

## Buchanan Town Improvement Society The Wilson Warehouse

### Fall Newsletter 2024



Bank of Botetourt

Welcome to our first newsletter. Thank you for signing up with your email address to receive it. Our objective is to start with a quarterly newsletter to keep you posted on upcoming events but also share with you some of the exciting developments at the Wilson Warehouse.

### Calendar of Events

Events listed take place at the Wilson Warehouse unless otherwise noted.

Mon. Sept. 30, 7pm	Monthly membership meeting
Sun. Oct. 20, starts 3pm	Lions Club High Tea—public invited
Mon. Oct. 28, 7pm	Monthly membership meeting
Sat. Nov. 2	Massive Cleanup Day
Sat. Nov. 16, 10:30-12:30pm	Joint program with the Buchanan Library, “Ginger Gungus”
Mon. Nov. 25, 7pm	Monthly membership meeting
Sun. Dec. 8, 1-5pm	Annual Christmas Home Tour (Reception 2-6 at the Wilson Warehouse)

### State Champion English Elm Tree at the Wilson Warehouse

Dr. Eric Wiseman of the Virginia Tech College of Natural Resources, who had visited the Wilson Warehouse, reports that the English Elm tree there is now the new State Champion English Elm (*Ulmus Procera*).

The tree has essentially been the same size for the last 60 years which is not uncommon for trees that reach this scale. At an estimated 125 years old, the tree would have been planted well after the Wilson Warehouse ceased operations. The absence of seedlings further supports the identification of the species as English Elm as that variety does not produce extensive seeds.

The fact that the tree has not been ravaged by Dutch Elm disease is a curiosity. This could indicate that the tree is a hybrid that has some Asian genes in it that confer resistance. Conversely the tree could simply be “lucky.”

The trunk’s circumference is 17’ 4”. It measures 81 feet high and the width of the tree’s canopy is also 81 feet. The Town Improvement Society is seeking funds to help preserve the tree by having an arborist prune, fertilize, provide lightning protection and cable support.



## Library of Virginia to Preserve Rare Documents from the Wilson Warehouse

As many of you know, this past spring one of our members discovered 30 “ledger books” in the attic of the Wilson Warehouse, one even dating to 1812. Several public presentations about this discovery have been made at the Wilson Warehouse.

16 of the books were business records of the John S. Wilson Company from 1834 to 1865, 6 were of the Robert R. Douthat Company and others concerned a Buchanan turnpike, a mill, United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Marshall Debating Society and an individual’s daily accounts, among others.



These extremely rare documents, most from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, offer a glimpse into Buchanan life in the distant past. Many are in remarkable condition while others need immediate help. With the assistance of Delegate Terry Austin, Dr. John Metz from the Library of Virginia in Richmond paid a visit to the Wilson Warehouse to examine all of the ledgers. As he put it, “Based on the list of documents you sent, I had very high expectations. However, what I have seen far exceeds my expectations.” Dr. Metz spent two hours reviewing what we have, sharing with us how valuable these documents are and how the Commonwealth can take them on as a preservation project for the eventual enjoyment of everyone.

While the project will take many years, the process will be to “digitize” each page and make each ledger available online for viewing and historical study. Another objective will be to take the original books and rebind each to ensure their preservation. These bound copies would be available in Richmond for study.

The ledgers, though kept off-site, need a controlled environment for storage; something the Town Improvement Society is unable to provide. Likewise, we do not have the many thousands of dollars needed to preserve them. Our primary concern is professional preservation and making each ledger available for viewing by all online.

*The ledgers found at the Wilson Warehouse*

## Ginger Gungus

We know what “Ginger” is but what in the world is “Gungus?” Join us on November 16<sup>th</sup> to find out!

Though no longer in existence, there was a log cabin next to the Wilson Warehouse, owned by John S. Wilson, built in 1816. The original cabin was still standing, as shown in this 1954 photograph taken at an event at the Wilson Warehouse.

Legend has it that a woman in the cabin baked ginger deserts and sold them out of the cabin, as far back as the canal days in Buchanan. The story is multi-layered and our friends at the Buchanan Library have been researching the story for months. They continue to turn up more and more information; things that were never known, and dispelling some old myths.

The Town Improvement Society years ago produced the “Ginger Gungus” cookbook which included the recipe for the ginger dessert. The recipe can be found in the latest Town Improvement Society cookbook, “Simply Love Buchanan” available at the Wilson Warehouse for \$25.



*The “Ginger Gungus” cabin beside the Wilson Warehouse in 1954*

## Annual Christmas Home Tour

When the Town Improvement Society relaunched the organization in September 2023, one of the first projects was to bring back the Buchanan Christmas Home Tour which had been on hiatus for many years. The 2023 Christmas Home Tour was a massive success. 4 homes were on the tour followed by a reception at the Wilson Warehouse.



*The Wilson Warehouse during the home tour in 2023*

The 2024 tour takes place on Sunday, December 8 from 1 to 5 pm with a reception at the Wilson Warehouse from 2 to 6pm. Tickets are \$20 per person and are available for purchase, by cash or check, at any one of the houses. Of course, not to be missed is the tour reception at the Wilson Warehouse featuring homemade Christmas delights, enough to make even Santa blush.

Four generous home owners have agreed to show their homes for the benefit of the Town Improvement Society. We will reveal the homes in November.

## New History of the Wilson Warehouse

The Town Improvement Society's historian, Steve Davis, recently completed a magazine style booklet about the Wilson Warehouse and the Town Improvement Society. The last time this was done was 1963 with a minor update in the 1980s.

Davis spent many hours developing the story, uncovering interesting photos and never-before known facts about John S. Wilson, his family and his company.

No plans are in the works to print the history. It is available from the Town Improvement Society presently at no charge. Just send us an email at [1903tis@gmail.com](mailto:1903tis@gmail.com) to request it and we will email to you a pdf.

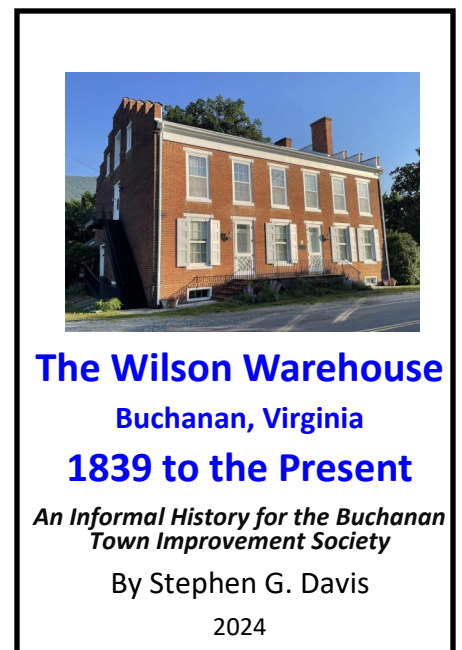
## Saturday, November 2nd Cleanup Day

Do you like a treasure hunt? Then come join other like-minded folks as we tackle the second and third floors of the Wilson Warehouse and the storage garage. We expect to find valuable old items, furniture and documents but also quite a bit of things suitable for the landfill.

Bring a dish for a potluck lunch. We start at 9am and go until “?” Please bring gloves and a mask.

## Town Improvement Membership

Individual memberships to the Town Improvement Society are just \$25 per person per year. These funds are integral to our continued daily operations. If you are not yet a member, please go to our website to learn more: [wilsonwarehouse.org](http://wilsonwarehouse.org).



## Virginia's Underwater Archaeologist Presented to a Full House at the Wilson Warehouse

The Wilson Warehouse welcomed the public to a presentation on August 6th, "The Marshall Tunnel in Botetourt County: Drilling and Blasting a Canal to the West." Virginia's Underwater Archaeologist, Brendan Burke, lead the audience through this fascinating pre-Civil War earthmoving project that was part of a planned expansion of the James River & Kanawha Canal to the Ohio River Basin. Up to that point the canal from Richmond, terminated in Buchanan.

The 1,900-foot-long tunnel had been abandoned when funding for the project ran out in 1856. Only recently, particularly through the efforts of Brendan Burke, has the interior of the tunnel been discovered.

The meeting room at the Wilson Warehouse was practically at standing room only for this incredible presentation.

*Interior of the abandoned Marshall Tunnel along the James River north of Buchanan*



*The Wilson Warehouse in 1938 after it was donated to the Town Improvement Society*

## So, what is it? The Wilson Warehouse or the Community House?

In 1938 when Oscar Caperton Huffman and Lucy Preston Beale Huffman donated the Wilson Warehouse to the Town Improvement Society, the society decided to call the building, "The Community House" in recognition of its purpose to be a place for community meetings and events.

86 years later the building remains a place for community events however, recognizing that this is one of the most historic commercial buildings in Virginia and one with a history still being discovered, it was felt that we needed to pay homage to its significance and refer to it by the name it was referred to when it was a seat of commerce in Botetourt County and western Virginia.

While many will still refer to it as the Community House, we hope you will join us in helping to preserve this unique structure and help it gain the recognition it deserves as the Wilson Warehouse.

## Wilson Warehouse State Champion Elm Tree T-Shirts

Several of our members got together with Acute Design Company of Bedford to develop a T-shirt celebrating our magnificent tree. Short sleeve shirts are just \$20 and long sleeve \$25. Send us an email and we'll provide more information. These will also be available on October 5<sup>th</sup> at the Town Improvement Society booth at Mountain Magic in Buchanan.



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