lack of money to pay the teachers; the textbooks were often incorporated into the librarians’ inventory. If a book or magazine was too worn to serve further, the women would literally take it apart. They would re-use the covers, cut out the most interesting material and create scrapbooks that salvaged a good deal of content, including recipes, articles, images, quilt-making pictures, etc. To raise money for new books or for paste and paper to rehabilitate old ones, they ran penny drives or pie slice sales. (The most successful drive on record raised \$52, a considerable amount of money at the time.)

End of an Era

The pack horse librarian program came to an end in 1943, primarily because of the war. The men had gone overseas and the women found other, better-paying jobs. Also

resources such as paper were now redirected to the war effort for maps, training manuals and such.

Urbin pointed out that similar programs had been attempted in other parts



An improvised “card catalog” and a scrapbook of materials salvaged from books and magazines that had outlived their useful life. Images: (l.) Courtesy of the speaker; (r.) tandfonline.com.



Image: [womenoflibraryhistory.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/womenoflibraryhistory).

of the country, but none was as successful as the one in Appalachian Kentucky. Of the total 1,000 women who participated, 200 were working at any one time. In a single year, 1937, 60,000 books were in circulation, benefiting 1.5 million people and 26,000 families. And there were a number of other important achievements too. The initiative:

- Gave women jobs conveniently near their homes so they could continue their role of homemaker and caregiver
- Encouraged literacy, which in turn, made it easier for book recipients to find jobs
- Promoted a sense of community among a hinterland population who might have otherwise been cut off
- Provided education and information so that these people were less susceptible to snake oil salesmen and shysters

- Fostered critical thinking at a time when Hitler, in Europe, was burning books
- Was one of the first private-government partnerships
- Underscored the importance of libraries and librarians

In the 1950s, neighborhoods and communities saw a new form of traveling libraries: bookmobiles. They were a wonderful development. But without the spirit, intimacy and creativity of the book women, they just weren't the same.

Editor's note: Two novels about the pack horse librarians are: *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* by Kim Michele Richardson; and *The Giver of Stars* by Jojo Moyes.

The Origins of Modern Santa— A New York Invention

December is coming and, with it, the delights of jolly, red-suited Santa Claus, his eight reindeer (nine if you count Rudolph), and the trove of gifts he showers upon good little girls and boys. Our paunchy, twinkled-eyed legend has been around longer than we have been alive. But was he always? Where exactly did he grow up? And who were the three famous New Yorkers who nurtured him into maturity?

The Early Years

Santa's ancestor, you might say, was a pious monk named St. Nicholas, who lived in the fourth century in what is modern-day Turkey. A generous soul, he traveled the countryside helping the sick and less fortunate. And when his parents died, leaving him a rich inheritance, he bestowed most of it upon those in need. Hardly surprising, he became the most popular saint in Europe and came to be known as the patron saint of children.

As Europeans settled the New World—most notably the 17th century Dutch in New Amsterdam (now New York City), Fort Orange/Beverwyck (Albany) and the Hudson Valley—St. Nicholas immigrated with them. He was the figure-head on one of the first ships to touch New York's shores and the name of the first church built within the city's walls. More to the point, a 19th century historian claims that, of the five Dutch national festivals celebrated throughout the community, St. Nicholas Day, which actually commemorated the death of the beloved saint on December 6, was the favorite. In all

likelihood, the New World inhabitants followed their home-country St. Nicholas Eve tradition of handing out candy, eatables and other items in emulation of their icon's kindness.



A 13th century depiction of St. Nicholas from St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai. Image: en.wikipedia.org.

The story of St. Nicholas, however, is not a straight line. With the advent of the Protestant Reformation in the first half of the 16th century, Protestant leaders worked hard to stamp out the popularity of the Catholic saint. Somehow rank-and-file churchgoers on the European Continent managed to keep their tradition alive. In England, though, St. Nicholas was completely suppressed. After the British took control of New York in 1664, one can imagine that interest in St. Nicholas suffered a steep decline. But when the spirit of revolution took hold in the country more than 100 years later, New York patriots gave the saint a new role and a newly passionate popularity...not out of pro-

Dutch sentiment, but out of anti-English animus.

A Local Creation

New Yorkers formed a local society dedicated to St. Nicholas, who became a symbol of the city and its defiance of the British. Some decades later, in the first years of the 1800s, he was named by one John Pintard, founder of the New-York Historical Society, as the city's patron saint. Prominent residents of the city gathered yearly on December 6 at the Society's headquarters to celebrate the saint's feast day. And then, in 1809, famous New York-born author **Washington Irving** published *Knickerbocker's History of New York*.

By Irving's own admission, his *History* was filled with quite a bit of whimsy. For here were numerous mentions of Sancte or Santa Claus (derived from the Dutch *Sint-Nicolaas* or *Sinterklaas*). And here was the image of Santa delivering gifts, parking his conveyance (a horse and wagon at that point in time) on the roof and sliding down the chimney. The citizenry even hung stockings by the chimney on St. Nicholas Eve. It is said that Washington Irving launched our modern concept of Santa Claus. Although, as his book took the city by storm, he inspired a lot of helpers.

Barely a year later, the *New York Spectator* published the country's first Santa Claus poem (see below) that, except for no mention of toys and video games, could have been written today. This was followed a decade later by Chelsea resident **Clement Clarke Moore's** 1822 poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas" (originally titled "A Visit from Saint Nicholas"). The work is called "the greatest

Oh good holy man! whom we Sancte Claus name,
The Nursery forever your praise shall proclaim:
The day of your joyful revisit returns,
When each little bosom with gratitude burns,
For the gifts which at night you so kindly impart
For the girls of your love, and the boys of your heart.
Oh! come with your panniers and pockets well stow'd,
Our stockings shall help you to lighten your load,
As close to the fireside gaily they swing,
While delighted we dream of the presents you bring.

Oh! bring the bright Orange so juicy and sweet,
Bring almonds and raisins to heighten the treat;
Rich waffles and dough-nuts must not be forgot,
Nor Crullers and Oley-Cooks fresh from the pot.
But of all these fine presents your Saintship can find,
Oh! leave not the famous big Cookies behind.*
Or if in your hurry one thing you mislay,
Let that be the Rod—and oh! keep it away.

Then holy St. Nicholas! all the year,
Our books we will love and our parents revere,
From naughty behavior we'll always refrain,
In hopes that you'll come and reward us again.

– *Spectator*, December 15, 1810

*Note: Refers to the Dutch custom of celebrating with special cookies that bore an impression of St. Nicholas on one side.



1837 Santa Claus painting by Robert Weir.
Image: The New-York Historical Society.

piece of genre word-painting in the English language" in acknowledgment of its vivid embellishment of the Santa legend.

This was the first time Santa was described as riding a sleigh and the first time he was fleshed out as "chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf" with "a little round belly" that "shook when he laughed like a bowlful of jelly." It is said that the writer's model was a portly Dutch neighbor and that the sleigh was inspired by Moore's own as he drove through the snowy streets of his Manhattan neighborhood. His flight of fancy also included eight reindeer, which he even named.

Still, our modern Santa wasn't quite fully developed. Through the first half of the 19th century, he came in various sizes and presentations. Early on he was pictured with a broad-brimmed hat, a sailor's pipe and a green winter coat. Moore's poem, which refers to him as an elf and speaks of his "miniature sleigh" and "tiny reindeer," clearly depicts him as physically diminutive. It awaited **Thomas Nast**, a cartoonist for Lower Manhattan's *Harper's Weekly*, to complete the job.

Beginning in the 1860s and refining his work over the next couple of decades, Nast gave

our merry character a white beard, black boots and his iconic red suit. Allegedly it was also Nast who gave him a home at the North Pole and a toy factory filled with elves. Being a patriot, of course, Santa is depicted in an 1863 cartoon visiting the Union troops. And he became immortalized as a large, heavysset person.

A Calendar Shift

Exactly when and why the St. Nicholas festivities migrated from December 5 and 6 to Christmas Eve and Christmas is unclear. Historically, it's not unusual for new cultural celebrations to piggy-back on the popularity of older ones. For example, Christmas itself became conflated with the Saturnalia of the Winter Solstice. Several scenarios may account for the Santa shift.

By the time of the Reformation (16th century), the custom of giving children gifts in honor of St. Nicholas was already established. As suggested earlier, Protestant leaders vehemently opposed the veneration of saints. So Martin Luther sought to focus the attention of children on Christ instead, and characterized the Christ child as the giver of gifts. In many countries the feast did move to December 24 and 25; however, in the popular imagination, St. Nicholas remained the gift-bearer.

This may have been true in Europe. But we know that in the U.S., St. Nicholas was still fêted on December 5 and 6 well into the 19th century. Another explanation references the English figure Father Christmas, who was supposed to typify the spirit of the holiday, bringing peace, joy, good food, wine and revelry. In fact, other European countries also had corresponding Fathers Christmas—*de Kerstman* in Dutch, *Père Noël* in French. As gift-giving was often a feature of these individuals (particularly in England, where the feast day of St. Nicholas no longer existed), it



1881 illustration by Thomas Nast. Image: en.wikipedia.org.

is easy to imagine Santa Claus slipping down the calendar and merging with Christmas under the influence of these customs.

One last theory involves the increasingly wild and lewd nature of Christmas celebrations in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Drunken misbehavior, aggressive invasions of people's homes demanding food and drink in exchange for caroling and performances, and public displays of sex and deviant sex were the norm.

There was a growing movement to tone down such errant behavior. Presumably the authorities might have borrowed the more peaceful and joyful traditions of St. Nicholas Day.

However we arrived here, no one can deny the success of our jolly holiday hero. In the 20th century, books, movies, songs, the Salvation Army, advertising and other commercial interests conspired to make him a symbol recognized worldwide. He may speak different languages and exhibit some country-specific idiosyncrasies. But the modern, red-suited, white-bearded, merry old gentleman riding the reindeer-pulled sleigh is purely a New York invention.

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Island Icons:

From Bad to Worse: The Story of Island Prisoner Dutch Schultz

Famous bootlegger and crime boss Dutch Schultz was born Arthur Simon Flegenheimer on August 6, 1902 to German Jewish immigrants in the south Bronx. Like all babies, he was probably a cute, cuddly, joyous arrival. Then he grew up... to be one of the most violent and ruthless gangsters in American history.

Crime Seems to Pay

Pitched into grinding poverty after his father abandoned the family, Flegenheimer began to steal to survive. By age 18 he had been caught during a burglary and sent to the Blackwell's Island penitentiary. But he proved to be such an unmanageable inmate, he was soon transferred to the Westhampton Work Farms in Westhampton, LI.

Upon the boy's release in December 1920, he actually took an honest job with Schultz Trucking. It was here that he adopted the name Dutch Schultz after a famous street-fighting criminal of the 1800s ("Dutch" was a corruption of "Deutsch"). It was also here that he was introduced into bootlegging. With the advent of Prohibition, the company began smuggling beer and liquor in from Canada. And the potential profits in illegal booze were hardly lost on the aggressive youngster.

Soon afterwards, Schultz partnered with gangster Joey Noe to open a ring of speakeasies in the Bronx. To avoid the high cost of shipping, they used their own trucks to bring in "hooch" from outside New York City and also sold it to other Bronx bootleggers.

The rivalry with other operations was fierce and brutal—machine-gunning, arson, hanging men from hooks and holding them for ransom, not to mention Schultz's own hellish invention. When a prospective customer refused to buy from Schultz's company, the now full-fledged gangster beat



Portrait of Dutch Schultz.

him, hung him by his thumbs from a meat hook, and then wrapped a bandage smeared with discharge from a gonorrhea infection over his eyes. The victim ultimately went blind and, not surprisingly, opposition to the Noe-Schultz gang subsequently melted away as they expanded across the entire Bronx.

Also not surprisingly, the "Bronx Beer Baron," as he became known, wasn't content with that limited turf. Off he went, pushing his operation into northern Manhattan, where he butted heads with the then territory kingpin Jack (Legs) Diamond and his Irish mob. The situation was obviously combustible, the perfect spur to gang war.

First, partner Noe was gunned down in front of a Manhattan speakeasy. Uncertain who the assassin was, Schultz retaliated by ordering a hit on the famous Arnold Rothstein of the Jewish mob...and somewhat later, on

Legs Diamond, who was left for dead after taking five bullets to his body and head. Much to Schultz's chagrin, Diamond



At Schultz's upstate distillery, a complex of bunkers and tunnels provided storage and escape routes.

somehow survived. But Schultz had won that round, becoming the biggest bootlegger in Manhattan.

Along the way, Schultz met crime boss Lucky Luciano. Of similar dispositions, the two men formed a crime syndicate specializing in the numbers racket, extortion, and—not incidentally—murder and mayhem. One could speculate that it was the profound stress of his chosen lifestyle that led the bootlegger up to rural Dutchess County. But, then again, it was probably money. He had hit on a new scheme to augment his income and prized the remote privacy of the area.

Country Creativity

Taking over Harvest Homestead, an unassuming turkey farm in Pine Plains, Schultz built one of the most extensive and elaborate distilleries ever seen on the East coast. The actual farmhouse was a front. To make sure that the operation went undetected, an underground pipe connected the distillery, located in the barn, to the farmhouse kitchen, so that any smoke rising from the property looked as though it was rising from the house. In addition, a complex series of bunkers and tunnels provided storage and escape routes. The tunnels ran under the farmhouse for a distance of about

400 feet and could be accessed by a hole in a random stone wall that was hidden by a lean-to.

From this serene site flowed one of the largest productions of moonshine in New York State. Even so, that did not mean that Schultz had a monopoly. Several other mobsters also appreciated the isolation of upstate New York, including one Legs Diamond, who was now headquartered in Kingston and Albany. No one knows the exact story, but Mr. Diamond was found dead in 1931—a murder, some believe, ordered by Schultz. Did our protagonist gloat? Possibly. But not for long.

In October 1932, the FBI raided his illegal distillery, confiscating two 2,000-gallon stills and over 10,000 pounds of sugar. Most of the workers, including Schultz, got away, presumably through the tunnels. Schultz hid out at a friend's in Saratoga until he was arrested in Albany in November 1934 and charged with racketeering and income tax evasion, charges prosecuted by then U.S. Attorney and, later, Special Prosecutor Thomas A. Dewey.

Nevertheless, the gangster wasn't going down without a fight. He managed to get the trial venue changed to a small upstate hamlet, where he mounted a vigorous effort



Dutch Schultz with cronies. Image: babyfacenelsonjournal.com.

to influence potential jurors. Impersonating a country squire and good citizen, Schultz donated toys to sick children, helped fund local businesses, and publicly performed other charitable acts.

To everyone's surprise, he was actually acquitted of the tax evasion charge. But Dewey was relentless in pursuing him. When Schultz proposed killing Dewey to his mob partner Luciano, Luciano was adamant that that would precipitate a massive law enforcement crackdown; the Crime Syndicate voted unanimously against the idea. A short time later, the Crime Syndicate got wind that Schultz was going ahead with the plan anyway, and they took another vote: in October 1935 in a restaurant in Newark, Dutch Schultz was "eliminated."

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87 Years Later—Redemption

They say America is a country of second chances. And nowhere is this more true than at the Harvest Homestead Farm at 98 Ryan Road, Pine Plains, in Dutchess County, NY. Here owner and history-lover Brendan McAlpine has resurrected Schultz's distillery as the now legal "Dutch's Spirits." He proudly boasts its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. And is determined to evoke the white-washed ghost of Mr. Schultz.

Inside the barn is a modern descendant of the bootlegger's distillery, plus a bar and tasting room. The company's signature product, "Sugar Wash Moonshine," emulates the ingredients found in the historic FBI raid—sugar, sulfuric acid and mash, although it has been refined to more contemporary (and smoother) tastes. What's more, the bunkers and tunnels still exist and will eventually be part of the property's planned tours.

In the nice weather, visitors can sit at picnic tables, enjoying an outdoor "tasting room" and lunch from a gourmet food truck. Also in the works—a New York Empire Rye, a line of ready-to-drink cocktails, and a farm-to-table restaurant. Perhaps worth a ride into the country.



*Sugar Wash Moonshine honors Schultz's hooch.
Photo: Sabrina Sucato.*

RIHS Calendar

FREE Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series in conjunction with the New York Public Library. Attend in person at the NYPL Branch, 504 Main St., and/or on Zoom, TBD. Register with danielle.shur@nypl.org.

Tuesday, November 15, 6:30–7:30

Benedict Arnold: Hero Betrayed

Before he was a turncoat, he was an American hero. James K. Martin, Professor Emeritus at the University of Houston and author of *Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered*, reveals the strategic genius of Arnold, his essential contributions to the Revolutionary War, and his mistreatment at the hands of his superiors.

Tuesday, December 13, 6:30–7:30

Back Number Budd

Victorians did not consider old periodicals valuable and did not save them, which severely limited the resources of researchers—unless they knew Robert M. “Back Number” Budd. Prize-winning author Ellen G. Garvey, PhD, tells about this African-American dealer who stockpiled millions of newspapers that he collected from hotels, clubs and libraries.

Month of December

RIHS Visitor Center

Watch for extended hours and announcements of special merchandise. (Regular hours are daily, 12 noon to 5 pm, except Tuesday.)

Saturday, December 10, 10:00 am–4:00 pm

Pop-up Holiday Market

RIHS merchandise and gifts at Senior Center, 546 Main Street. Stop by our table.

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