The USS West Virginia: Phoenix of Pearl Harbor

On December 7, 1941, Austin “Don” Cunningham, United States Navy Seaman 1st Class from Harrison County, West Virginia, was looking forward to a leisurely Sunday morning aboard ship. Suddenly, he heard a tremendous thud and “Boy, everything broke loose!” The first of seven torpedoes and two bombs had struck his vessel, the USS West Virginia. Moored on Battleship Row in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, beside the USS Tennessee, the West Virginia was the first ship hit by the attacking Japanese warplanes. Cunningham and the rest of the crew rushed to man their battle stations amidst the heavy barrage of torpedo strikes, strafing, raging fires, oily smoke and water. Many men found their assigned positions were unreachable or demolished and turned their efforts to rescuing the wounded in the hellish conditions.

Within minutes the West Virginia was severely listing to port. Alert junior officers immediately started to counter flood compartments below, an action which had the unfortunate consequence of trapping numerous members of the crew. But the balancing strategy worked, preventing the ship from fatally capsizing, and instead of “turning turtle,” the USS West Virginia sank forty feet to the floor of the harbor on an even keel. Only the top deck and caged masts remained above the water line.

Commanding officer Captain Mervyn Bennion was mortally wounded on the command deck while directing his crew’s actions to defend the ship. Refusing to be taken off the burning vessel, Bennion was moved to a less exposed area where he continued issuing orders. His last order to his men was to abandon ship and leave him behind. Captain Bennion was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his “extraordinary courage and complete disregard of his own life above and beyond the call of duty.”

One of the crew members who helped carry Captain Bennion to cover was Mess Attendant 2nd Class Doris “Dorie” Miller, a 22-year-old African-American from Waco, Texas. After finding his battle station destroyed, Miller was assigned to the bridge to assist in moving the dying captain. Miller was next ordered to help mount and load anti-aircraft machine guns. Despite his lack of gunnery training, Miller manned one of the weapons and shot at the oncoming enemy planes “as if he had fired one all his life.” When his ammunition was spent, Miller shifted back into rescue mode, pulling wounded sailors from the fiery, oil-covered water up to the quarter deck. For his courageous actions without regard to his own life, Miller was awarded the Navy Cross, becoming the first...
African-American to earn that high honor.

By the time the second wave of the attack had ended, the keel of the “Mountaineer Battlewagon” sat at the bottom of the harbor, a fate few could have imagined for the 20 year old vessel. The last battleship to be built before World War II, the USS West Virginia was launched at Newport News, Virginia in 1921. She was then outfitted and commissioned in 1923, taking her place as a prominent member of the United States Battle Fleet. Affectionately called the Wee Vee, she took part in every naval exercise and won several prizes for gunnery and overall efficiency in the ensuing years. She served more than once as the fleet’s flagship.

Prior to December 7, 1941, life onboard ship was regimented and stern but there was lighthearted entertainment, athletic competitions, holiday celebrations and a ship newspaper aptly titled, The Mountaineer. One of the most notorious activities was the 400-year-old naval tradition of “initiating” crew members “crossing the line” (the equator) for the first time, a rite of passage through which a sailor was transformed from Pollywog to a “trusty” Shellback, an official son of King Neptune. The Pollywogs were ordered to put on a talent show to entertain the Shellbacks who donned costumes representing King Neptune and his court, including Davy Jones and Peg Leg, among others. In return for their efforts the Pollywogs were served with subpoenas from Davy Jones to answer charges brought against them such as, “fading too much Shellback cabbage in crap games,” “trying to consume beer faster than it could be made,” and for complaining about or, even worse, complimenting Navy chow. When found guilty, a hazing ritual ensued whereby bodies were “paddled into shape” and “decorative grooming” was applied. After kissing the belly of the royal baby (coated with grease and other tasty substances), navigating an obstacle course, and a dip in the salt water, the Pollywogs were declared Shellbacks and presented with certificates initiating them “into the solemn mysteries of the ancient order of the deep.” This time-honored ritual was deemed to strengthen camaraderie among the crew and thus practiced on U.S. Navy vessels throughout the war.

Casual life aboard ship abruptly ceased with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. For over two weeks after the battle, a constant rhythmic banging was heard
emanating from the bow of the West Virginia, buried deep in the waters of the harbor. Marine Corps crew member Dick Fiske recalled, “It didn’t take long to realize that men were making that noise. Pretty soon nobody wanted to do guard duty, especially at night when it was quiet. It didn’t stop until Christmas Eve.” Finally, in May of 1942, the West Virginia reached the top of the salvage priority list and was raised for repair. During the search of the vessel’s lower decks, the bodies of 66 sailors were found. Among them were the huddled bodies of three sailors -- Clifford Olds, Buddy Costin, and Ronald Endicott – discovered in the forward compartment of the bow. Lying beside them was a marked calendar. The last day marked off was December 23, 1941.

After extensive repairs, refitting, and modernization at the Puget Sound Navy Yard in Bremerton, Washington, the USS West Virginia rejoined the U.S. fleet in 1944. The Wee Vee participated in several major engagements against the Japanese stronghold in the Pacific Theater including the battles of Leyte Gulf, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. During the battle of Okinawa, the ship received another major wound from a Kamikaze attack which killed four crew members. She was patched up and returned to battle once again, dubbed with the sobriquet, “The Phoenix of Pearl Harbor.”

On August 31, 1945, the USS West Virginia sailed into Tokyo Bay. She was present at the formal surrender of Japan to the Allied forces two days later, the only ship to witness both Japan’s first attack and Japan’s surrender.

The USS West Virginia was deactivated in 1946 and decommissioned the following year. A decade later the vessel was sent to the Todd Shipyard in Washington to be scrapped. Through the herculean efforts of the WVU student body and Morgantown Junior Chamber of Commerce, funds were raised to save the mast of the stalwart Wee Vee and to provide it a permanent home on the campus of West Virginia University. Transported across the nation to the Mountain State free of charge by the B&O Railroad, the mast arrived in Morgantown in 1961. It was installed and dedicated two years later on Memorial Plaza in front of Oglebay Hall where it remains today as a monument to the USS West Virginia, “her gallant crew, and all West Virginians who have served our country in the Armed Forces.”
USS West Virginia Collections in the West Virginia and Regional History Center

The following list highlights selected USS West Virginia archives and manuscript collections. Additional documents, correspondence, photographs and other materials relating to the ship may be found in other archives and manuscripts collections, as well as in other units of the WVRHC.

A&M 4119, Battleship USS West Virginia Memorabilia, 1936-1940.

This collection compiled by Deb Green includes photographs, memoranda, “orders of the day,” radio messages, press summaries, menus (“bill of fare”), programs for holiday and recreational events, wing fabric from a USS West Virginia plane, and newspapers with articles regarding the ship. The material mainly regards the day-to-day operations of the ship and its crew, as well as special events such as holidays, sports competitions, and film showings.


This dress white U.S. Navy uniform belonged to Granville R. Williams, Gunner’s Mate 2nd Class, who served aboard the USS West Virginia during the attack at Pearl Harbor. Williams survived the attack and was awarded the Purple Heart. His Purple Heart medal and five campaign and achievement medals adorn the uniform. There is also a photograph of Williams and a copy of the article ‘The Horror of Pearl Harbor’ from Militaria International magazine (May 2001), which includes a reminiscence by Williams of his Pearl Harbor experience.


This collection includes a scrapbook, hat, neckerchief, ribbons, and pins of United States Navy Seamen First Class William Hand of the Battleship USS West Virginia. He enlisted August 1933 and was honorably discharged July 1937. The scrapbook includes certificates, a Christmas menu, clippings, envelope covers, newsletters, a photograph of a whale boat crew, and a photograph of the S-Division of the USS West Virginia.


This collection includes artifacts, a scrapbook, photographs, clippings, and ephemera related to Pearl Harbor, the USS West Virginia, and World War II. The 9” x 14” scrapbook labelled “Logalbum, USS West Virginia, Aloha Honolulu” with a color illustration of the USS West Virginia on the cover contains 27 vintage World War II photographs of mostly naval ships (not including the USS West Virginia). There is an 8” x 14” print of a tinted photograph of the USS West Virginia. There are also four World War II service and campaign medals and one ribbon, a Pearl Harbor Survivor Association medal, three naval certificates, two news clippings, and a 1991 collector’s edition Life magazine relating to Pearl Harbor, and a Minnesota ‘Pearl Harbor Survivor’ license plate.


This group of records regarding the mast, bell, and clapper of the USS West Virginia documents both the World War I armored cruiser put into service in 1903 and the World War II battleship of the same name. The collection includes correspondence, receipts, loan forms, incident and damage reports, memoranda, newspaper articles (copied and original), and a magazine article regarding West Virginia University’s possession of the bell and clapper from the cruiser and the mast from the battleship.

A&M 5156, West Virginia University Student Affairs Records Regarding the USS West Virginia, 1937-2002.

The Student Affairs office at West Virginia University documented the establishment of a campus memorial displaying the mast and bell from the World War II era battleship USS West Virginia and from the armored cruiser USS West Virginia respectively. The records regarding the battleship mast include historical information, dedication information (1963), photographs of battleship and mast, clippings, and correspondence of Joseph E. Gluck and others (1960-2001). Records regarding the armored cruiser bell include dedication information (1967) and correspondence (1966-2002).


This collection includes letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings relating to the mast of the World War II battleship USS West Virginia being brought to the University campus. The collection also contains materials concerning the dedication of the bell of the World War I armored cruiser USS West Virginia, including programs, invocations, newspaper clippings, an essay about the dedication, and a notebook containing correspondence, photographs, and a history of the ship.
Selected Recent Accessions:

**Anderson, Jack Sandy, Compiler. Local History Articles and Genealogy Papers. ca. 1600-2011 and undated, 5 in., Gift in 2016. A&M 4195.**

Records pertaining to the local history and genealogy of north-central West Virginia. The collection contains articles written by Jack Sandy Anderson and his related research papers. Types of material include photographs, articles, and genealogical materials (such as pedigree charts; records of marriage, births, and deaths; and detailed family lists; among others). Materials of note include family listings tracing lineages back to European nobility and a Civil War discharge of Robert Rose Anderson.


The Anderson genealogical papers include a five generation pedigree chart and a detailed listing of family members who were born between 1771 and 1923. The earliest Anderson family member listed is Joseph Tate Anderson, who was born in 1771. Recent Anderson family members listed include Waitman Claude Anderson (1889-1962) and Lawrence Clifton Anderson (1923- ).


Photographs by Daniel Albert Anthony (1878-1945), a Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania resident. Subjects include family members, friends, homes, buildings, automobiles and roads, horses and carriages, agriculture, and the Oakford amusement park near Jeannette, Pennsylvania. There are also a few images of industrial subject matter. Daniel Anthony worked in a coke works and served in World War I; he was married to Myrtle Phellaboum Anthony (1899-1931).

**Bennett, Louis and Sallie. Papers of a Lewis County Family. ca. 1870-1930, 2 ft. 2 1/2 in., Gift in 2016. A&M 4198.**

Papers of Louis Bennett, a wealthy lawyer, and of his wife, Sallie Bennett. Includes letters, a few photographs, and other material. There are records regarding the Glenville Normal School (including reports, correspondence, and advertising from publishers of school books) where Mr. Bennett was a principal (1870s); and letters authored by Sallie Bennett to her husband Louis (1880s).

**Coal Mining Disaster Reports Collection. 1938-1977, 1 ft. 8 in., Acquired in 2016. A&M 4203.**

Mine disaster reports, official hearing reports, and hearing and inquest transcripts (1938-1967). Most of the mine disaster reports were created by inspectors from the West Virginia Department of Mines, and some of them involved federal inspectors. Other reports were created by the United States Bureau of Mines, and by the West Virginia Department of Mines, Coal Mine Safety Board of Review. Also includes volumes 3 through 8 of the Decisions of the Interior Board of Mine Operations Appeals (1974-1977).

**Critchfield, Sutton. Papers Regarding the Mountain State Forest Festival, the Upper Monongahela Valley Association, and Other Material. 1933-1941, 4 in., Gift in 2016. A&M 4192.**

Papers regarding the Mountain State Forest Festival (Elkins) and the Upper Monongahela Valley Association. Includes clippings, news releases, letters, publications, and newspapers pertaining to the Forest Festival, and the involvement of the Upper Monongahela Valley Association in the Festival, during the years 1933 to 1941. Topics discussed include the coal and glass industry, rural electrification, and the representation of West Virginia industry at the Festival.

Correspondence between Joseph Hubert Diss Debar (1820-1905), who was West Virginia’s first commissioner of immigration, and Judge John S. Hoffman. The correspondence includes two agreements (1873) and nine letters (1873-1874) concerning land sales. Hoffman is likely John Stringer Hoffman (1821-1877), a Clarksburg lawyer who specialized in land title litigation.


Research papers of Dolores Fleming, a West Virginia historian. The collection includes research regarding the local glass industry (particularly Seneca Glass in Morgantown), the South Park neighborhood in Morgantown (including national register of historic places documents), the historic Cook House in Parkersburg, and Friendship Hill.


Papers of the Goff family of Harrison County, West Virginia. Includes the papers of Nathan Goff III, grandson of Nathan Goff, Jr. (1843-1920), as well as his daughter Laura Ellen Goff Fireman (later Davis). Also includes correspondence of Howard Caplan, the administrator of the estate of Nathan Goff III, and H. Dotson Cather, the brother-in-law of Mrs. Goff Fireman Davis who may have been involved in Goff’s estate. The collection includes correspondence, ephemera, programs, invitations, plats, photographs, clippings, and other material.


Contains a revised typescript of “Hamilton Family of Prince Georges County, Maryland” (60 pages) compiled by John D. Baldwin. This document traces the descendants of Gavin Hamilton (1630s-1698) and their activities during the years 1685 to 1832 via chronological entries. The typescript also contains information regarding connections between the Hamilton, Evans, and Belt families, among others.


Two documents regarding the estate of William Haymond (1740-1821), a prominent 18th century pioneer of western Virginia. There is an “inventory” in 10 pages of the property of Haymond with appraised values; the appraisal was conducted on 9 March 1822, the year after his death. There is a related but undated document showing both Haymond property “sold and assigned to the widow “Mary Haymond,” and property simply “assigned” to her.


Listings of delinquent lands issued by James E. Heath, Auditor of Virginia. Contains printed documents pertaining to Kanawha County (1832), Greenbrier County (1833), Nicholas County (1833), Ohio County (1833), Pocahontas County (1833), and Preston County (1833).


Papers of Dr. Harry Heflin, who served as Interim President (1966, 1973) and President of West Virginia University (1981). The collection includes genealogy records for the Heflin family and other families, photographs, family letters, and other material. Heflin was married to Dora Morgan.


Letters of West Virginia University student Jay Everett Long, class of 1926. Includes 29 letters from Long of Morgantown to A. David Stewart of Huntington, West Virginia. Subjects include social life at WVU, local baseball, events in Morgantown and Huntington, and local politics. The letter of 23 May 1926 references a KKK rally at WVU. Also includes three photographs (in folder 1).
Monongalia County. Land Grant to John O. Finn from Governor Patrick Henry. 1803, 1 item, Transfer in 2016. A&M 4183.

Land grant to John O. Finn from Virginia Governor Patrick Henry for 400 acres in Monongalia County on the Ohio River; 1803 copy of a 1785 document.


Papers of Felix Nemegyei. Nemegyei, also known as Felix DeNemegyei or Nemegyei Bodog, was a Hungarian soldier and engineer who immigrated to the United States in 1851. He settled in West Virginia and became the owner of an iron works and other businesses. Papers include records of Nemegyei’s academic performance as a student, records of his military service in Europe, material regarding military engineering, and family history. Family history material includes items regarding Nemegyei’s father. The majority of documents in this collection are in German, Hungarian, or Latin; many documents have a brief explanation of their content in English attached.


Papers of author, artist, and activist Alvena Seckar (1916-2012), born in McMechen, West Virginia to Slovak immigrant parents. She studied at the University of Pennsylvania and transferred to New York University to complete her bachelor’s (1939) and master’s degrees (1949). She wrote three books for young adults: Zuska of the Burning Hills (1952), Trapped in the Old Mine (1953), and Misko (1956). Her papers include manuscripts of writings such as autobiographical and fiction works, photographs (including Alvena and her family), slides and photographs of paintings by Seckar, family documents, correspondence, clippings, scrapbooks, and drawings.


Papers of author Agnes Smith of Harrison and Marion Counties, West Virginia. The collection includes manuscripts of essays and stories, personal and professional correspondence, photographs, diaries (1969-1973), her diploma from Fairmont State Teachers College (1932), speeches (1959-1963), and publications. Publications include published copies of essays and articles as well as Smith’s books: the award-winning Edge of the Forest (1959) and The Bluegreen Tree (1977), both children’s books, and Speaking as a Writer (1978), a collection of essays.


Records of the Extension Service of West Virginia University. There are many records related to the work of the Extension Service to support the war effort during World War II, including material regarding food preservation and conservation, and the West Virginia Victory Garden program. Other material includes monthly reports, and records of farm women’s clubs and the tourist home program, among other records.


Family papers of Lucie S. Wysong of Charles Town, Jefferson County, West Virginia and Sykesville, Carroll County, Maryland. Includes letters, receipts, tax documents, and legal documents. Most of the letters were sent to Wysong. Letters are attached to the envelopes in which they were found, though in some cases the dates do not match. Wysong seems to have written notes on the envelopes regarding their content. Additional documents concern her earlier relatives of Jefferson County including Thomas, John, and Sarah Campbell. The surnames Janney and Hammond also appear within the collection. There are also papers that list the full names of slaves owned by Wysong’s family, and names of slaves that were “taken by the government”, as well as a deposition (1874) listing the names of slaves belonging to Wysong and her mother, Sarah Campbell, who were freed in 1863.

WVRHC Launches New USS West Virginia Exhibit and Digital Photographs Collection

A new exhibit, “The USS West Virginia: Phoenix of Pearl Harbor,” is on display in the Rockefeller Gallery of the Wise Library through March 24, 2017. The exhibit features photographs, letters, ship’s orders, an oral history interview, and a gunman’s uniform, as well as other documents and artifacts. These materials reveal the story of the USS West Virginia from before the infamous attack at Pearl Harbor up to the placement of its mast on the campus of West Virginia University. The exhibit is open to the public during the WVU Downtown Campus Libraries’ open hours.

Accompanying the exhibit is the USS West Virginia Digital Photograph Collection, which includes over 150 photographs that document the life of the battleship. Images included in the digital collection showcase the USS West Virginia’s christening, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the scrapping of the battleship. Also included are candid portraits of crew members and visiting US Navy officials, scenic views taken from the deck of the ship, and images documenting the installation of the mast on the campus of West Virginia University. The digital collection is available on the WVRHC website.