Volunteering is a fundamental American value. One that has built a nation from a ragtag group of loosely connected colonies populated by people from many nations, religions, languages, and ethnicities. A nation that has led and served the world for a hundred years.

It is a value the people of this region have embodied from the earliest settlements here.

This week the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History thanks and celebrates the many folks who've created a legacy of volunteerism that gave birth to and grew the museum and who continue the work in a multitude of ways.

It's always dangerous to start 'naming names' in such conversations because every contribution is important and there is simply no way to mention everyone who's given time, energy, and resources across three decades since the museum's inception. But it's important to recognize the vital role volunteers have played to make this institution possible.

From our founding members to the folks who staff the gift shop, board members to tour guides, hundreds of thousands of hours have been donated to tell the stories and preserve the treasures of the region. Some have been educators or historians, others retired lawyers, executives, retail workers, and housewives. One thing they all have in common has been their love of community and the museum.

There is a long tradition of working together in counties of this region. During the French and Indian War they sought shelter together, helping neighbors reach Fort Dobbs below Elkin or Bethabara near Winston-Salem. As communities grew people coordinated efforts for large tasks such as fighting fires.

Benjamin Franklin is credited with forming the first volunteer fire department in 1736. His model remains in force to this day as 70 percent of America's fire fighters are still volunteers. Surry County has 16 volunteer fire departments.

Community service organizations such as the YMCA, the Red Cross, Rotary International, and ‘ladies’ aid societies’ were spawned by social movements in the 19th century. As members of such clubs, local residents coordinated efforts to improve education, medical care, and sanitation. During WWI they supplied canned goods and sweaters to the military and created a fund to ensure the families of soldiers would be taken care of in the absence of the primary breadwinners.

The ladies of the Mount Airy Presbyterian church, under the leadership of Mrs. J.L. Gilmer and Mrs. W.E. Merritt, organized a sewing circle to raise money to build their new church. Folks could pay a small fee to have “plain or fancy needlework, plain machine work, embroidery or button-holes” done as reported in the Mount Airy News Sept. 26, 1912.

“There are so many little ways to show kindness,” wrote Mrs. F.L. Townsend in the News on Mar. 2, 1904, encouraging people to do service in their neighborhoods in any way they could find. “I wonder that more of us do not spend time in these little things.”

Surry residents do spend time doing for their community, in large ways and small. From the libraries to Head Start, the Jones Family Resource Center to, yes, the museum, folks in this region work hard to help their neighbors and keep the community working.

My Grandma Rauhauser used to say, “Many hands make light work.” She was right. Thank you, with all our hearts, to the many, many hands who’ve done the work here, but most especially for the honor of your friendship and dedication.