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Early Morgantown Ledger/Scrapbook Holds Clues, Mysteries, and Musings

Morgantown area history buffs will be interested to know that the Regional History Collection has recently acquired a store ledger that reads like a virtual “who’s who” of residents in Monongalia County during the late eighteenth century. Discovered by the Macon County Conservation District in Decater, Illinois, the ledger was “sent home” to the Monongalia County Historical Society in August. The Society promptly entrusted it to the Regional History Collection’s safekeeping. The ledger records the names of more than one hundred citizens with whom the store transacted business primarily during the year 1798. The list of accounts includes the surnames of many historically prominent local families — Morgan, Pierpoint, Dering, Evans, Hanley, Reeder, Vandervoort, Stealey and Kiger to name but a few.

The ledger was created prior to the establishment of a standard nationwide monetary value for the dollar. For this reason, like many account books of the period, values are recorded not in dollars, but in English currency — pounds, shillings and pence. The transactions of each customer’s account are listed in two facing columns: a “debit” column showing the customer’s debt to the store for goods received, and a “credit” column showing the customer’s payment to, or credit owed by the store. Unfortunately, as the volume is only a “ledger,” the information presented regarding the individual transactions is quite limited. In accordance with accounting practices of the day, the ledger would have been used in conjunction with a corresponding “daybook” in which the specifics of all transactions — sale, trade or barter — would have been recorded in detail. The ledger informs us, for example, that one Nichols Vandervoort received 5 shillings worth of goods from the store on February 12, 1798. It shows that he settled 4 shillings of this debt the following day by providing the store with unspecified goods or services in return. An itemized description of the goods given and received by each party would have been recorded in the corresponding daybook.

This late eighteenth century Monongalia County business ledger contains many surnames that are still familiar in the area today.
Due to the cryptic nature of its entries, in many respects the ledger creates more mysteries than it solves. Indeed, without an itemized list of commodities and services bought and sold, it is only an assumption that the proprietor was engaged in general merchandising as opposed to a specific field of trade. What is clear is that the owner supplied "store goods," (goods in store) "sundries," (various items) and, in many cases, cash money to a wide variety of clients.

Perhaps the greatest mystery pertaining to the volume rests in the nature of the business establishment’s relationship to one of the area’s earliest industrial enterprises in Monongalia County, the Pleasant Iron Furnace. Located on Quarry Run, the Pleasant Furnace was reportedly the first of the many iron furnaces that sprang up in the Cheat area during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Little remembered today, the Cheat iron furnaces represented an important source of iron on the western American frontier. According to historians, munitions made from the products of the Cheat furnaces contributed directly to American military victories on the Great Lakes and in New Orleans during the War of 1812.

Despite its significance to the region and the nation, the details of much of the history of the Cheat iron industry are lost, and the history of the Pleasant Furnace is certainly no exception. It is unknown either exactly when or by whom the furnace was built. It is alleged to have been built by John Davis in cooperation with Hugh McNeely about 1798. The earliest record of its existence, prior to the discovery of the present ledger, rests in a deed which transferred ownership of the 200 acre tract of land including that “upon which Pleasant Furnace is now standing” from John Armistead to John Davis, Henry Dering, Jr., and Isaac Hite in November, 1798. Armistead had acquired this piece of land, along with 800 acres more, in November 1796, from Thomas Evans at a cost of just five shillings (less than one dollar). Considering the price, it is unlikely that any development had occurred on the property by that time. John Davis is known to have operated the furnace (which was sometimes later referred to as the “Davis Furnace”) for several years around the turn of the century before failing in business and suffering a mental break-down. The furnace was subsequently owned by John Jackson and James Updegraff and, by 1808, by a John Test (or Tessey).

The “Pleasant Furnace” shows up on both the debit and credit sides of the ledger repeatedly. The first presently legible such entry was recorded on February 20, 1798. By far the majority of these entries appear on the credit side of the ledger, indicating that the furnace settled the debts of many of the store’s patrons, presumably in return for services in goods or labor provided by these individuals to the furnace. The furnace settled 12 shillings of Augustin Wells’ debt to the store on March 12, 1798. It provided Benjamin Hixon with a sizeable credit of more than 24 pounds three days later. During the first week of December, 1798, the furnace settled the debts of several dozen of the store’s customers. It is possible that the settle-
ment of these accounts related in some way to the transferral of ownership of the furnace property, and perhaps the furnace proper, from Armistead to Davis and company in the preceding month.

Whatever the explanation, the numerous credits provided to the store by the furnace on behalf of so many of its clients indicate that there was a close working relationship between the store and the furnace. In fact, it was common for stores to operate in conjunction with or as part of frontier industrial enterprises such as this. The availability of store goods represented a convenience if not a necessity in maintaining a resident labor force which in turn represented a captive market for the store. In fact, John Test is known to have run a large store in conjunction with the furnace during his tenure.

Complicating the unraveling of these mysteries is the fact that more than half of the pages in the ledger, including all of the earliest ones, are currently concealed from view. About 1839, long after its original purpose had ceased, the ledger came into the possession of a Miss Caroline M. Graham of Morgantown. In accordance with a common practice of the day, the new owner recycled the volume into a scrapbook. During the next few years the book’s pages were filled with all manner of newspaper and periodical clippings, containing poetry by Longfellow, Lord Byron, William Cullen Bryant and others, as well as assorted anecdotes, morals, biblical quotations and an occasional obituary of local interest. Miss Graham’s original contributions included an assortment of notes, names and doodles, along with some poetry evidently of her own composition:

We do not know how much we love
Until we come to leave
An aged tree, a common flower
Are things o’er which we grieve
There is a pleasure in the pain
That brings us back the past again.

Though Caroline suffered no compunctions about obscuring the original content of the ledger, she evidently felt strongly that there were limits on the rights of the owner of any book. On page 94 she boldly expressed her indignation over the fact that some prior owner had removed a number of the volume’s pages:

Whoever has taken the liberty of tearing leaves out of this book is without a certain kind of principle and if they want to know what it is call on C. M. Graham

Such statements imbue the “scrapbook” component of this volume with a charm and insight in its own right that adds much to its value as a historical resource.

In order to both mine the mysteries of the ledger’s many hidden pages, and preserve Miss Caroline M. Graham’s Scrapbook, the volume will initially be microfilmed in its present form by the Regional History Collection’s microphotography unit. It will then be sent to a paper conservator who will endeavor to remove the clippings and thereby restore its value as a primary resource for studying the birth of commerce and industry in the Morgantown area.

The Regional History Collection wishes to thank the Monongalia Historical Society for its role in making this acquisition possible.
Robert J. Bennett literally changed the face of West Virginia University. A Wheeling native, Bennett studied architecture at George Washington University and Ohio State University before serving in the Air Force in World War II. Establishing himself in Morgantown in 1949, he earned recognition as one of the area's most talented architects in the ensuing decades.

In addition to major city projects like the Sundale Nursing Home and BOPARC Skating Arena, Bennett and his staff played a highly significant role in developing the WVU campus as it exists today. During the 1960s, Bennett designed the University's Knapp Hall (1965) and Chemistry Annex (1966) for the downtown campus. His projects of the following decade included the complete renovation of the historical heart of the University, Woodburn Circle, as well as the Evansdale Library. Later projects included the Medical Center Basic Sciences Building and Athletic Shell building. Bennett also served as the architect for the construction or renovation of eight major buildings on the Potomac State College campus between 1958 and 1984.

An extensive group of original architectural drawings by Bennett documenting his many West Virginia University and Potomac State College projects was donated to the Regional History Collection by Bennett's daughter, Sandy Bennett Taylor, on behalf of the architect's estate last year. These drawings are now available as a resource to all who have an interest in studying the development of the WVU campuses.
NEW BOOK ON EARLY ART AND ARTISTS IN WEST VIRGINIA ELUCIDATES STATE’S LITTLE KNOWN FINE ART HERITAGE

Curator John Cuthbert’s new book on Early Art and Artists in West Virginia represents a treasure trove for art lovers everywhere, especially those with an interest in the state of West Virginia and its history. The first-ever look at this long neglected subject, this handsome and sumptuously illustrated volume traces the development of fine art in West Virginia from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, presenting information about nearly 1000 artists. In the process, the book does much to dispel old stereotypes about the people and culture of the Mountain State.

According to the author’s prologue, contrary to popular belief, West Virginia’s populace has never been “confined to isolated mountain dwellings, out of touch and oblivious” to the progress of American civilization. “The State’s population has always been concentrated along its river valleys — the Ohio, the Kanawha, the Monongahela — and in the rolling hills of the Eastern Panhandle. Its inhabitants have generally been no less sophisticated than their neighbors in bordering states,” Cuthbert notes.

“Everything that has happened in American art through the years has also happened in West Virginia,” agrees Patrick Conner, Director of the West Virginia University Press which published the volume. “This book is important in helping West Virginia break down the myths about its culture and image,” he maintains. “Sophistication and elegance have long coexisted with the state’s celebrated mountain folk culture,” Dr. Conner quotes from the book’s foreword by United States Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, a collector of West Virginia art.

The book’s cover features an oil portrait of an elegantly clad young woman posed in a wooded setting that symbolizes the interplay of refinement and rusticity that has shaped West Virginia’s artistic heritage. Painted by Berkeley County native William Robinson Leigh in 1896, the portrait hangs in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. The back cover captures William L. Sonntag’s panoramic oil on canvas landscape, Scene Near Grafton, West Virginia (1864), that hangs in the R.W. Norton Art Gallery in Shreveport, Louisiana. These are just two of the nearly 300 full-color plates that illustrate Cuthbert’s rich narrative about the development of portrait and landscape painting in the state and the directory of artists that forms the volume’s second part.

In the foreword, Senator Rockefeller calls the book “ground-breaking” because it establishes a foundation for elaborating the history of art in West Virginia. He recalls receiving a “wonderful little painting” by Frederic Edwin Church, one of America’s greatest 19th century landscape painters, as a gift from his father when he first arrived in West Virginia. That such an eminent artist had a connection to the state sparked Rockefeller’s curiosity and he wanted to know more.

Cuthbert points out that while many of the most important artists connected with West Virginia were visitors, a significant number were either born in the state or spent a substantial part of their careers here. Martinsburg’s David Hunter Strother was the best-known illustrative artist in...
America on the eve of the Civil War, and the Cincinnati-based landscapist William L. Sonntag devoted more than a decade to painting the state's scenery. Berkeley County's William R. Leigh gained fame as one of the nation's leading artist interpreters of the Old West, and Monongalia County's Blanche Lazzell became one of 20th century America's modern art pioneers.

Cuthbert's point is that the history of fine art in West Virginia closely parallels that of the development of American art nationally. Though he maintains that much work remains in documenting this exciting legacy, the present volume, which will be equally at home on coffee tables and reference library shelves, represents a tremendous contribution towards that end.

The book is now on sale for $85 through the WVU Bookstores and University Press. The entire catalog of WVU Press publications may be examined at www.as.wvu.edu/press.

Coursey WVU News Service.

Selected Recent Accessions

Bound volume consisting primarily of photocopies of correspondence, news clippings, exhibit brochures and other papers regarding the career of artist and art educator Urban Couch. A native of Minneapolis, Couch was educated at the Minneapolis School of Art and Cranbrook Academy. He also studied briefly with, and was heavily influenced by, Josef Albers. Couch served as chair of the Division of Art at West Virginia University from 1970 to 1980. He subsequently served as Curator of the West Virginia University Permanent Art Collection and as a teacher in the University's Honors Program. These papers document his early successes as a painter, as well as his later work in the field of education.

One bound volume of 84 leaves documenting transactions of a Monongalia County business during the year 1798. The volume was later used (circa 1840) as a scrapbook by Caroline Graham of Morgantown who pasted news clippings containing poetry and other articles onto many of the ledger's pages. (See story, page 1.)


Research papers of Daisy Neptune documenting primarily Confederate soldiers and veterans from West Virginia. Included are muster roll transcripts (36th Virginia Infantry, Company A), troop roster transcripts (Wood County soldiers, 20th Virginia Cavalry), biographies of soldiers, confederate songs and poems, headstone and medal applications, and miscellaneous additional materials. There are photographs and a biographical letter of Confederate veteran Julius C. Frederick. Also included are minutes of the Parkersburg Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (1927-1929) and miscellaneous records of other post-Civil War Confederate veterans organizations.


Final manuscript, typescript and galley proof versions of Kanawhan Prelude to Nineteenth-Century Monopoly in the United States (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 2000) and galley proof of The Antebellum Kanawha Salt Business and Western Markets (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1993) by John Edmund Stealey, III.


An eighty-seven page manuscript titled “Toothman Family History” (1993) and a seventy-five page manuscript titled “Wetzel & Bonnet Branches of the Toothman Family History” (1999) written by Arthur H. Toothman. The manuscripts include narrative, genealogical charts, maps and other materials documenting the Toothman and related families primarily during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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Choir practice in the WVU Creative Arts Center's Choir Rehearsal Room, 1968/69.

Assorted recent published and unpublished documents regarding the history of the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra. Included are a 24-page 50th Anniversary History (1979) of the Wheeling Symphony, photo portraits of conductor Rachel Worby and the orchestra (ca. 1990s), a four-page typescript history of the orchestra (ca. 1990s) and assorted other related ephemera.

The records of Robert E. Woods, railroad engineer and union representative of the Brotherhood of Firemen and Locomotive Engineers, local Virginia Lodge #953. Woods worked in West Virginia for the Virginian Railway company and the Norfolk & Western Railroad Company. His papers include union correspondence, minutes, case files, seniority lists, wage rate sheets, and bargaining and financial records. Also included are railway industry and union publications and railroad engineer operating manuals.

A Virginian Railway heavy electric locomotive #126, ca. 1940.

West Virginia and Regional History Collection NEWSLETTER
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Early Art and Artists in West Virginia (See page 5)