High winds and residual power outages on Saturday did not keep a capacity crowd from coming out to Mount Airy Museum of Regional History to hear Dr. Angela Robbins' presentation "North Carolina Women Do Their Bit During World War I."

Robbins, a "Road Scholar" with the North Carolina Humanities Council, was second in a series of Spring 2018 History Talks at the museum. She received her Ph.D. in U.S. history from UNC Greensboro, where she specialized in women's history. Saturday's presentation was based on her dissertation research. She teaches at Meredith College and delivers similar presentations around the state. "'Do your bit' was a popular phrase at the time" began Robbins, a slogan which she adapted to "Do your BIG bit," to highlight the enormous contributions made by women to the war effort. Robbins said that American women at the beginning of the twentieth century were already organized into women's clubs which did civic and humanitarian work in their communities. In North Carolina and most of the South, economies were still suffering following the Civil War, and the women worked through their clubs to do charitable work in their communities. When Belgium was invaded by Germany, and news reached America of civilians being slaughtered and burned out of their homes, the women tuned their attention to providing relief to them, using the techniques and organization they already had in place. A State Council of Defense and a National Council of Defense was set up, and a complicated system of committees was developed. Women worked independently of men in women's auxiliaries. Committees were segregated by race as well as gender. African-American women formed committees to make "comfort kits" to send to black soldiers, not expecting them to receive any of the kits made by white women.

Robbins showed a series of posters that adapted a two-pronged approach to war propaganda involving women. Some of the posters showed wise, nurturing maternal figures and others focused on flirtatious images of scantily clad women. Early on in the war effort, women did the kind of work traditionally considered "women's work." "Girls, you were born knowing how to sew and change a diaper, weren't you?" Robbins asked the audience. Women were expected to help with shortages of wheat, meat, dairy and sugar by observing "Meatless Tuesdays" and "Wheatless Wednesday" to help starving women and children in Belgium. Home demonstration agents taught women the newly developed techniques of home canning food and provided a recipe for a butter substitute, consisting of gelatin, milk and oleomargarine.

By the time the United States finally entered the war in 1917, groups of college women had taken on typically male roles and were actually growing food. These "farmerettes," as they called themselves, donned middy blouses, khaki skirts and brogans to go out to farms and drive the tractors themselves. Motorized tractors were a relatively new technology at the time and not many male farmers drove them, much less women. The farmerettes, Robbins noted, prepared

their own lunch, and did not rely on farmer's wives to cook for them as the men did. Two causes for which women had been organizing even before the war, temperance and women's suffrage, took the back burner for some women during the war, but not for others. This was a point of contention, but within two years of war's end the temperance movement had brought about Prohibition and the suffragettes gained the vote for women.

The traveling exhibit, "North Carolina in the Great War," exhibit will be at the museum until March 24. The final Spring 2018 History Talk, "First in Forestry" will be April 15 at 2 p.m. It will be a combination film screening and talk, presented by James Lewis, historian of the Forest History Center and the Emmy-winning film, "First in Forestry: Carl Schenk and the Biltmore Forest School," will be screened.