

Fall 2009

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West Virginia and Regional History Collection

NEWSLETTER

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Melville Davisson Post Papers Elucidate a Man of Many Mysteries

Extolled by Ellery Queen, imitated by William Faulkner, adored by Teddy Roosevelt and millions of other early twentieth century readers, Melville Davisson Post is considered by many to be the greatest American mystery writer of all time. His name was a household word a century ago in the homes of readers of the *Saturday Evening Post* to which he contributed nearly one hundred short stories and articles between 1908 and 1919. He published dozens more in other leading periodicals of the day — *Redbook*, *Atlantic*, *Pearson's*, *Collier's*, *McCall's*, and *The Ladies' Home Journal* to name but a few. In addition to being one of the most prolific writers of his day, he was also one of the highest paid. Yet, like his stories, Post himself, was somewhat of a mystery to his fans, an enigmatic figure who avoided the limelight and who spent his mature years in relative seclusion on his Harrison County estate.

An extensive collection of Post's personal and professional papers recently acquired by the Regional History Collection affords considerable insight into the world of



Melville Davisson Post (1869-1930)

this leading American author. Consisting of several hundred letters and documents, the papers reveal much about Post's personal and professional life including his keen financial

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acumen in dealing with his agents and
publishers.

Born in Clarksburg on April 19, 1869,
Post was the product of a marriage that united
two of north-central West Virginia's oldest
families. His father, Ira C. Post, was a
successful cattle farmer, a shrewd
businessman and a biblical scholar. His mother,
Florence May Davisson, was descended from
one of Clarksburg's founding fathers. A
"commanding presence" and devout Methodist,
she played a leading role in organizing the local



Melville Davisson Post, center, possibly with school mates at the Buckhannon
Normal and Classical Academy, ca. 1885.

chapter of the Daughters of the American
Revolution.

Raised with a reverence for both history
and place, Post spent his childhood listening to
lore about his forebears who included soldiers,
settlers and one of Harrison County's first
sheriffs. During his youth he spent countless
hours roaming the fields and woodlands near his
home, often on the back of a horse. He likely
used himself as the model for a character in one
of his most famous stories when he wrote, "I
could ride a horse all day when I was nine years
old – most any kind of horse. I was tough as
whit'-leather.... You must not picture a little boy
rolling a hoop in the park."

Post's formal education began at the
Raccoon Run elementary school (he later
facetiously called it "Raccoon College") near his
home. He continued his studies at the Normal
and Classical Academy in Buckhannon before
entering West Virginia University's Prep
Department in 1886. Admitted to the university
program the following year, Post proved to be a
good, though not exceptional student, and one
who participated fully in
the life of the university.
He excelled as a member
of the debating team, was
a leader of the Columbia
Literary Society, and
served as a captain of the
Cadet Corps. He earned a
permanent place in the
annals of WVU history by
organizing a presentation
of Shakespeare's *Richard
III* to raise funds to outfit
the university's first
football team.

Graduating in the
spring of 1891, Post
returned to WVU in the
fall of that year to pursue



Post (4th from left) directed and starred in a presentation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* organized to raise funds to outfit WVU's first football team in 1891.

a degree in law. Completing the degree in May 1892, he found immediate employment as a prosecuting attorney in Wheeling. While his career in criminal law would be relatively short-lived, his exposure to crimes, criminals and criminology during this period would provide a foundation for his true calling.

Post's literary debut came four years later with the publication of a collection of short stories titled *The Strange Schemes of Randolph Mason*. The novel twist of these stories heralded the arrival of a fresh new pen on the mystery scene. Rather than conventional tales in which a scrupulous agent of the law uses his wits to unravel crimes, the protagonist of this collection is an unscrupulous agent of the law, a cunning lawyer, who assists criminals in beating the rap via loopholes and other legal maneuvering.

Criticized as a "how to" manual for law breakers by some critics, the book stirred up quite a controversy when it was published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in 1896. That the book sold well is attested to by the fact that a sequel volume, *The Man of Last Resort, or the Clients of Randolph Mason*, appeared the following year. Both books would undergo successive printings for the next three decades. The Randolph Mason stories alone would have earned their author a memorable place in the history of American crime fiction, yet, they were just a prelude to what lay ahead.

In his next literary effort, Post took a respite from the underworld and returned to his West Virginia roots. Lovingly crafted from nostalgic memories of people, places and adventures Post experienced in his youth, *Dwellers in the Hills* (G.P. Putnam's Sons,

1901), tells the tale of three boys' struggle to drive a herd of cattle across central West Virginia despite obstacles presented by both man and nature. Rich in local color, highly descriptive, and bordering on poetry in many places, the book has been hailed as a minor classic in American literature though it is largely unknown today and never approached the popularity of the author's mysteries.

The half dozen years that followed the publication of *Dwellers in the Hills* were eventful ones for Post in fields other than literature. His legal career reached new heights when he formed a partnership with John T. McGraw of Grafton, one of the state's leading attorneys, in 1901. His personal life soared when he fell in love soon afterwards with a ravishingly

beautiful and wealthy young widow, Ann Bloomfield Gamble Schoolfield.

Wed in 1903, Mr. and Mrs. Post began married life with an extended honeymoon in Europe. Traveling incessantly for the next year and a half, they returned to West Virginia for the birth of their son, Ira C. Post, in February 1905. Their only child would live just 18 months before being claimed by Typhoid fever the following year. At his passing, the couple took to the road once again, landing initially in England for which Post had a particular fondness and where his work was held in high esteem. After months of fraternizing with royalty including King Edward VII himself, they moved on to rejuvenate in the spas of France and Switzerland and then sojourned in Italy where they received an



*The Chalet on the Hill of the Painted Men ca. 1930. Post spent the better part of a decade traveling the world before returning to the beloved land of his birth in 1914. In *Dwellers in the Hills* he wrote: "It is a wonderful thing how the frost glistening on a rail, or a redbird chirping in a thicket of purple raspberry briars, can lift a heart into the sun."*

audience with Pope Pius X.

Selling the Grafton home that held sad memories, the Posts lived a vagabond existence for the next several years, residing with friends and family when home from abroad. It was not until 1914 that the two decided it was time to settle down. Returning to Post's boyhood home of Harrison County, the couple designed and constructed a grand chalet-inspired dwelling modeled on those they had admired in Switzerland. They called their home "The Chalet on the Hill of the Painted Men" in homage to previous residents of the site whose remnants were unearthed during excavation.

After a hiatus of a half dozen years following the release of *Dwellers of the Hills*, Post renewed his literary career with vigor in 1907. Beginning with the publication in *Pearson's Magazine* of a new series of Randolph Mason stories drafted years earlier, Post began feeding American periodicals a steady stream of stories and articles that would dry up only upon his death. His affiliation with the *Saturday Evening Post*, which boasted a readership of well over a million, began in December 1908 with the publication of a short story titled "The Trivial Incident." America's leading magazine would publish three dozen more of Post's stories over the next four years alone making him one of the most widely read writers in the nation.

In the short story, "The Broken Stirrup," published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in June 1911, Post introduced a character who was destined to become an icon of the mystery genre – Uncle Abner. Like Post's forebears, Uncle Abner was a cattleman who dwelled in antebellum western Virginia, a place where the long arm of the law was too often "short and feeble." A big, broad shouldered "Saxon," with a grizzled beard and an iron frame hardened by wind and sun, Abner was "one of those

austere, deeply religious men who were the product of the Reformation," according to his creator.

He always carried a Bible in his pocket and he read it where he pleased. Once the crowd at Roy's Tavern tried to make sport of him when he got his book out by the fire; but they never tried it again. When the fight was over...he was the only man in the tavern who could ride a horse. Abner belonged to the church militant and his God was a war lord.

Blessed with a keen mind for deductive reasoning and an uncanny ability to see into the hearts of others, Uncle Abner considered it his duty, not as an agent of the law but as a servant of God, to see that justice triumphed over evil. And in endeavoring to do so, he found that Providence was always willing to lend a hand to those who were insightful enough to heed its signs and warnings.

In the case of Abner's first mystery, on three different occasions a broken stirrup leather forewarned of murder intentions. It was not until the third instance that Uncle Abner recognized this omen just in time to prevent the murder of his own nephew. The villain in the story was a well known figure in the community. Confronted by Abner with evidence of his crimes, the man confessed, lamenting that it was "Hell's luck" that had driven him to evil deeds. Concurring with this assessment, rather than having the man arrested, Abner directed the murderer to pick up his things and leave the country, stating that God would have his vengeance. When the villain responded that he was too cold and too poor to travel, Abner handed him his own (Abner's) coat and a sum of money, and told him once again to "Go!," adding "But if I find you in the hills tomorrow, or if I ever find you, I warn you in the name of the living God that I will stamp you out of life!" Translation: don't mess with Uncle Abner!



Melville Davisson Post, ca. 1929. The author had plans for several future works when he died twelve days after falling from a horse in 1930.

Post's highly original new crime solver was an instant hit with the nation's mystery readers. The author would feed their appetites with many more Uncle Abner stories in the months and years that followed. A gathering of eighteen were published in a collected edition titled, *Uncle Abner, Man of Mysteries* (New York: D. Doubleday) in 1918. Critics of the genre, then and now, agree that this volume is among the finest collections of short mysteries ever written by an American author. Ellery Queen considered Uncle Abner second only to Edgar Allen Poe's "Dupin," who untangled the *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. Willard Howard Wright, creator of the renowned detective "Philo Vance," placed Uncle Abner on an equal footing with Sherlock Holmes. Howard Haycraft, a towering figure in publishing and scholarship in this genre declared, "No reader can call himself a connoisseur who does not know Uncle Abner backward and forward."

While the Uncle Abner mysteries are

Post's crowning achievement, they represent only a tiny fraction of the author's complete oeuvre which include some sixteen books and nearly two hundred short stories and nonfiction articles. Among this immense body of work are several collections of mysteries built around other colorful heroes such as "Sir Henry Marquis," *The Sleuth of St. James Square* (New York: D. Appleton, 1920); *Monsieur Jonquelle, Prefect of Police of Paris* (New York: D. Appleton, 1923); and *Walker of the Secret Service* (New York: D. Appleton, 1924). Published in collected editions in 1920, 1923 and 1924 respectively, these books further solidified Post's position as the Arthur Conan Doyle of America.

Post was awaiting the publication of yet another collection of mysteries, this one featuring Virginia frontier attorney "Colonel Braxton," when he fell from his horse while riding on his estate in June 1930. Rushed to a hospital in Clarksburg, he survived for only twelve more days before succumbing on June 23, 1930 at the age of sixty-one.

The newly acquired Melville Davisson Post papers join earlier accessions of Post literary manuscripts and correspondence that were received by the West Virginia Collection during the mid-twentieth century. The new material is composed mostly of personal letters and business correspondence received by Post during the 1920s. The latter documents demonstrate the high demand for Post's work by American magazine publishers at this time. Included are letters from both *Harper's Magazine* and *The Ladies' Home Journal* expressing interest in literally anything Post might care to send their way. Many letters regard the price Post would be paid for his stories and demonstrate his bargaining power.

In a communication of May 4, 1922, one publisher curtly wrote:

My dear Mr. Post

This agreement is all right except as to the price. The highest price we have ever paid you is \$1,000 a story and I don't feel like increasing that.

Sincerely, R.L.

While Post's response, perhaps by telegram, is not preserved, just six days later, Mr. Long wrote again, this time with a less commanding tone:

Dear Mr. Post:

I did not understand the situation. Of course we do not want to pay you under your market rate, therefore let's consider it a deal at \$1200.00.

Sincerely, Ray Long.

It is worth noting that the sum of \$1200 likely exceeded the average annual salary in America at that time (it was approximately \$1236 in 1925). Presuming Post accepted this amount, Mr. Long may still, in fact, have gotten a bargain. Correspondence shows that just three years later Post sold two short stories to *The Ladies' Home Journal* for \$3,000 each, and a novelette to be published in two parts in the same periodical for \$7500 soon afterwards.

Included among the Post papers are notes and letters from several leading literary figures of the day including author and American literature scholar Blanche Colton Williams, author/editor Grant Overton, novelist and short story writer Katharine Fullerton Gerould. Several pieces of correspondence regard Post's advocacy of and efforts to promote fellow Harrison Countian John W. Davis's bid for the presidency of the United States in 1924.

As a group, the West Virginia Collection's Melville Davisson Post papers represent the most significant primary resource that survives regarding the author. They help to unravel the story of a man who intentionally

limited the release of information about his personal life to a handful of brief, often ambiguous and sometimes intentionally erroneous statements. He was, indeed, a man of mysteries.

A Collection of Post First Editions

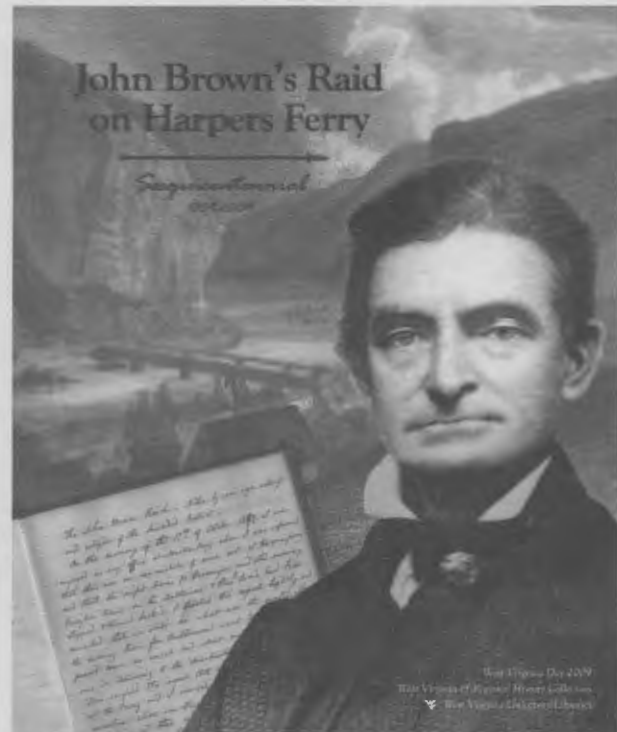
The Melville Davisson Post Papers come on the heels of another notable acquisition, a collection of eighteen books by Post that were owned by the author's brother, Sydney H. Post. Including all sixteen Post book titles, all are first or early editions with the exception of the latest volume, a 1931 edition of Uncle Abner, Master of Mysteries. Eight of the volumes are in their original dust jackets which enhances their value. The books are a gift from Tom and Liza Spelsberg in memory of Dr. Walter Spelsberg who acquired the books directly from the author's brother shortly after Post's death in 1930. A native of Clarksburg, Dr. Spelsberg was a friend and neighbor of the Posts and a 1921 graduate of West Virginia University.



John Brown, the West Virginia Collection, and You!

One hundred and fifty years ago this fall, the notorious abolitionist John Brown led a small band of followers into Harpers Ferry with the intent of sparking a revolt that would “overthrow the South and its institutions,” foremost among them, the institution of slavery. Though their plot failed in the short run, Brown and his cohorts set forces in motion that would result in the complete realization of their goals just a few years later. In elucidating this poignant moment in American history during the WVU Libraries 2009 West Virginia Day Celebration, the West Virginia Collection was able to draw upon some of the most significant primary resources regarding Brown’s Raid in existence — letters and reminiscences of several eyewitness; the uniform of Col. John T. Gibson who commanded the first troops to respond to the raid; a Visitors Register for John Brown’s Fort begun during the Niagara Movement’s first meeting on American soil; the diaries and sketches of Brown’s capture, trial and execution by David Hunter Strother, the nation’s most gifted artist-reporter. These items, which will remain on view in the Davis Family Galleries through the winter, surpass what one might find in the foremost museums in our country.

The existence of these priceless treasures, and the broader collection in which they are preserved, is the result of more than eighty years’ effort to which literally thousands of West Virginians, by birth, residence or ancestry, have contributed. Since its founding in 1932, the West Virginia and Regional History Collection has relied heavily on private donations both in assembling its collections and in augmenting its budget. Today, private gifts contribute to the Collection’s mission in many areas including acquisitions, travel and shipping expenses, student assistant wages and much more.



All new and returning members in the WVRHA will be entitled to a copy of the 2009 West Virginia Day poster.

If you are reading this newsletter, it is surely because you have a special interest in the heritage of our great state. Please take a moment to ponder the level of your commitment to that interest and join or renew your membership in the West Virginia and Regional Association today!

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Selected Recent Accessions

Bond, Donovan H., Compiler. Research Papers regarding Vandalia Colony and West Virginia Forts, 1754-2002, 1 ft. 8 in., Gift in 2009. A&M 3702.

Research papers of Donovan Bond, a professor of Journalism at West Virginia University, regarding the 1772 proposal for a Colony of Vandalia in western Virginia territory, and histories of frontier forts (ca.1749-1794) in western Virginia.

Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Miscellaneous Papers, 1857-1921, 15 items, Acquired in 2009. A&M 3683.

Miscellaneous records of Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Includes: 1) financial records (8 items, 1870-1921) such as receipts from various businesses including The Thomas Grocery Company (Lewisburg, West Virginia) (1916), Mason Bell (Lewisburg, West Virginia) (1921), and A.G. Handy and Company (a general store in Meadow Bluff, West Virginia) (1870), among others; 2) personal and business letters (4 items, 1895-1910) between Greenbrier County residents and others; and 3) legal papers (3 items), including a Greenbrier County Court document regarding the payment of a state license tax by John H. McPherson (1886), and documents regarding the estates of Joseph McMillion (1857) and Cavendish Knight (1870). Personal names throughout the collection include John C. Dice, John H. McPherson, James K. McMillion, Joseph McMillion, Maggie L. McMillion, R.W. Montague, and E.R. Skaggs.

Kanawha County. Board of School Commissioners. Records, 1812-1848, 1/2 in., Acquired in 2009. A&M 3679.

Records of the Board of School Commissioners of Kanawha County, Virginia including minutes, financial records, and other material. The records regard topics such as the purchase of books for poor students, children's tuition, allowance for the

Board members, and other funding issues. Board members include Reverend Mark W. Calhoun, David Ruffner, John P. Turner, and Alexander W. Quamen.

Laing, James, Collector. Photographic Postcards Issued by C.H. Mead Coal Company, ca. 1930-1935, 2 1/2 in., Gift in 2009. A&M 3708.

Photographic postcards documenting the C.H. Mead Coal Company, a mining company located in the Winding Gulf Coalfield in western Raleigh County and eastern Wyoming County, southern West Virginia. Includes 72 postcards issued by the Company in the 1930s in a numbered series to publicize their facilities and activities. Subjects of images include industrial infrastructure, equipment, offices, coal transport, housing, schools, stores, hospital, and portraits of managers. Some facilities are specifically identified as African-American. Of the numbered series of 77 postcards in this collection, numbers 1, 5, 13, 29, and 40 are missing. There are also seven photographs of similar subject matter,



Miners with Jeffrey coal cutting machine ca. 1930.

including one group portrait of an African-American family. These materials were collected by James Laing in connection with his 1933 dissertation "The Negro Miner in West Virginia".

McCabe, Brooks, Compiler. Papers of Aretas Brooks Fleming and Records of Charles Ward

Engineering, 1878-1952, 2 ft., Gift in 2009. A&M 3697.

Papers of Aretas Brooks Fleming, Governor of West Virginia (1890-1893), and records of the Charles Ward Engineering Works of Charleston, West Virginia, compiled by Brooks McCabe. The A.B. Fleming papers include: Fleming's notes pertaining to cases from his career as a lawyer and circuit court judge (1878-1888); photographs of Governor Fleming and others (4 items, ca. 1890-1920); papers regarding the A.B. Fleming estate and its heirs (1923-1952); genealogical and historical information related to the Fleming family (1890-1934); and a scrapbook documenting Fleming's term as Governor of West Virginia



Tugboat W. C. Kelley, Charleston, WV, May 29, 1923.

(1889-1939). The Charles Ward Engineering Works records include: a technical paper by Charles Ward titled "Shallow-Draught River Steamers"; a photograph of the historic contest between a stern wheel boat (The D.T. Lane) and a propeller powered boat (The James Rumsey), (ca. 1903); financial statements (1931-1942); minutes of stockholder's meetings (1931-1942); and a photograph album of ships built by Ward Engineering (ca. 1923-1932). There are also five personal letters addressed to Margaret Fleming Ward (1914). The collection also includes motion picture footage documenting several Ward Engineering and Ward family activities (ca. 1927-1932).

Moore Family. World War I Letters and Other Material, 1897, 1918-1952, 7 1/2 in., Acquired in 2009. A&M 3675.

Chiefly the World War I letters of brothers Arch C. Moore and John Cecil Moore and relative Virgil E. Moore, all from Diamond, Kanawha County, West Virginia, who served in the American Expeditionary Force in 1918 and 1919. The Moores wrote to both their mother, Armilda Moore, and their sister, Nora Moore, during their military service. Primary topics for all of the correspondents include the weather; their health; sending and receiving letters from home; girls; and family news. Collection also includes three additional World War I letters written to Nora Moore; two 1939 letters written to Nora Moore from an English pen pal; approximately twenty undated and unidentified military and family photographs, probably from World War I; picture post cards from World War I and World War II; a World War II ration book and savings stamp booklet; and other miscellaneous Moore family items.

Price, Paul H., Surveyor. Photographic Survey of West Virginia Roads and Other Material, 1925-1935, 7 1/2 in., Gift in 2009. A&M 3690.

Photographs compiled by Paul H. Price. The collection includes a photographic survey of West Virginia roads conducted by Price for the State Road Commission of West Virginia in the period ca. 1925-1935. Many of West Virginia's counties are included in this series of photographs. There are also photographs of the West Virginia landscape (most notably the eastern panhandle), unidentified landscapes, archaeological artifacts, the Paul H. Price family, and other material. Includes negatives and prints.

Raleigh County Photographs for Pictorial History, 1880-1968, 7 1/2 in., Acquired in 2009. A&M 3698.

Collection consists of approximately 300 photographs that appeared in the three volume

series, "Beckley U.S.A.," by Harlow Warren, published in 1955, 1963, and 1968. These images document the town of Beckley and Raleigh County, West Virginia. Subjects include portraits of prominent and historically notable citizens; group portraits of families, community and civic organizations, school groups, and city and county officials, among others; interior and exterior views of local businesses and buildings; and aerial views of buildings, roads, and natural features in the region. The collection includes mostly prints, many of which are card mounted. There are also a few negatives, newspaper clippings, and "proof" pages for the book.

Relihan, Michael. Personal and Family Papers of a Greenbrier County Resident, 1830-2009, 8 in., Gift in 2009. A&M 3699.

The papers of Michael Relihan of Greenbrier County, West Virginia, an Irish emigrant, farmer and Confederate veteran of the Stonewall Brigade. Includes: biographical information such as death certificates, cemetery and census records, and clippings (1870-2003); several land records, including deeds and surveys, (1856-1946); financial records (1895-1927); family correspondence (1879-1911); and miscellaneous items, including an itemized bill of Relihan property lost to the Union Army during the Civil War (1863-1864), a "Workman's Account Book" (1853), and "An Abstract of Road Laws" pertaining to Greenbrier County (ca. 1882). There is also a photograph of Michael and Mary Relihan (ca. 1920).

Sutton, David H., Compiler. Research Papers Regarding Helvetia, West Virginia, 1835-2004, 8 ft., Gift in 2009. A&M 3687; 3706.

Photographs and research papers compiled by David H. Sutton documenting the early history of Helvetia, West Virginia, including information regarding the work, recreation, and genealogy of Helvetia's early settlers. The collection includes family papers, letters, oral histories, genealogies, photographs, and other material, regarding the



Olga Aegerter brings home the bacon (or rather the turkey), Helvetia, WV, ca. Thanksgiving, 1912.

Schneider, Aegerter, Hofer, and other families. Of special interest are the oral histories conducted and compiled by David Sutton of Helvetia citizens who were residents during the community's formative years (ca. 1880-1900); the interviews regard farming, education, recreation, and food, among other topics. In addition, there is a photocopy facsimile and transcription of an advertisement from 1873 designed to attract settlement to Helvetia by describing the location of the community, job opportunities, wages, terrain, and seasonal weather, among other topics.

Tucker, Eldon, Collector. Chadwick, Miller, Hall, and Lazier Indentures of Monongalia County, Virginia, 1800-1851, 1 in., Gift in 2009. A&M 3676.

Indentures (28 items), including land deeds and trusts, from Monongalia County, Virginia dating from 1810 to 1851. Family names include: Chadwick, Miller, Hall, Lazier, Baker, Hull, and Berkshire, among others. In addition to currency, transactions were conducted with bedding, clocks, cows, iron bars, and tools, among other items.



The mysterious Melville Davisson Post, see story, page 1.

Walton, Elmer Arthur, Soldier. World War I Letter, Scrapbook, and Papers, ca. 1916-1919, 1931, 1960, 3 in., Gift in 2009. A&M 3694.

Papers of Elmer Arthur Walton (1896-1960), a Martin's Ferry, Ohio native, documenting his experiences in France and the United States during World War I as a member of Company H, 4th Regiment, 3rd Division. Includes a 32 page narrative letter, book of original cartoons, scrapbook, photographs, and obituaries. Addressed to his father, the narrative letter was written by Walton while hospitalized in Limoges, France in November 1918. The letter describes in detail his experiences as a soldier from the time he embarked on a troop ship at Newport News, Virginia to his hospitalization in France. The letter includes his reflections on America's role in the war. The book of cartoons by Walton records his war experiences in a humorous manner (ca. 1918). The scrapbook contains photographs

of Walton's fellow soldiers, WWI memorabilia, a postcard of crowds celebrating in the street on Armistice day somewhere in France, and pictures of his wife Jessie Ray Kidd Walton and their two children, among other subjects (ca. 1916-1919). Also included in the collection are four portrait photographs of Walton (ca. 1917-1919, 1931), and two newspaper obituaries published following his death in 1960.



"Is this the dishwasher?" "Hell No! That's coffee." Cartoon by Elmer A. Walton.