

A Tribute To  
**Oliver “Nol” de Montalant Putnam**

1934-2023

by Katharine L. Putnam Bennett, *niece to O.M. (Nol) Putnam*

Oliver “Nol” de Montalant Putnam died June 11, 2023, in Charlottesville, VA, having been a long-time resident of Rappahannock County, VA. He was well known to the public as an artist blacksmith and highly respected, even revered, in the blacksmithing community as a master craftsman. He was also a teacher at heart, a voracious student of life, and the truest of friends.

Nol was born May 12, 1934, on Beacon Hill in Boston to Augustus Lowell Putnam, Sr. and Anne Lockwood Lackey. From the age of four, he grew up on a subsistence farm with his mother and stepfather in Washington Depot, CT. He attended the local grammar school, the Lenox School for Boys, Lenox, MA through 1951 and completed a PG year at Deerfield Academy, Deerfield, MA, graduating high school in 1952. He then married his first wife Marinette “Rusty” Wise and graduated from Trinity College, Hartford, CT in 1959, the same year his daughter Anne was born. During his undergraduate years, he served in the U.S. Army as a sergeant in Georgia, Missouri, and Southern Germany teaching rifle operation and current events.

Post Trinity, Nol was both a student and a teacher. He completed graduate work at the Harvard School of Arts & Sciences and the University of Massachusetts School of Education where he earned a Master’s degree and almost completed the necessary work to earn a doctorate. He also taught at the Lenox School for Boys until it closed in 1971. The final yearbook was dedicated to Nol. While at Lenox, Nol was a soccer coach, dorm master, and teacher of ancient, American, Russian, and modern European history. He became the Head of the History Department at which point he developed ever more varied and complex courses. He also co-directed the Dramatics Club where he focused on creating and building innovative stage sets with the students. While in the Army, Nol had learned to work with those who were from a radically different background and so was a fierce proponent of inclusion for all. As such, he was passionate about the Native American Studies Program. In his words, he believed in “making the subject matter fit the needs of the kids so they could grow”. With Nol’s unflagging zeal, it became a nationally recognized program, even receiving a grant from the Mellon Foundation. He stayed in touch with a group of these students through regular email dialogues until his death.

After one year teaching at the Northfield Mount Hermon School, Mount Hermon, MA 1971-1972, Nol made a sea change. He left academia, cashed in his savings, and bought a small farm in western MA. Shortly thereafter, he purchased an anvil for his second wife, Anne Clark, and along with it came a second-hand set of ironworking tools and a portable forge. With the wrong hammer, the wrong coal, and a book on blacksmithing, Nol heated up a piece of iron, hit it and when it moved he was instantly smitten with artistic blacksmithing. Thus, White Oak Forge was founded in 1973.

In the mid-70s, Nol moved to Madison, VA where he built his second forge. A decade later, Nol built a house in Flint Hill, VA with his third wife and fellow blacksmith Claudia McCue. In



*Nol Putnam at the forge*

*Photo by Carl Zitzmann*

1982 he was invited to open a forge in The Plains, VA where he became widely known for his signature style of traditional smithing. White Oak Forge became a beloved and integral part of The Plains community. As Nol’s work gradually evolved into more free-form sculptural work, he needed “a space to help on the lonely journey inward”. Needing less distraction, he purchased land in Huntly, VA where he built a house in 1995 which he shared with his fourth wife, Susan Covington, until 2014. It included a view of the Shenandoah Mountains and was full of ironwork ranging from stair railings to toilet paper holders. He built his final forge at his Huntly home in 2001.

Nol lived and worked alone at the Huntly house and forge with his devoted dog Jack until his death. During those years, he lived life deeply and created prodigiously. He completed his final commissioned work in 2022; three large iron crosses for the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. He personally delivered this bookend to his career in late Spring 2022 at age 88.

In the Spring of 2017, Nol began what started as a collegial relationship with fellow artist blacksmith Drew Alexander. They quickly became fast friends, discussing smithing, art, and life, often over a cup of tea.

When it was time for Nol to make another sea change, he sold his entire forge to Drew, entrusting him with his legacy, a legacy described by Nol as “... the transformation of alchemy, not into gold and silver, but by imagination into beauty and love, and sent forth to the world in healing”.

Nol’s design studio in Huntly was a mecca of creative energy and overflowing with his artistic visions: stacks of pencil sketches, detailed drawings, and watercolors with precisely written notes in the margins - all in preparation for lead solder or modeling clay and perhaps the first blow of the hammer on heated iron. While Nol spent a preponderance of time alone in his forge, being a teacher at heart, he was not insular; he mentored many, sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm. He gave innumerable workshops and was invited to speak and demonstrate at many conferences. He had gallery shows, received awards, and was asked to create installations for many public buildings. He was also often seen sharing with the public at open houses and art fairs.



At the time of his death, Nol was a highly esteemed artist blacksmith. Classical European technique combined with aesthetic sensibility gave his functional and artistic creations a signature style. Whether a paperweight, candelabra, stair railing, garden gate, bench, soaring sculpture, or enormous cathedral gate, all were characterized by a balance between enduring iron and weightless dreams, often with a touch of whimsy. Natural design themes of leaves, tendrils, grapevines, and gusts of wind were prominent in his work.

Nol's creations were commissioned throughout the mid-Atlantic region and beyond. His most publicly recognized, his crowning achievement, was an invitation to create three commemorative hand-forged gates for the Columbarium at the National Cathedral, Washington, DC. "To be chosen to do ironwork for the cathedral, I get goosebumps when I think about it, and it's a little overwhelming, and it brings tears, it brings tears to think that my work is here". Taking approximately 1200 hours each, the largest and most complex gate is composed of 42 flowers and 204 leaves, each individually crafted. In Nol's words: "...what I like about ironwork, the hammer blows merge and they're the ones that catch the light and bring the gate to life, it's a living thing, not inanimate, not machine made, not static, it's life".

Nol co-authored two books: "Lines in Space" (2010), which shares his thoughts on design and interpretation and showcases some of his sculptures, and "Beauty in the Shadows: Wrought Iron in the National Cathedral" (2014), a definitive guide to the ironwork at the cathedral. Nol was also the subject of two documentaries. The first, titled "The Prophet of The Plains", was released in 2000. This was created by the community of The Plains as a dedication and thank you to Nol. This was followed by an award-winning documentary "Forging Art: Nol Putnam, Artist Blacksmith". It was aired by PBS in May 2023 with footage of Nol working in his forge, discussing a few of his more iconic pieces, and sharing his thoughts on art and "making metal move".

While Nol was himself a master craftsman, he also always considered himself a student, learning from the ancient art of ironwork, great smiths who had gone before, rambling walks with his dog Jack, and from his relentless efforts and steady learning curve in the forge. Since he believed that "art is a basic component of the soul as we look out into the world", his creations also came from his own dreams in which ideas were transformed into three-dimensional reality. Nol was also a student of his own life. He used dreams as a vehicle for studying his own interior landscape which he brought to fruition through extensive journaling. This revealed new realities and created humble understandings along with a few regrets. In his own words: "It takes great ... energy to want to change; to identify what to change; to do the work of change; to sustain change. To find that which is unlovable in your heart and only then to be able to love it to death for the new you". Nol engaged in this work of change right up until his death.

Nol was equally comfortable working in solitude and creating human connections. He participated in many reading and writing groups, some casual and some with formal instruction. He maintained regular and meaningful conversations with family and friends whether near or far. He was philosophical and often outspoken, most especially in the social science of politics, frequently writing letters to editors or hand-addressing postcards for a cause he believed in. He enjoyed many forms of art and was himself a photographer. He adored music, J.S. Bach especially, and



loved to "let it all out" through dancing. Nol was both a student and a teacher in everything he did, whether creating art, human connections, or being a devoted and compassionate friend. Through his art and through simply being all that he was, Nol added beauty, grace, thoughtfulness, and straight-up fun to the world. While he is no longer physically present, the radiant beacon that was Nol nonetheless continues to shine forth through his artistic legacy and all who were blessed to cross his path. In that way, Nol is now, and will always be, of this world.

***From Nol: "Be safe, my friends, be brave, be brave. Onward!"***

Nol is survived by his daughter Marinette Anne Putnam "Anne", his stepson Jamie Braden, wife Jenn Braden, their daughter Maddy "Zoey" Braden, his sister Lawrence "Toni" Lowell Putnam, 12 nieces and nephews, and his devoted companion, dog Jack. He was predeceased by his brother Augustus "Pete" Lowell Putnam and his sister Anne Lockwood Seamans.

*A celebration of Nol's life will be held in May 2024 near his home in Huntly, VA to which all are welcome! The details will be posted on Nol's site on Caring Bridge ([www.caringbridge.org/visit/nolputnam](http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/nolputnam)) and announced in the Rappahannock News ([rappnews.com](http://rappnews.com)).*





## Nol Putnam

By Veronika Benson

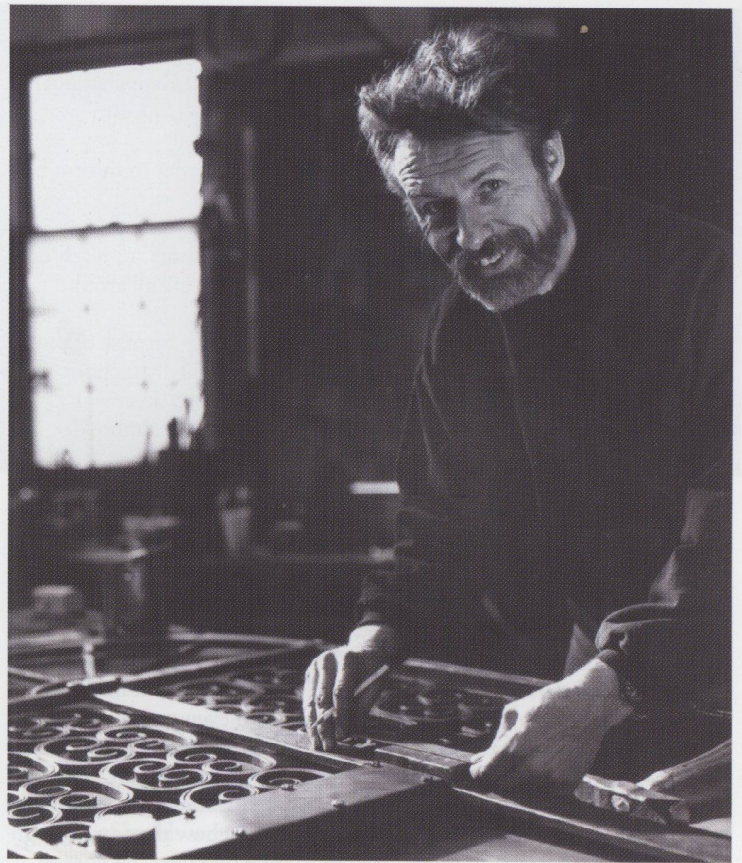
Six feet tall and wiry, 83-year-old Nol Putnam still boasts a full head of hair. In 2004, he posed as Mr. May in Rappahannock County's risqué men's calendar. More recently, he was featured in a provocative photography exhibit. Despite his ease in front of a camera, there's not a shred of evidence that Putnam could be mistaken for the superficial model type. His thoughts and opinions run deep and his talent as a blacksmith even deeper. His reputation in the world's second-oldest trade reaches far beyond the Piedmont.

Among Putnam's more notable works are three gates that hang in the Columbarium of the National Cathedral. The Folger Gate took 1,200 hours to complete; there are 250 intricate leaves in its design. He also designed and crafted a gate for the Rockefeller Plantation in Tarrytown, N.Y.

It wasn't until 1972 that one of the region's most celebrated blacksmiths began to labor in his trade. "The first time I handled the tools, I knew working with iron was my calling," he recalls. "When it was hot, I could manipulate the iron — could learn to change its shape, its dimension into an idea — tools became an extension of my mind."

Ironically, several years later he learned this affinity was genetic; two of his ancestors had been smiths. Although blacksmithing remains popular, according to Nol, "it will never reach the heyday of the 1920s."

It troubles him that society is doing less work with their hands.



*Nol Putnam, in his studio working on the Cathedral Gate*



## White Oak Forge

His White Oak Forge is the first thing you encounter when approaching Putnam's five-acre property in Huntly.

With its timber frame and pitched roof, his smithy resembles a weathered New England cottage. Frayed Tibetan peace flags wave in the breeze above the enormous poplar doors leading into the forge. Various samples of his ironwork hang on the walls, immediately drawing the eye upward. To the left is a huge metal table, which functions as both a drawing surface and a finishing area. Several intimidating machines stand at the rear of the building, and the forge itself is nestled back in the right-hand corner. At first glance, it could be mistaken for a pizza oven, but this hearth burns coal and exceeds temperatures of 2,500 degrees.

"My favorite tools," he confides, "are a reworked hammer, two pair of tongs that magically appear when needed, and a six-foot folding, stainless steel ruler."

His movements within the forge are fluid and clearly second nature. He stokes the fire-breathing beast of a hearth with coal, then waits for it to heat up before feeding it virgin iron. The heated metal emerges from the forge red-gold and malleable. He's then able to shape this molten version by pressure of some kind, often hammering. Putnam displays an earthy, sinewy grit as he hammers the hot metal, demonstrating his work.

There's an art to the hammering when, for example, he does so at a slight angle and the veins in a leaf emerge. He likens this manual process to that of using a "rolling pin and dough," but somehow this seems far more technical and physically demanding than baking. The forging of iron into the rods of a gate, for example, requires twisting of the metal while it's hot. When asked if the iron ever breaks when in this superheated state, Putnam replies, "Never."

And that is not the only surprising aspect of his work. There is rarely any arc welding involved in his creations, except the occasional



tack here or there to join two large pieces together. A stunning example of one of his larger works can be viewed in Rappahannock County, an ornate gate. Henri Julien Rousseau's "The Dream" was the inspiration for the work.

Putnam reads as many myths as possible, in order to inform his work.

"Myths should still guide us," he says. "They remain potent forces. We ignore them at our peril, for they have much to teach us. Even though we may not know them, their stories are all around us — we are still subject to them."

He feels we have forgotten about myths, partly because of our busyness with the internet, social media, and "futile distractions like reality TV." Many of his designs first come to him in dreams; REM sleep provides him with ideas from which he harvests a more detailed and tangible vision.

The name of each sculpture evolves as he designs and crafts the work. It is Putnam's belief that "artists do things with images to better understand the world. They have an obligation to ask questions, enhance awareness, raise consciousness, and elevate the mind." In his opinion, "the public needs things to experience that are beyond voyeuristic, especially now."

For Putnam, blacksmithing is "an ancient, nostalgic trade," and he considers its fire "mesmerizing." He continues, at his age, to evolve through painting, writing, yoga, and even peace-making. Through creative endeavors, and his interaction with others, Putnam hopes he can make a larger difference.

"When I'm engaged in a conversation with someone, I want to pay full attention to what that person is saying, how they are saying it, and what matters to them," Nol says. If he disagrees, he does so respectfully by providing his viewpoint in a thoughtful and non-threatening manner.

"I consider myself an elder now," he explains, "and we are all like stones in the water. Everything we do sends a ripple effect outward into the universe." This listening with rapt attention, and responding in kind, is yet another of Putnam's valuable contributions to a fractured world.

## Before the Forge

He began his life's journey in Boston in May of 1934.

Born Oliver de Montalant Putnam, Nol lived just across Beacon Street from the Public Garden. His memories of that era, like his art, are precise and captivating. He recalls the strict formalities of his family's upper-middle-class Brahmin existence — a thick rule book with "more don'ts to abide by than dos." Eventually, Putnam rebelled, developing a roguish persona still apparent in his casual, gentleman-farmer style, oft accented with a scarf about his neck.

Merely four when his parents divorced, Putnam moved with his mother to a farm in rural Connecticut.

"I think that move saved me from growing up to become a fiduciary attorney," he jokes.

Thanks to his mother, Anne, there was early, frequent exposure to the arts and literature. Their home, like Gertrude Stein's, welcomed many an artist. Perhaps this is why Putnam preferred to spend time working with his hands, not studying. In an effort to curb these industrial tendencies, his mother enrolled him in the

Lenox School for Boys in the Berkshires.

After successfully completing his secondary education, Nol was uncertain about which path to choose. Ultimately, his mother encouraged him to join the military. "This," he says, "was the best advice I've ever received. The army taught me that I could have control over my life."

After serving his country, he attended Trinity College in Hartford — remaining in academics, it turns out, for 23 years, including teaching Russian history at the height of the Cold War.

He also wrote and gave anti-war speeches during that period. "I conducted these strictly off-campus," he says, "because I didn't want my views to interfere with those of the students, or distort my teaching." Some of Putnam's students remain in touch with him, often expressing their gratitude for his nurturing and inspiration.

"When a student is struggling, you lend them a hand," he says. "And when things are just too difficult, you hold them in your arms, guiltlessly."

## Musings and Healing

There's a path leading away from his forge, which crosses a meandering stream. It opens onto a glen where the house and outbuildings are located. The setting is one of a tiny hamlet, a place where artists like Shakespeare might have sought respite. Putnam helped design and complete the finishing touches on his home.

The exterior façade is rustic, while its interior is more contemporary, boasting thick beams and soaring ceilings. Broad panels of light slant inward from an expansive meadow beyond. The sharper angles of the architecture are softened by many of his own hand-forged details. Shapely candlesticks don bookshelves, while a dragon's head perches at the end of a curved iron stair rail. Larger works are scattered about the house and yard.

These artistic touches conjure up a feeling of enchantment. The kitchen, with hunter-green cabinets and a worn farmhouse table, adjoins the light-filled living room. There cathedral-sized windows peer out over a deck, where on a clear day, the dusky, rolling hills appear to be lording over the pasture.

The atmosphere of his home is charged with the energy of books, nature, and dramatic artwork. It is a place of warmth and genuine truths. A room just off the kitchen has a plaque above the door that reads, "Nol's Musings & Words."

Here is where he keeps his journals, large leather-bound books; the pages of his current volume left open for all to read. Given his mastery of conversation, the 'Musings' room is likely a space where words flow as easily as the stream on his property.

There are sketches in his journals as well, which are sometimes transferred to the drawing table in his forge. While en route, "these designs often change," Putnam declares. They do so inexplicably. There's another sort of diagram on a nearby bulletin board. He created this one to help him focus on the inner work his therapist recommended. His ex-wives' names loom large on the board.

"Now," he confides, "is the period in my life for reflection and acknowledgment of past mistakes."

Putnam takes responsibility for his actions, while still choosing to celebrate being alive. He appreciates those who are in his life now and speaks with kindness and deference to those who are not.

A staircase in his foyer leads down to a stunning library filled with books of every imaginable genre, and more of Putnam's



ironwork. A photo of his maternal grandfather in full military regalia peers down from a high shelf. On the windowed side of the room, a bright display of red poppies steals the show. They are metal, of course, and crafted as a tribute to his five relatives who served in the Great War (two uncles, a grandfather, his father, and stepfather).

On the opposite side of the room sits a slender, chest-high sculpture called "Three Broken Hearts." Tall, grassy tendrils reaching upward provide a sharp contrast to its dangling, copper hearts. The piece's name raises the question of its true meaning, but Putnam resists inquiry, saying "Some things are better left to interpretation."

The hearts, diminutive and vulnerable, flutter at the slightest movement. These two fantastic pieces — the poppies, the hearts — rest across from one another, echoing each other's sentiment.

There's no doubt Putnam will leave behind an incredible legacy in his metal works, yet it is another work he now cherishes, and hopes will have the most powerful influence. This work is motivated by his concern for the spiritual and economic suffering of fellow humans.

"There is a troublesome divide in our culture," he says, "but as an optimist, I feel we can and should begin healing this fissure at the community level." Putnam believes politics, religion, art, science, industry, and wealth are all superfluous without relationships, without community, and without kindred spirits that make us feel we are a part of something larger than ourselves.

"We should come together and talk with one another, about things that are difficult to discuss," he says, a look of concern casting a shadow over his face. "We ought to celebrate our differences, and respect one another in spite of them."

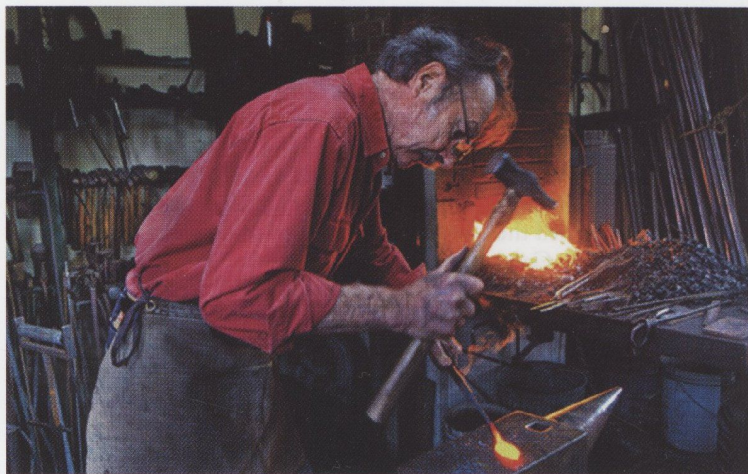
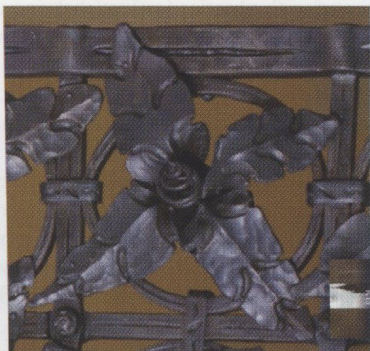
Perhaps his struggles as an artist fostered such a wealth of compassion. There was one year in New England when he had three mouths to feed and only \$2,000 to his name. "We bought a few chickens, some pigs, a cow, and planted a garden, which carried us through the winter," he explains.

And this is the kind of perseverance his art speaks to, by way of both its tensile strength and its universal truths. From the National Cathedral to the Piedmont and beyond, his legacy will abide.

Most artists would likely be content with this measure of success, perhaps even retire. Not Oliver Montalant Putnam; no, indeed. Forever the educator, who still wants to inspire, Nol has a schedule he jokingly refers to as warranting a "private secretary."

Alas, he marches on, searching for opportunities to provide others and his beloved community with hope, and maybe even a dream or two.

*Veronika Benson grew up in Maine and spent three years pursuing a creative writing degree at George Mason University. She is currently working on a novel. Veronika was drawn to the Piedmont region over 18 years ago because it reminded her of home, but without the harsh winters. She resides in Washington, Virginia.*



*Nol Putnam was the Guest Speaker at the Mary Scott - Guest Talk, at the College of Building Arts November 13, 2019*

### Thoughts and Reflections by Nol Putnam

I am reminded of a writers' workshop I took in the 1990's where the leader asked how many of us were writing a novel. A number of hands went up and she responded: "Oh, I am so sorry."

**And so,** how many of you wish to become Blacksmiths? Oh, I am so sorry... but congratulations. You are entering a tradition of metal working 10,000 years old and it is glorious.

I was thirty-nine when I first picked up a hammer, started a fire, and rather randomly hit hot iron.

I had absolutely no conception, nor do I think I gave it a moment's thought, of the transition from receiving a salary for 9 to 5 work, to working freelance. I was no businessman. I had at best a vague awareness of trading what I made for money. But how much money given my lack of ability? And so I needed to develop a new set skills - record keeping, monthly reports, sales taxes, deadlines. And add to that the one rare commodity, the management of time within which to fit everything. It was a reflexive choice to be in charge of my own well-being. I had given fourteen years to two institutions. They were not careful nor respectful of my gifts. I would not make that mistake again. For forty-five years, the White Oak Forge has been my show.

Those survival days, those press ahead regardless days because there were no turning back days; those early days are a blur of farm chores, where to buy soft coal, arranging steel delivery, selling outlets, fairs, and back in time to milk my cow, Katya.

I have had four weeks of formal training: 2 weeks with Dimitri Gerakaris on the shore of some frozen lake in New Hampshire one winter; and two weeks with Francis Whitaker in the Yellin Shop in Philadelphia before it disappeared. And I benefitted greatly from a thirty year friendship with Bill Gichner.

Somebody should write an essay on the men and women who carried the art of smithing from pre-Second World to the renaissance of working iron in the early 1970s.

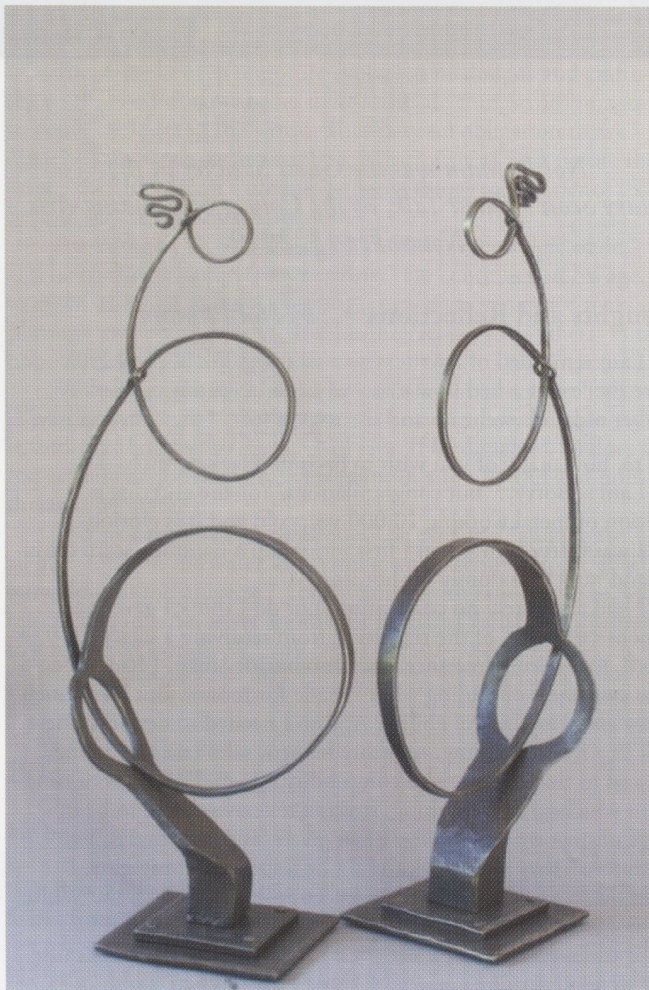
I those days I was a rank beginner, an apprentice to smithing. At best I was an artisan learning the mechanics of a trade by choosing simple objects to create, from a line of hooks, to rudimentary candlesticks, to fireplace tools and andirons. My early chandeliers were pretty sketchy.

These products served two functions: first they brought money in to support family and more work. Second, and in the long run



more importantly, my skill level improved with each object. My “eye” improved. Thus, I moved through the levels of apprentice, journeyman and master. No degrees conferred, no examinations passed, except the approval of customers and a widening of the geographical client base from New England to Florida.

Almost imperceptibly, I changed from artisan to artist. In the creating I learned the type of work I wanted to do - architectural-scale ironwork. Gates for driveways, balustrades, stair railings; large installations that broadened my understanding of architectural style so that my work enhanced the setting. As my skills grew and as my creative desires changed, the work morphed into sculpture. I now make objects whose only purpose was to gladden the heart and



create beauty in space derived from my mind. I became an artist, a sculptor in iron.

Today I wrestle with the concept of art, artistry, artists — those huge, encompassing life terms, with no roadmaps, very few signposts, and precious little on epiphanies. I say, “Art begins in conflict.” I am in conflict with myself, or in conflict with what I know, or what I do not know. My goal is “out there,” on the other side of the “known.” Denise Levertov speaks to this in *“The Borderland”*:

“The borderland — that’s where, if one knew how, one would establish residence. That watershed, that spine, that looking glass . . .”

. . .

“But there’s an interface, immeasurable, elusive — an equilibrium just attainable, sometimes, when the attention’s rightly poised.”

“Couldn’t one learn to maintain that exquisite balance for more than a second?”

She refers to that moment between known and unknown; that moment of wakefulness between the dream and remembering the details of the dream; of trying to walk through those mists to gather ephemeral threads into a cogent whole that can be drawn, seen, tweaked and perhaps created. Or perhaps just walk off a cliff.

The abyss, the edge of creating is close, the path unknown, forward movement difficult. But there’s a remedy - only one - for the paralysis seizing your throat, your arm, your hand, your mind to mute you.

To wait for the muse to alight on your shoulder is to wait for Godot; is to believe the gods will release Sisyphus from his uphill struggle. And while I wait, I might as well start a forge fire, get some iron hot and begin to change its form. I might as well pick up the bloody hammer, the brush, the pencil, mix the paint, or wet my hands for the clay, and get on with it.

Just - show - up. Most of art is simply that, just showing up for the work and doing it.

We acquire new skills by observing and doing. For me, journals have always helped. They are a record from whence I’ve come, what ideas to pursue. Sometimes it is no more than a sketched will-o-the-wisp from a dream, made first two dimensional in pencil and ink, perhaps with color added. And there it sits for consideration and perhaps movement into the third dimension. It can sit for weeks, months. It is my reservoir of ideas.

There have always two been hurdles for me. The first is the intimidation of a blank page. It is the nattering monkey whispering in my ear, “But what if nothing comes?” You’re all set to give a party and no one shows up! It is a painful moment, the denouement, to commit oneself to start on a journey. But I remind myself that even the longest road starts with but one step. So I have learned to ease myself into that step. A small ritual of making a cup of tea, sharpening the favorite pencils, arrange the pen and ink on the desk, perhaps play some music that is conducive to creative thoughts. Then simply make a mark and I am off. Natalie Goldberg tells her writers “Keep the hand moving.” Sometimes ideas and variations arrive like fresh water over smooth rocks of an up-Country South Carolina waterfall. Sometimes you must spread a piece of plastic over the Sonora Desert to catch a drop and then it is on the under side!

So I make a mark and commit myself and still the monkey persists. “What do you know about drawing?” Well, actually not very much. I did not go to art school. I had to teach myself. I have pushed myself to learn the rudiments of design, of expressing those thoughts visually and with practice (or just showing up), to be able to convey the idea that has been in my mind. The lines grow, the idea takes shape. I use the eraser frequently when my eye sees my hand has been errant. It is an important tool that allows me to try something knowing it can quickly be dispatched. The edges are softened with finger tip, the salient lines darkened.

Hold it up, pin it to a board and walk away for perspective, and practice the art of seeing. You will do it over and over again and in many different ways. Look down the edge of a long bar, is the taper even? Is the bar straight? Does the scroll curl ever inward evenly? Is there grace to the piece? Is the whole congruent? By paying





attention you will inadvertently and successfully train your eye to really “see.” Just - show - up.

My second hurdle is the feeling that I do not have the skill to create that idea on paper. Probably it is rooted in a fear to commit to something, anything that seems permanent. Ironic! I have watched hundreds of students heat up their first piece of iron, bring it to the anvil, hammer firmly in hand and freeze. A panicked look crosses their face, “What happens if I make a mistake?” I reassure them that it is only a mistake and they are only hitting iron. It is very plentiful and we have lots more!

Always there is the risk of failure. I draw an idea; I create it in iron; it does not match what was in my mind’s eye. Risk is part of every single human endeavor — as is the desire to succeed. Look at risk as a learning tool. Sometimes the failure is instructive. Press on!

I cringe when I see one more wizard made from a railroad spike. I want more imagination shown. Stretch your mind. What are you reading outside of classes? What was the last art gallery or museum show you visited? Do you keep a journal of any kind? Do you unplug from the glut of social media in order to hear your own thoughts? Have you read Grimm’s Fairy Tales, those archetypes of our daily life written in a different guise. A well-respected blacksmith friend in Phoenix was stopped by a client one night while attending the opera. “Aren’t you the blacksmith?” “Yes,” my friend responded. “What are you doing here?” The richer you are in your head, the richer will be your work and the more important your place in the world.

On the Steppes of Russia, a tribe was ruled by a triumvirate of the Prince, the Shaman, and the Blacksmith. All decisions for the tribe were made in agreement. The Prince a temporal position, insecure. The Shaman had to intercede with his gods daily, protected as he was by the blacksmith’s symbols on his cloak. Alone, the Blacksmith was protected unto the seventh generation.

In West Africa, of all the craftsmen, only the blacksmith was allowed to woo the chief’s daughter for her hand in marriage.

Our own patron saint is St. Clement, celebrated on November 23rd. A traditional day off in earlier times. No doubt the authorities will release you from classes and supply you with mead. Good luck with that!

You are entering on the first steps of an ancient and honorable profession. I wish you all a wonderful journey.

This is Nol’s story. Nol was a legend in the blacksmith trade, a self-taught craftsman who spent thousands of hours shaping 2,000-degree iron into brilliant works of art. He began his career at the Cathedral in the 1980s; he delivered his final pieces just last year. His best-known work at the Cathedral are a set of three iron gates in the Cathedral’s crypt-level columbarium. The heavy gates protect the final resting places of Helen Keller, Matthew Shepard, First Lady Edith Wilson, bishops, priests and musicians.

While the Cathedral is perhaps best known for its stained-glass and stone carvings, the building is also home to large collection of wrought iron artistry. In 2014, Nol teamed with three Cathedral docents to produce a book, “Beauty in the Shadows,” which chronicles every piece of wrought iron in the Cathedral. From the book:

“Once one begins to notice the ironwork in the building and on the grounds here, it is surprising just how many doors, latches and railings there are. It is not too much to suggest that the ironwork knits the fabric of the Cathedral’s stone and glass together. It both separates and connects the building from the grounds, and it does the same with all the materials inside the building itself.”

And then this:

“Once noticed here, you will find it in many other places, utilitarian and beautiful, practical or decorative to gladden the heart, and finally because it is iron, all but timeless.”

A few staggering numbers to put it all into perspective:

One set of Nol’s double gates contains 42 flowers and 204 leaves. Each leaf requires about 50 hammers from the blacksmith to shape into form. The gates weigh 1,200 pounds.

The estimated time to produce each gate was roughly 1,200 hours. Nol also crafted four free-standing candelabra that are used in the Cathedral nave, as well as his final projects (also located in the columbarium): an elaborate six-foot candlestick, matching crosses and a meditation bench fashioned from walnut wood from his family farm in Massachusetts. He also created several handrails that guide visitors into St. John’s Chapel and St. Mary’s Chapel.

For a deeper dive into Nol’s work — particularly his gates in the columbarium — here’s a Docent Spotlight talk from 2021, and a short documentary, “Forging Art,” that is streaming on Maryland Public Television.

*From the National Cathedral to a Rockefeller Estate, his work is renowned. Oliver de Montalant Putnam is more than a great artist, meet the philosopher blacksmith.*





### *Where did the time go?*

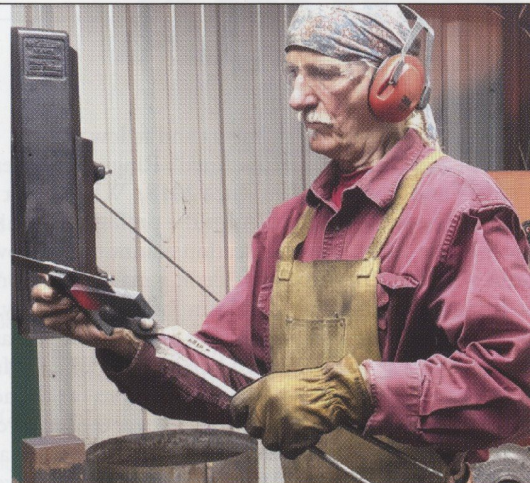
It seems like only yesterday that I was scrambling to produce my first issue of the Anvil's Ring. After four years as your AR Editor, Winter 2024 will be my sixteenth and final issue. Volume 52 No. 1, will arrive the first week of December 2023.

I first considered taking on this challenge on when Dan Nauman decided to step down and there was no talking him out of it. I tried. The very talented Bruce Jarrell convinced me to throw my hat over the fence. His confidence that I would make a success of it and that it would be good for the organization has always been my North Star. I will always be grateful for his support.

In this issue we have a lot to say about Nol Putnam. I tried to edit it down, but there is just so much to share about the love and respect for and from this man.

***That and more, right here within the pages of The Anvil's Ring.***

The Editor



Mark Paul Kochan

*To Tristan, Amy, Lola, Daisy, Midi, and Squeeks, thank you for the use of your beautiful Tahoe home to create this issue. M.K.*

Dear Mark,

Let me introduce myself as a longtime and now, ex-member of ABANA, age, not interest. If you think it fitting and appropriate I have written a little blurb to mark the transition, but more to introduce Drew Alexander to the membership. He was recently at the Gichner Winterfest and met many of the old timers. Feel free to edit liberally or if you think not suitable, ignore completely.

With thanks for the work you do for smithing,

Nol Putnam

Dear Friends,

Some of you will have heard that after 50 years I have finally laid my hammer down as of January 1, 2022. The organization and it's membership have been generous to me over the years. I have been invited to demonstrate in most of the country. I have been befriended by hundreds of you. I served on the ABANA board, the Bealer and Membership Committees. I broke my big toe dancing while demonstrating at De Pere, gave the keynote address at Alfred. I snagged Bill Gichner as a mentor and friend for a good chunk of time. I am not able, alas, to keep up with Clay Spencer at 92 ... me, a mere 88. But my time has come. I need the time remaining for a few other projects. So what to do with the books - in truth, price and all, many bought from Bill, likewise a shop full of tools?

The books may be found in the library of The College of Building Arts in Charleston, SC. All my tools, power and hand, I sold to Drew Alexander of Broadway, VA, just over the Blue Ridge in the Shenandoah Valley, near Harrisonburg. He comes from a family of artisans across the crafts. A young family precludes traveling far but a days' drive is quite doable. I have left a request to return in 40 years to see what he then creates!

Nol Putnam, Flint Hill, Virginia

Fellow Craftsmen

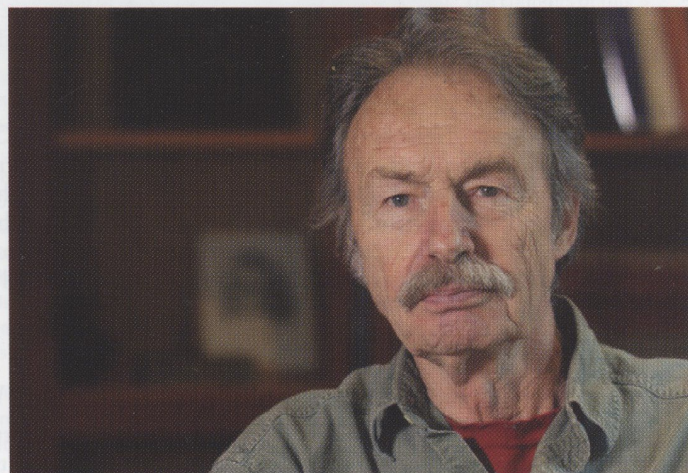
My blacksmithing journey began in 2002 where I worked as a "costumed interpreter" of history in the blacksmith shop of a state run museum. Soon after I joined a local guild and have since attended many local and regional events. I started getting more serious about the craft when I bought a farm with abundant shop space. Working around the fire, it's practice has become a core tenant of my identity.

I first met Nol around 2006, when he demonstrated for our local guild, Boone Pasture Parties, and ABANA 2018 where he

invited me out to his shop, only an hour from mine. One talk led to another, he was selling! It was perfect timing as I had just decided to go full time, and to rebuild my shop to accommodate all the new.

I feel incredibly honored that Nol holds me in enough esteem to trust me in this manner. It will be my privilege to carry the legacy of these tools forward to a future generation, within a community that has already given me so much.

Drew Alexander, Broadway, Virginia



Nol Putnam

(To) Nol,

Over the years we have talked a time or two. I recall less and less these days about the particulars, that being said I have been aware of your work and what you have meant to the Artist-Blacksmith community for many years.

With this step it sounds like a good opportunity for both you and Drew to move to the next level. Like Drew I have worked in a historic park for many years. It appears I am wearing a costume but what they don't know is that I dress like this most of the time. It is how a blacksmith looks by default.

Finding someone to carry on is the best we can hope for. Using the tools we have made and valuing the principles we have chosen to live by after we have left the building can be a tribute to a phase of a life well lived. At least that is how it seems from my point of view.



I offer my congratulations and I would like to talk with you about your experience shifting gears at this stage of your blacksmithing career and would welcome a phone call if you would be open to a conversation about your work and where Drew is going with his. More and more of us are facing this journey and it would be good to have a road map.

Please forward my number and interest to Drew.

All the best.

Mark Kochan The AR Editor

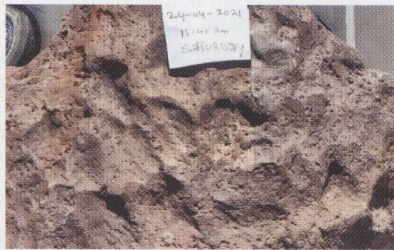
Dear Mark,

Your letter is very kind and supportive! Thank you - it means a lot to me. The usual response in the wide world is, "Ok, see ya. Don't let the door hit you!"

So, I would love to talk to you, about the experience, what's next, etc. Rather than grabbing a beer, feet up and gab, we could brainstorm some questions. I have found that a little thought about where this should go, depth, etc., saves me having to yank my leg out of my mouth later! But, really, however you want to set it up is fine.

**Nicholas Gessler, Ph.D. a retired Duke University Professor asks an ABANA's Affiliate a question about a meteorite.**

I need your expertise and help. Here we have a 15.15 tonne iron meteorite that shows markings similar to a Cape York meteor from 1818, worked by the Inuit of Greenland. They removed meteoritic iron and made knives which were traded for as far as 1000 miles.



*The EL ALI meteorite*

Using basalt hammer stones to build up ridges of metal and hammered into knives, the EL ALI meteorite shows the resulting concave facets. At the right edge of the photograph there are many parallel lineations. Have any knives been found made from this meteorite?

With colleagues from North America and Somalia who specialize in meteorites, I have put together a session of six speakers at the upcoming conference of the METEORITICAL SOCIETY to take place at UCLA in Los Angeles mid-August.

Please read the attachments and in particular have a close look at the large .jpg image. My claim, and that of colleagues, is that this meteorite is of world, natural and cultural heritage significance. Also, please have a look at the resources I have assembled: <https://people.duke.edu/~ng46/El-Ali/>.

Sincerely, Nick, [nick.gessler@duke.edu](mailto:nick.gessler@duke.edu)

There was a nice 1/2 hr. show on me on Maryland PBS last fall. I think you can still get it via YouTube / NolPutnam / MdPBS / etc.

I know you guys are wet this time of year, but I hope not California wet! Be careful,

Happy New Year,  
Nol

*With regret, completeing this interview was not in the cards. See page 11 for the **Thoughts and Reflections** by Nol Putnam*

*The Editor*

As of this writing the PBS programs on Nol Putnam are still available on Youtube. The topics include:  
*Nol Putnam's Wrought Iron in the Washington National Cathedral* by Barry Bem and *MPT Presents: Forging Art*, Nol Putnam, Artist Blacksmith.

*"It is where God hides... in the details."*

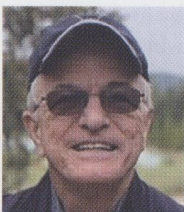
NP

**WORTHY OF MENTION**

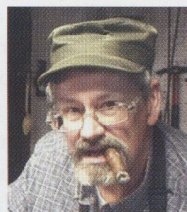
**National Curriculum Certificates**

Peter Clark	OR	L II/L II Instructor
Philip Waters	TX	L I Instructor
Glenn Gilmore	MT	L II Instructor
Henrietta Verwey	Canada	L I Instructor
Andy Ruse	MD	L I
Andrew Garrett	IL	L I
Rusty Osborne	SC	L I
Craig R. Hines	GA	L I
Matt Jenkins	Canada	L II Instructor
Richard Zago	TN	L II Instructor
Scott Davidson	IL	L I Instructor
Greg Peter	SD	L I
Avery Goltz	Canada	L I

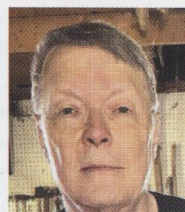
**Please welcome the new and returning ABANA Board members**



**Ronny Booth**



**Pete Engelbert**



**Andrew Hagemann**



**Becky Schimpff**



**David Walker**