

An event next weekend will honor 'The Rock' — no, not the professional wrestler and action-movie actor with that nickname — but a big chunk of Mount Airy history, or make that many chunks. To be exact, the world's largest open-faced granite quarry — aka North Carolina Granite Corp., and also "The Rock" — is expected to take center stage during a family history and genealogy swap meet at Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.

The event, a late-January fixture in recent years which is free and open to the public, is scheduled next Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on the third floor of the museum at 301 N. Main St. It is sponsored by the museum and the Surry County Genealogical Association.

Usually, it's an occasion for area residents to compare notes on family links, access information for free via the Ancestry.com database and pick up various other historical tidbits. It's one geared toward experienced genealogists as well as those just getting started in building their trees. All that will be included again, but next Saturday's event offers the added attraction of focusing on a cornerstone of local history, literally, the granite quarry. "This year we are asking anyone who has ever had family that worked at our quarry ... to come as our special guest that day," explained Esther Johnson, president of the Surry Genealogical Association. "And we hope they will bring pictures of their family and the quarry and share them," Johnson added.

Steadfast industry

As textiles have faded over the years locally, North Carolina Granite Corp. has remained an industry as durable as the material it produces. Its roots run deep in local history and have forged strong ties with the community and its people. The granite company site in Flat Rock once was considered a worthless piece of rocky land — but would become a multimillion-dollar enterprise. Records of early Moravian settlers indicate that their millstones came from the quarry, and the company itself dates to the late 1880s. After Thomas Woodruff bought the site, history shows that the versatile local businessman used his marketing expertise to grow the operation tremendously. It really boomed when a railroad line was established to the quarry. This allowed a reliable means for the heavy material to be shipped from the Granite City to distant locations. In the earlier years of North Carolina Granite Corp., master stonecutters from Italy were brought in to ply their skills here, and their descendants still live in the area. Meanwhile, many buildings around the state and nation, including in Washington, D.C., have been constructed with the unique white granite from Mount Airy. Over the years, the quarry has affectionately been known by local residents as "The Rock."

Something for all

In addition to urging those with ties to North Carolina Granite Corp. to attend Saturday's event at the museum, an invitation is being extended to anyone who has ever enrolled in a beginners genealogy class sponsored by the museum to come as a special guest. Organizers have sought to provide something of interest to everyone regarding local genealogy and history:

- This includes persons connected with any history or genealogy group being invited to set up at the swap meet to advertise their organizations and sell books, maps, etc. it might have.

- Authors of books on local history also may offer them for sale.
- A regular swap meet attraction in which someone will help attendees look up family names for free on Ancestry.com is to be continued this year.

- Examples of DNA analysis, a growing genealogy trend, also are to be on hand to show attendees what's involved with those.

Wanted: family info

No genealogy forum would be complete without the lifeblood of such events: compiled family histories that can be shared with others. "The big thing will be, everyone is invited and you are asked to bring your genealogy (information) and display it so everyone can make connections and find new family information," Johnson stressed regarding a process often compared to filling in puzzle pieces. "Sometimes all it takes is one name or one date and it may have been something you have looked for, for years," she added of how networking with others at a genealogy event can help bridge gaps. "Be sure and bring any old Bibles you have and old letters, and old pictures or diaries or scrapbooks — also old obituaries."

Those attending are encouraged to use laptops to record information, with a copy machine also to be available for duplication of materials at a small fee. "If you do not know one thing about

genealogy or your family, come anyway and what is going on," Johnson urged in inviting everyone to attend.

A natural tie-in

Museum Director Matt Edwards says it is only natural for the museum to host an event furthering the field of genealogy as well as focusing on a colorful segment of local history. "I think the inclusion of the granite quarry this year is fantastic," Edwards said. The museum is home to archives of North Carolina Granite Corp., including about 2,000 photographs from the company's files. "And they are a huge supporter of the museum," Edwards said. "So it's a natural tie." Edwards said next Saturday's event also serves as the kickoff for a six-week introductory genealogy course to be hosted by the museum.