A group of local students is proving that the study and celebration of history is not a lost art, even when facing a pandemic of historic proportions.

This has been evidenced by members of the Jesse Franklin Pioneers club at Mount Airy Museum of Regional History capturing top honors in an annual statewide competition of the Tar Heel Junior Historians.

Along with history, local students kept alive a 10-year tradition of such achievements by their group, formed in 2006.

The Jesse Franklin Pioneers chapter of the Tar Heel Junior Historians has 18 members this year, in grades 4-8, with the competition involving all those youths digging into various aspects of North Carolina's heritage for the past eight months.

They then created literary, artwork, scrapbook, video or photographic entries with well-documented research to enter in the state contest.

Despite stumbling blocks posed by the coronavirus, the judging process recently was completed and those with winning entries announced, including local students:

• Andrew Edwards, a fifth grader at Millennium Charter Academy (MCA), who took first place in the Video Documentary category, Elementary Division, on the topic "Wilmington Film Industry."

Andrew created a video exploring the storied history of the industry in that eastern North Carolina city and the films produced there.

• Seven other students won first place in Group Video Documentary competition for their subject, "Blue Ridge Inn," focusing on a legendary hotel that stood in downtown Mount Airy for

decades.

Included were Parker Rector, fourth grade, Millennium Charter Academy; Laney Robertson, Grayson Hubbard and Andrew Edwards, fifth graders at MCA; Ciara Valentine, a fourth grader at Franklin Elementary School; and Sadie Lovill and Daisy Tate, fifth graders at Franklin Elementary.

Their entry involved working together to research the history of the Blue Ridge Inn and creating a video exploring the daily life there.

• Two other local students were winners in the Artifact Search category, which involves students choosing any item, photographing it and researching its history, composition, use and significance. As is the case with all entries, an annotated bibliography must be included.

Laney Robertson, a fifth grader at Millennium Charter Academy, focused on the role of the handwoven basket, exploring her family's genealogy and the history of creating baskets from local natural materials.

James Caudill, an eighth grader who is home-schooled, chose to examine a historic cabin, which included researching the origin and architecture of a building located behind Cousin Emma's Bed and Breakfast on South Main Street.

The winning entries will be on display in the state museum for the next year.

COVID-19 disruption

The emergence of the coronavirus did curtail an event normally associated with the award process which is one of the most exciting activities for the Jesse Franklin Pioneers: an annual trip to Raleigh for the Tar Heel Junior Historians Conference.

During that occasion, the local youths are able to meet other students from across the state, participate in various activities, tour the state history museum and hear contest winners announced — but not this year.

“For the first time that we know of, the meeting in Raleigh was cancelled due to COVID-19,” explained Justyn Kissam, director of programs and education at Mount Airy Museum of Regional History. She works with the Jesse Franklin Pioneers and provided information about their latest honors.

“The in-person conference was cancelled, but the projects submitted from all of the chapters across the state were still reviewed and judged,” Kissam added. Thousands of students in grades 4-12 participate in the Junior Historians program among nearly 200 clubs in 65 counties.

The Tar Heel Junior Historian Association released a video acknowledging the winners for 2020, and the local museum shared this video on its Facebook page. “Through it all their hard work shone bright,” Kissam observed in light of the COVID-19 impact.

While it derailed the statewide gathering along with many other events, she said the coronavirus has not diminished the interest of the Jesse Franklin Pioneers in local history — which remains as healthy as ever.

Kissam said Tuesday that along with young people exhibiting a thirst for historical knowledge in the video game era, it’s rewarding to witness the innocent wonderment appearing on their faces upon discovering some interesting fact for the first time.

“Seeing their eyes light up when they learn something about their community, honestly it’s amazing.” This was the case with the youths’ studies of the Blue Ridge Inn, Kissam said.

In being part of the statewide Tar Heel Junior Historians organization created by the state Legislature in 1953, the Jesse Franklin Pioneers chapter — named for a former North Carolina

governor from Surry County — is aiding its overall purpose. That is to promote youth interest and involvement in state and local history.

The program is run by the state history museum, which hosts about 350 students at the conference each year. The local club has won multiple awards in its 15-year existence, including chapter of the year, advisor of the year and many group and individual accolades, according to information supplied by Kissam.

Chick-fil-A in Mount Airy has been the chapter's business sponsor for several years.

The group will spend the summer working on service projects and teaching visitors old-time games, with its meetings to resume in September.

Meetings are held every Thursday afternoon during the school year for students in fourth grade and above. More information is available from Justyn Kissam at 336-786-4478 x 228 or jnkissam@northcarolinamuseum.org