

A More Perfect UNION

A history power couple builds a life around examining the past — from Benedict Arnold to the American Civil War.

By Natalie Missakian



Laura Macaluso, '94, and Jeffrey Nichols, '96, recently moved to the historic village of Boiling Springs, Penn., named for the natural, artesian-well springs located in and around the town.

WHEN JEFFREY NICHOLS, '96, AND LAURA MACALUSO, '94, WALK OUT THE FRONT DOOR OF THE HOUSE they bought in Pennsylvania in late 2021, they see cornfields, cows, and a small lake — a view seemingly out of time. Their tiny village — Boiling Springs — has no traffic lights and looks much like it did in the late 19th century, when its founder, abolitionist Daniel Kaufman, helped smuggle enslaved people to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

The couple's brick, Federal-style house, which was built in 1880, sits just down the street from where Kaufman lived. Hunkered down there on a snowy weekday afternoon last January, the couple spoke by phone about their long-term plans to restore their home, which sits on the Appalachian Trail and is a half-hour drive to Gettysburg.

"It needs work, but for a history major and an art history major, it kinda fits the bill," says Nichols.

Macaluso chimes in, laughing, "Basically we were the only people who weren't scared of it."

It's true, Macaluso and Nichols know a few things about historic houses. The couple, who married in 2001, spent years as caretakers of the 1700s-era Pardee-Morris House in New Haven, which was burned by the British during the Revolutionary War. They later oversaw colonial homes owned by the Milford Historical Society.

Then, in 2008, Nichols became executive director of what is arguably Connecticut's most famous historic house — the Hartford-based former residence of novelist Mark Twain. Nichols later left the museum for a similar job running Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, the third president's 317-acre private retreat outside Lynchburg, Va.

Meanwhile, Macaluso's scholarly pursuits have gravitated toward the intersection of art, architecture, and history, including historical homes.

Her most recent paper, *Benedict Arnold's House: The Making and Unmaking of an American*, was published in the October 2021 issue of the history journal *Commonplace*. Macaluso examines the life of the traitorous American Revolutionary War general through the lens of houses he bought or built.

Now, with Boiling Springs as their home base, the couple is beginning a next chapter in their story as husband-and-wife historians. Nichols is less than a year into his new job as executive director of the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Penn., while Macaluso is part of a team planning a spring excavation at the site of Benedict Arnold's former New Haven home. In February, she joined the York County History Center in York, Pa., as the manager of institutional giving — and May 2022 will see the publication of her latest book: *A History Lover's Guide to Alexandria and South Fairfax County*.

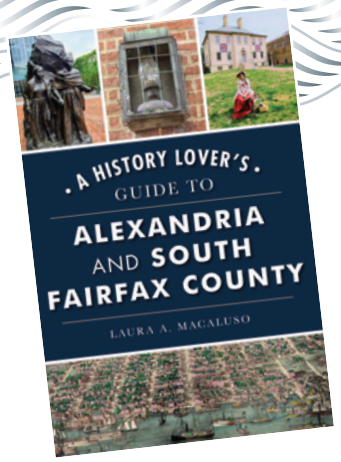
The couple's own history dates to 1989 in Naugatuck, Conn., where they both grew up but never crossed paths. Nichols went to the local public high school; Macaluso attended Sacred Heart, a Catholic School in Waterbury. Mutual friends set them up on a blind date, and he took her to see *Major League*, which had just come out in theaters. They instantly clicked, but if their shared love of history cemented the bond, neither realized it at the time.







From left: The couple stands at the front door of their new home. Other local historic places include this picturesque tavern and the homesite of abolitionist Daniel Kaufman.



Many Stories to Tell

Sharing history is a heartfelt pursuit for Laura Macaluso, '94 — inspiring numerous projects. The author's latest book *A History Lover's Guide to Alexandria and South Fairfax County* (History Press), will be published in May 2022. Also slated for release this year: *Objectify Benedict Arnold: Making Memory of America's Traitor*, a storytelling website created with Rachel Boyle of Omni History. Another digital exhibit — *Celebrating CETA: When Public Art Made the Walls Talk* — will expand on Macaluso's 2019 showcase of the City of New Haven's first community-based public art program. Lori Goldstein, manager of the Public Art Archive, is the co-curator.

"I never really thought about whether that was a connecting point for us," Macaluso says. "We were kids, and we were just having fun."

Both ended up at Southern (Macaluso enrolled as a freshman in the Honors College and Nichols later transferred from Eastern) where they flourished in their respective majors. Nichols had planned to get his teaching certification but gravitated toward public history after volunteering in the curatorial department at the New Haven Historical Society (now the New Haven Museum) while at Southern.

Macaluso double majored in English and art history and minored in Italian at Southern, but it was art history that resonated most. She gives credit to dedicated faculty like David Levine and Camille Serchuk, professors of art history; a study abroad opportunity in Italy; and New Haven itself, with its rich historic architecture and free access to Yale museums.





MELANIE STENGEL PHOTOS

Uncovering Buried Secrets of Benedict Arnold in New Haven

1. Local historian Robert S. Greenberg examines pottery found at the site of Benedict Arnold's New Haven home in December 2021.
2. Debbie Surabian, a soil scientist with the State of Connecticut, uses ground-penetrating radar to collect data.
3. Laura Macaluso, '94, who has written extensively on Arnold, helped organize the expedition. The dig is slated to continue this spring.



CONNECTICUT HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION

HE REKINDLED HER CONNECTION TO THE ELM CITY YEARS LATER. After earning her master's in art history from Syracuse University in Florence, Italy, she took a part-time job with New Haven's Arts, Culture, and Tourism Division. Then, while earning her doctorate in humanities at Salve Regina University in Newport, R.I., in 2016, she wrote her dissertation on New Haven's public art collection.

It was through the city's artwork that she became fascinated with Arnold, who was memorialized in the works not as a traitor, but as an early leader in the Revolution. A painting that hung in City Hall portrays his role in "Powder House Day," when he demanded the keys to New Haven's powder house to collect munitions before leading a local militia north to the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

"My particular interest in the Arnold story is to tease out the ways in which his image was crafted — both by himself and by others," says Macaluso. "That's why I take material and visual culture as historical evidence — and interrogate it and interpret it."

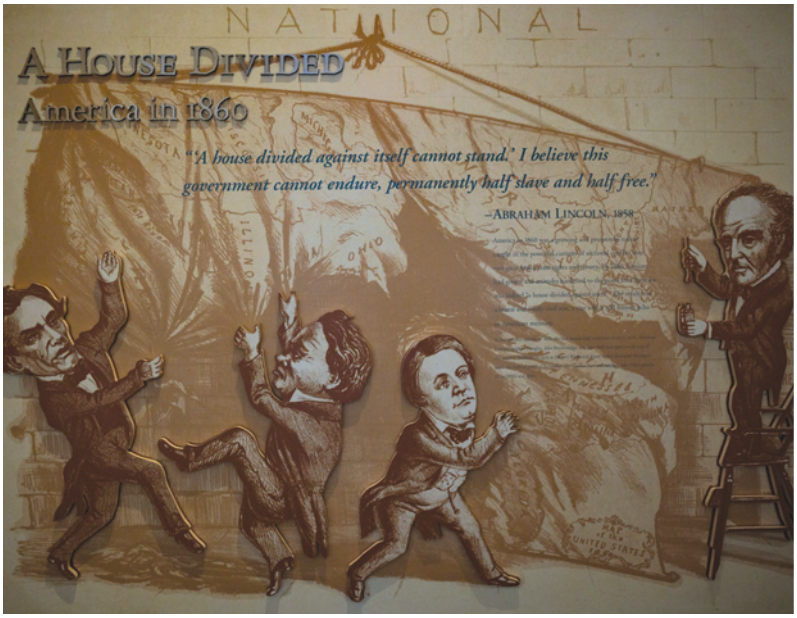
Now, Macaluso is joining her friend Robert S. Greenberg, a New Haven historian, and state archeologist Sarah Sportman for an excavation at the site of Arnold's former house on Water Street. Remnants of the home are buried beneath the parking lot of New Haven's High School in the Community. The trio and other experts were on-site late last year, using ground-penetrating radar to scan for man-made structures to help inform the future dig.

Macaluso hopes the endeavor will ultimately shed more light on how Arnold lived and reveal the truth behind "myths and lore." Among them, whether Arnold built a secret tunnel from his house to the harbor to smuggle goods.

"I'm interested in telling the full story, always and as much as possible," says Macaluso.

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Clockwise from top left: Macaluso's research covers many topics, including Benedict Arnold (in silhouette) and New Haven (depicted in this early sketch of the city green). • The statue marks the entrance to the National Civil War Museum. • Weapons held by the museum include this rifle manufactured by the New Haven Arms Co. of Connecticut. • These pants were worn by a child who was enslaved, likely in the 1840s. • "A House Divided," an exhibit on America in 1860, provides educational context.

Sharing History

Long connected to popular historical sites through his work, Jeffrey Nichols, '96, continues to host history buffs and scholars as the newly named chief executive officer of the National Civil War Museum. The museum, which opened in 2001 in Harrisburg, Penn., has welcomed more than 950,000 guests from all 50 states and 39 countries. It features more than 4,400 artifacts and 21,000 archival pieces, including weapons, uniforms, and camp and personal effects, and is part of the Smithsonian Institution Affiliations Program.



(From top) Nichols stands on the main staircase of the National Civil War Museum, which includes two floors of galleries. * An exhibit on the "Presidential Election of 1860" includes Abraham Lincoln's hatbox, a ballot box, and a pendant with an image of "Old Abe" worn by a member of the Republican Party.

Supporting Southern
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In 2010, Ruth co-founded — along with the late James Granfield, the former interim dean of what is now the College of Education — the Center of Excellence on Autism Spectrum Disorders at Southern. Its mission is to develop and deliver training rooted in evidence-based practices for teachers and others working with children with ASD. She became the center's first director, a position she held until her retirement. In 2015, the university named Ruth the Goodwin Endowed Chair in Special Education, the first endowed professorship in Southern's history. Following her retirement as a faculty member in 2017, she joined the SCSU Foundation Board of Directors.

While Ruth's desire to support higher education seems a natural extension of her life's work, her husband's motivation may not appear as obvious, since he dropped out of college to join the Turkish Army. A former Olympic-level alpine skier, Tumer taught members of NATO's special forces in Turkey to ski. The Turkish native immigrated to the United States in 1978 at age 33 with only "a small backpack, very little money, and a big dream to become a successful American citizen."

Tumer soon found work as a ski instructor at a ski and racquet club in Connecticut's Litchfield County. That led to a side hustle repairing cracked asphalt tennis courts. But he was frustrated to see the courts soon crumble again in the harsh New England climate. So he developed and patented a concrete surface that he could guarantee for 20 years or more and founded the Classic Turf Company in 1980. His was the first company to build post-tension concrete courts in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, eventually expanding the technology to basketball, track, and multipurpose courts. The business took off during the pandemic, registering $10 million in annual sales.

Along the way, Tumer met and married Ruth. They had two children — John and Elizabeth — and now have three grandchildren. They raised their family in Woodbury, Conn., and recently moved to a house along the Niantic River. Ruth says it's their retirement home "if Tumer ever retires."

The business is clearly in a growth mode. With more than "40 years in the game," Classic Turf boasts an extensive portfolio of courts, tracks and fields — ranging from home playscapes to dramatic rooftop basketball and tennis courts. Clients include sports clubs, high schools, universities, municipalities, and homeowners, among them, the Heights Casino in Brooklyn, the Aspen Alps sports club in Colorado, White Plains City Center in New York, and, yes, Southern Connecticut State University.

Though a self-made man, Tumer believes deeply in the value of education. He not only encouraged his children's studies, he provided the necessary financial support for three nieces and nephews from Turkey to earn college degrees in the U.S. The Erens' son John and his wife Kate both completed their MBAs at Southern. They now work in the family business. John, MBA '11, who earlier earned his civil engineering degree from Northeastern University, is vice president and an engineer with Classic Turf Company. Kate, MBA '11, is the company's director of finance. The *Hartford Business Journal* named John a "Rising Star," honoring the company with one of its "Family Business Awards" in 2021.

When President Bertolino made his pitch at Southern's anniversary gala, the time was right — their children's educations paid for, the family business prospering — for Ruth and Tumer to respond in a more significant way than they had been able to before. "In the past, I contributed very modest amounts to Southern. Only after Tumer's company really took off were we able to begin to make more substantial donations," Ruth says. "Whether large or small, we think our donations always were made in the spirit of giving back.

"Southern has given me the opportunity to have a very rewarding career in education and has now given our son and daughter-in-law, with their recently earned MBAs, an opportunity to lead the family company and continue its legacy of philanthropic support."

A More Perfect Union
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Nichols, who holds a master's in museum studies from Bank Street College of Education and an MBA from the University of New Haven, is relying on the same approach in his new role at the National Civil War Museum, which boasts a collection of more than 25,000 artifacts, documents, and photographs and aims to present a balanced view of the war.

He recalls a story Jon Purmont, M.S. '64, Southern professor emeritus of history, told his students about English Civil War leader Oliver Cromwell, who, while sitting for a portrait, instructed the artist to paint him "warts and all."

"I remember him saying that's a good way to think about history," Nichols says.

Nichols plans to introduce new educational programs at the museum that focus on the war and its legacy, including the unfulfilled promises of reconstruction. He also wants to tell the stories of marginalized groups, such as the 180,000 Black soldiers who fought in the war.

He credits Southern for teaching him how to think critically about history, a skill that's especially crucial in today's politically polarized climate, as debates rage over the removal of Confederate statues and as Congress continues to probe the events surrounding the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

"Obviously we live in an era that's very challenging. We have a country where we are truly at each other's throats," says Nichols. "Looking back at Lincoln and the Civil War era is an important part of analyzing where we are today, and hopefully we can make better decisions than they did."



An exhibit focuses on drummer boys and buglers at the National Civil War Museum. The Civil War marked the first time *Taps* was played as the official "lights out" bugle call.