Karen Sweeny-Justice

Thomas Hughes' "Rugby"

Utopia on the Cumberland Plateau

From a visitor's perspective, standing in a grassy clearing looking down upon a quiet pond, it is easy to imagine what Thomas Hughes must have seen when he arrived on the Cumberland Plateau of eastern Tennessee in 1880. Hughes, an English author and social reformer, had selected a rural setting some 70 miles north of Knoxville for the site of Rugby, his planned utopian community.

Winding, twisting roads. Wooded lots. The Clear Fork River. The calmness that certainly met the original settlers Hughes encouraged to join his experiment can almost be felt. Almost that is, until a semitrailer comes barreling along the state road that runs up the center of the community, reminding visitors that time has not stood still in Rugby.

And that is one thing that sets Historic Rugby apart from other utopian villages preserved and interpreted today. Rugby has adapted, and is a village of both the 19th and 21st centuries.

The 19th-century part is the most obvious. In his original plans, Hughes envisioned a town where the second sons of English gentry—deprived of the inheritances that went to older brothers and precluded from engaging in "common" labor by social custom—could mix with others in creating a "community of gentlemen and ladies." Ironically, it was a community that he never lived in for more than periodic visits; his wife looked less than favorably upon the adventure and remained in England.

The 35,000 acres that Hughes and his associates planned to sell to colonists included sites for homes and farms, a school, a public library, dining and lodging facilities, and factories, along with public parks, trails, and gardens. A donation from Hughes built a cooperative commissary for the townspeople; there were tennis courts and croquet games, swimming at the Gentlemen's Watering Hole, and afternoon tea.

Unfortunately, the "laboring" part of life in Rugby did not quite catch on with all the colonists. Despite a library filled with some 7,000 volumes (many donated by American publishers as gifts to Hughes), more novels were circulated than books on agriculture. A tomato cannery, built in anticipation of a fine harvest, closed after processing only a few bushels. In just its first year, Rugby was visited by a harsh winter, a typhoid epidemic that killed seven, a drought, and a hotel fire.

The hope of happier times for the colony came in 1881, with the arrival of Hughes' 83-year-old mother, Margaret, and his 18-year-old niece, who took up residence in Uffington house. The move of Madame Hughes proved inspired

"Kingstone Lisle," the residence built for Rugby founder Thomas Hughes in 1884.

and supportive, re-invigorating the efforts of the now 300-strong community. A newspaper was established and travel to the village increased. There was a dramatic club, a tennis club, and even a coronet band.

Within a few years, Rugby had grown to a population of approximately 350 and the community flourished with some 60 significant buildings. After Madame Hughes' death in 1887, though, the spirit of the colony also began to die. Problems resulting from unrecorded property deeds, poor long-distance management from England, and a poor road and transportation system led to a general decline in the population. With settlers leaving, a governing board was reorganized in 1892; the effort was too little, too late.

While Thomas Hughes' utopian experiment may have died only a dozen years after its beginning, Rugby continued as an unincorporated community in Morgan County, albeit one with a smaller population and fewer physical structures. By 1950, some 40 buildings had either burned or been torn down. More might have followed in the last quarter of the 20th century if not for the efforts of Brian Stagg.

As a teenager, Stagg "discovered" Rugby and began his own passionate experiment—in historic preservation. In 1966, he became executive director of the Rugby Restoration Association. By the early 1970s, he had raised enough funds to save the library, church, and Thomas Hughes' home, and the Rugby Colony Historic District was entered on the National Register of Historic Places.

Barbara Stagg took over as executive director in 1976 after her brother's death. In the years since then, the Rugby Colony has undergone a transformation that would make Thomas Hughes proud.

The remote rural setting that helped lead to the colony's decline a century earlier actually helped with preservation efforts. Little if any "modern" development took place, and the structures that still stood were almost perfect textbook examples of Victorian architecture. Inside the library, time stood still, with none of the 7,000 volumes dating from later than 1899.

"I don't think there is anything else like us in America," says Barbara Stagg. "One thing that sets us apart from utopian sites that try to preserve and interpret that 'one moment in time' is that the story of Rugby is much more complex. This colony didn't just fail and disappear. There has always been residents and descendants here."

And the residential population continues to grow. Using site plans drawn up by Hughes' management, Historic Rugby began offering home sites for sale in the mid-1990s. Known as Beacon Hill, this residential tract of some 28 lots has been plotted from original land maps. The gravel roads leading to new home construction are laid out following the original rights-of-way, and a bandstand that Hughes only dreamed of has finally been constructed.

New housing, which must meet strict design guidelines in keeping with Historic Rugby's preservation plan, must be approved in advance. The number of plans available, many taken from historic architectural drawings, offer prospective home builders a variety of styles to choose from. Utilities are buried, and garages cannot be attached. Further adding to the sense of stepping back in time to a quiet Victorian community is the wilderness of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area which borders Beacon Hill on the northern edge of town.

Interior view of Christ Church Episcopal, highlighting the magnificent woodwork.

Original 1881 Rugby town pump.

"We're trying to continue to develop the publicly accessible historic sites and enhance programming while becoming even more so a wonderful rural community to live in," says Stagg.

"It is certainly challenging to balance the needs and wants of both visitors and residents, but we have never even contemplated trying to turn the whole community into an organization-owned museum," she continues. "Instead, owners of private historic homes have voluntarily restored them and keep them in a good state of preservation. We are also working in a number of ways to help insure that no future incompatible development occurs, particularly in the heart of the historic district."

For visitors, interpretive programming begins at the schoolhouse, which has been converted into a visitor center with exhibits that take a look at 100 years of Rugby history. Next to that is the Hughes Library, while Christ Church Episcopal is just across the street. Next to the reconstructed Board of Aid building is the Commissary, which offers visitors a chance to purchase locally-made crafts.

Although the original colony's hotel is long gone, Historic Rugby offers overnight guests lodgings in quaint bed and breakfasts. The Harrow Road Café, built in 1985, is known for its Welsh Rarebit, a popular dish the colony's namesake restaurant served in the 1880s.

Many of the structures in the community are private; some that are already owned by Historic Rugby are still under renovation. Despite the unique approach that Rugby has for re-inventing itself, funding can be as difficult to find as it is for other non-profit historical sites. Restoration has already begun on Uffington House, and in time Stagg hopes visitors will be able to participate in living history programs.

For more than 25 years, Historic Rugby has lobbied for a truck by-pass around the historic district. The present governor has supported this effort which will help with both resident and visitor safety, and final engineering efforts and right-of-way purchase is now underway.

With the eventual removal of truck traffic and a growing residential population, the day will come when visitors to Historic Rugby can stand in that grassy clearing behind Uffington House and look down on a quiet pond, imagining how it must have been more than a century ago.

And perhaps Madame Hughes will even be able to invite them in for a cup of tea.

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Photos courtesy Historic Rugby.

The Thomas Hughes Free Public Library retains most of the elements that it had when it was built in 1882.