HARLEY O. STAGGERS PAPERS OFFER SLICE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

As President Gerald R. Ford stood before Congress for the last time and delivered his State of the Union Address in January 1977, he reminisced about his first day in Congress in 1949 and recognized the congressmen who had taken office with him twenty-eight years earlier. Only five remained. Among them was Harley O. Staggers, Democrat from West Virginia. Along with Ford, Staggers witnessed some of the most monumental events of the twentieth century—from the Chinese Revolution and the Red Scare to the Vietnam War and Watergate. Ford left political life in January 1977, but Staggers continued in Congress for two more terms. When he left office in 1981, Staggers had served for 32 years, longer than any other member of the U.S. House of Representatives from West Virginia.

Staggers' family recently deeded his congressional papers to the West Virginia and Regional History Collection in fulfillment of his wishes. The collection consists of 63 linear feet of correspondence, reports, and legislation along with 36 bound volumes of debates, speeches, bills, and resolutions. The papers shed valuable light upon late twentieth-century America through documentation of the congressman’s legislative efforts, committee work, ceremonial duties, and press relations. Although Staggers gained national prominence, most particularly as chairman of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, the papers reveal his emphasis upon personal and political relationships in West Virginia and his concern for his constituents.

Harley O. Staggers was born near Keyser on August 3, 1907 to Jacob and Frances (Cumberledge) Staggers. As a youth, he worked in a Mineral County silk mill and as a “caller boy” for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. He worked his way through Emory and Henry College in southwestern Virginia as a B&O Railroad brakeman and spent summers working in Oklahoma and Kansas wheat fields and, like many unemployed West Virginians, in an Akron, Ohio, rubber factory. In spite of his work schedule, he found time to play fullback on the school’s football team and serve in student government. Staggers graduated from college in 1931 and later did graduate work at Northwestern University and Duke University.

Even though he entered the job market in the midst of the Great Depression, he found positions as a teacher and coach at Norton High School in Virginia and, from 1933 to 1935, at Potomac State College. The future congressman soon entered politics as a Democrat and won election in 1936 as sheriff of Mineral County, a strongly Republican area. The venture into Democratic politics paid off for Staggers. When his term as sheriff expired, party leaders in Charleston favored him with the post of right-of-way agent for the State Road Commission. He moved farther up the patronage ladder in 1942 when he received a federal appointment as state director for the Office of Government Reports, which later became the Office of War Information.

Although World War II intervened in Staggers’ life, his service record improved his political career. He served as a navigator on Navy planes in both the Atlantic and Pacific. By the end of the war, he had risen to the rank of lieutenant commander. West Virginians, like most Americans, were grateful to their veterans and elected a new generation of politicians to office based on their war records. In 1948, Harley Staggers rode on a wave of Democratic victory and defeated one-term Republican Congressman Melvin C. Snyder of Preston County in the race to represent the vast Second Congressional District.
National security became an early concern for Staggers in Congress, and he became known as a "hawk" in foreign affairs. Like many of his colleagues, he participated in the campaign against Communism in the government, and in 1954 approached President Dwight D. Eisenhower to seek the appointment of a broad-based investigative commission on the matter. He consistently supported a strong defense and backed the U.S. role in the Vietnam War. A voting record that favored veterans and gun owners' rights enhanced his "hawkish" image.

While Harley Staggers put together a conservative record on foreign and military affairs, veterans' issues, and gun control, he voted with other Democrats on the war against poverty, urban renewal programs, and educational aid packages. He became known as an advocate of civil rights and joined supporters of school desegregation measures; the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which gave eighteen-year-olds the right to vote. He also supported the ill-fated Equal Rights Amendment, efforts to eliminate the electoral college, and statehood for Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

A tenacious sense of right and wrong determined Staggers' political positions, whether liberal or conservative. He often fought hard in defending his positions when he believed that his principles were at stake. He espoused the cause of the underdog and became an advocate of consumer and minority rights. Characteristic of this advocacy, Staggers took on the broadcasting industry during the Nixon years. Critics charged that CBS News had fabricated reports on the Pentagon and hunger in America. They accused the network of misquoting military personnel in order to place the Defense Department in a negative light. This included airing answers to questions as if they were answers to others and attributing the words of a foreign official to a U.S. Army colonel. In the story on hunger, CBS allegedly hired people to pose as poverty stricken and arranged for welfare centers to remain closed beyond the normal start of morning business so that lines would form outside for the cameras.

As head of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Harley Staggers sought to determine the extent of such practices in broadcasting. The resulting congressional investigation brought a hail of criticism from broadcasters, who raised the specter of censorship. Popular entertainers leaped into the battle. At one point, Tommy Smothers, upset over network restraints on the Smothers Brothers' television show, visited Washington to add his voice against both government and corporate control over the content of programs. As the controversy climaxed, the Investigations Subcommittee of the House Commerce Committee summoned CBS president Frank Stanton and questioned him about the practices of CBS News. Stanton was uncooperative in Staggers' view, and the congressman had contempt charges leveled against the network president—charges that the full House failed to sustain.

Staggers could be a highly principled and stubborn defender of his views, but fellow congressmen knew him as a friendly, moderate politician. Those endearing qualities made him popular with Democratic congressional leaders early in his career, and he was appointed as assistant majority whip. The position in party leadership led the West Virginian to seats on the Veterans Affairs, Post Office and Civil Service committees and to the chair of the Transportation and Aeronautics Subcommittee. When the chairman of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce resigned from Congress in 1966 to become a federal judge, Democratic leaders elevated Staggers to the post. In that position, he headed one of the most powerful and heavily lobbied committees in Congress. Its concerns included all aspects of interstate and international trade, communications, transportation, and energy production. Consumer protection, automobile safety, public health, and pollution were among the far-reaching issues that faced the committee while Staggers chaired it. In a personal commentary on the committee's importance, the chairman once observed that its actions affected "every household in the land."

The chairmanship of the House Commerce Committee made Harley Staggers one of the most powerful congressmen in the country, but his constituents continued to be his main priority. He believed that "it's the local things that really matter." The congressman placed great store in "doing favors" or addressing individual concerns and needs. This traditional approach to politics in West Virginia was expected by the voters, and Staggers became particularly skilled at it. He built a reputation for going beyond party patronage, however, and assisting West
Virginians with their problems regardless of party. Many people also approached him for help in dealing with state government.

Critics believed that Staggers sometimes concentrated upon district interests at the expense of his committee and its concerns. Such instances affected the way that some people viewed Staggers, but he was still a strong and popular leader who could see that his constituents’ interests were heard in Congress, a fact that did not escape his colleagues. When Staggers announced his retirement in 1980, one member of the Commerce Committee joked that the “West Virginia orientation” to legislation would be missed.

Despite his emphasis on his home state, Harley Staggers accomplished many things for the entire nation during his tenure as chairman of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. He put forth legislation that removed unsafe toys from the market, succeeded in having a series of safety devices placed on automobiles, worked cooperatively with industries to reduce pollution and protect the environment, and sponsored dramatic legislation to support the fight against cancer. At the height of the Energy Crisis of the 1970s, Staggers succeeded in efforts to regulate the oil and gas industries and, in cooperation with congressmen from other coal states, worked with the Carter Administration to take greater advantage of coal as an energy source.

A series of crises in American railroading during the 1970s provided Staggers with his greatest challenges as chairman of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce and gave him a lasting place in the nation’s history. Early in the decade, the rail passenger industry faced possible extinction because it no longer was economical for the various railroad companies to compete against airline and highway transportation. Yet, many Americans still depended upon passenger trains. In order to allow railroads to divest themselves of passenger operations and, at the same time, maintain service where needed, Congress created the National Railroad Passenger Corporation in 1971 as a federally-subsidized railroad company. The corporation operated under the name Amtrak and consisted of the passenger components of railroads that had voluntarily divested themselves of passenger business. Harley Staggers was instrumental in creating Amtrak and ensuring that two routes ran through West Virginia, one along Chesapeake and Ohio tracks in the southern part of the state and one along the Baltimore and Ohio in the eastern panhandle and the northern section.

Just as Congress solved one major railroad crisis, another came along. Penn Central, a huge railroad that had been created with the merger of the Pennsylvania and the New York Central, went bankrupt in 1970 after only two years of existence. Facing serious economic repercussions throughout the northeast and midwest, Congress reacted by passing the Regional Rail Reorganization Act of 1973, which created the United States Railway Association to stabilize the Penn Central’s finances and reorganize it. The agency formulated a plan, but before it could be implemented, disastrous floods struck seven other railroads in the northeast. Those railroads lacked the resources to recover, and regional politicians prevailed upon congressional leaders, such as Harley Staggers, to bail out those railroads as well. The result was the incorporation of those companies into the Penn Central reorganization plan. The eight railroads effectively merged into the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail), which was created under the plan and began operation in 1976 with financial assistance from the federal government.

The creation of Amtrak and Conrail were important historical events in which Harley Staggers played a major part. However, a third railroading crisis put his name in the history books. The nation’s railroads struggled against declines in heavy industry, such as coal, steel, and automobile production, and lost business due to the completion of the interstate highway system and resulting increase in truck traffic. Many railroad companies called for relief from government regulations that kept them from streamlining operations and merging with other railroads. Supporters of deregulation believed that the move would allow railroading to adapt to changing times and provide for lower shipping rates and better service through greater competition between companies. Harley Staggers listened to the supporters and drafted the Staggers Rail Act of 1980, which
A "pigeon's eye view" of construction of the Walnut Street Personal Rapid Transit Station in Morgantown. Congressman Staggers was instrumental in getting U.S. Department of Transportation support and congressional funding for West Virginia University's PRT.

provided for the partial deregulation of the rail industry.

The law dramatically affected railroading in the United States. It paved the way for the consolidation of subsidiary companies into the parents, the absorption of weak rail lines by larger ones, and the abandonment of unprofitable and parallel routes. As a result, several mega-railroad systems developed; including Amtrak, Burlington Northern, Conrail, CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern, Santa Fe, Southern Pacific, and Union Pacific. In turn, short line or regional railroads emerged in many areas and utilized equipment, tracks, buildings, and employees that other companies no longer needed because of reorganizations and reroutings. In a not so positive light, the Staggers Rail Act generated competition that led to the failure of some small companies and the loss of jobs. Whether the law was largely positive or negative, there is no argument that it greatly impacted the nation. The act made history, and Harley Staggers will forever be associated with it.

The Staggers Rail Act became a parting legacy from the congressman to the country. He decided not to seek reelection in 1980 but hoped that his son, Harley junior, would succeed him. However, his son lost in the Democratic primary, and his party lost in the general election that swept a number of Republicans into office on Ronald Reagan's coattails. In a twist of irony, Cleve Benedict, the son of one of Staggers' former opponents, was elected. Two years later, Harley O. Staggers, Jr., rebounded and won his father's old seat, which he held for five terms.

Harley O. Staggers left a memorable record and provided, through himself and his son, more than four decades of service in Congress. That record places Staggers as one of the most revered congressmen in West Virginia history and in twentieth-century America. In the words of Massachusetts Republican Silvio O. Conte during a farewell tribute to Staggers in the House of Representatives, "Harley has used his talents to chart this Nation's course in the 20th century. Let us hope that in this House, others will follow Harley's example and bring the spirit that comes from his native State—that all Americans, like his mountaineers, are always free."

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This 1936 photograph captured Fire Creek Coal and Coke Company employees Archie Digggs and Charlie Smith in a moment of conversation. It is part of a 130-piece collection of Fayette County coal town photographs donated by one of the West Virginia Collection's many in-kind donors.

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Charitable Gift Annuity

In this issue of the Newsletter, we continue our series on options for planned financial donations to the West Virginia University Foundation, Inc. for the benefit of the West Virginia and Regional History Collection. This is the third of those options.

A charitable gift annuity is a legal contract between you and the West Virginia University Foundation, Inc. In exchange for your gift of a specific sum of money, you will receive a guaranteed fixed income for life. You may set up an annuity to pay a life income to you and your spouse for as long as either of you lives.

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SELECTED ACCESSIONS LIST


While a resident of Morgantown, prolific children’s literature author Betsy Byars wrote the story and lyrics for this musical play, Music, Music, which was presented at Westover Junior High School in 1971. Byars received the Newberry Award in 1972 for Summer of the Swans. Morgantown resident Marjorie Eddy wrote the music for the play.


During the waning months of the Civil War, political divisions and strife erupted throughout the South. Much dissatisfaction grew with the weakening military position of the Confederacy. One related controversy developed when Virginians, led by Governor William “Billy” Walker, sought the removal of Lieutenant General Jubal A. Early as commander of Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley in the aftermath of the defeat of his troops at Winchester. In this letter, dated October 14, 1864, Confederate Senator Allen T. Caperton of Monroe County expressed the views of Virginians to his friend, former U.S. Vice President and 1860 presidential candidate Major General John C. Breckinridge, who had recently left Early’s command to take over the Department of Western Virginia and East Tennessee for the Confederate Army. Caperton’s

Thanks to a good, old-fashioned winter, West Virginia University paused to plow itself out. So, our Fall/Winter Newsletter is a bit later than usual.
letter praises Breckinridge’s military abilities and supports the popular wish for him to command in the Shenandoah Valley.


This document reflects the rampant land speculation that occurred during the late 1700s and early 1800s. In this instance, Berkeley Countian David Gray assigned one-fourth interest which he held in ten different Virginia military land warrants to Moses Hoge.

Members of this string band included Ed MeWhorter (1st row, far left), Earle Miller (1st row, 3rd from left), and Fred B. Deem (2nd row, far left), authors of “Hail West Virginia.”


A cooperative effort with the Greene County Historical Society and Cornerstone Genealogical Society in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, has led to the loan of the Historical Society’s genealogical and historical note and index file for microfilming. The alphabetized file was created between 1960 and 1990 by longtime Historical Society librarian, Morgantown resident Alvah Headlee, and contains notes from an assortment of primary and secondary sources, ranging in date from 1730 to 1960. The file not only refers to Greene County but to surrounding areas of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Much information exists concerning Virginia’s eighteenth-century District of West Augusta, which encompassed the present area of southwestern Pennsylvania and neighboring portions of West Virginia.


Parkersburg native and University senior Fred B. Deem wrote the lyrics and Ed McWhorter and Earl Miller wrote the music in 1915 for West Virginia University’s official song. The sheet music was copyrighted by WVU and sold by the University YMCA. In later years, Deem served on the WVU Board of Governors and was president of the Harrison County Bar Association.


Robert E. Lee Keadle received the diary as a gift from a girlfriend and recorded in it his life as a youth in Union, Monroe County, including his church activities; involvement in the temperance movement; and participation in Teachers Institutes and militia drills. His active social life and leisure pursuits are also detailed. Keadle entered West Virginia University in 1889 and related his experiences in Morgantown as a student. He graduated with a law degree in 1890 and entered practice in Union.


The papers of these two families, joined by marriage in 1884, consist of correspondence, financial records, and a ledger. They deal with the personal and professional lives of a Greenbrier County farm family and its descendants. The family was notably involved in banking in Bluefield and Bramwell and Giles County, Virginia, and included banker and coal operator Isaac T. Mann. A ledger with the antebellum accounts of the Monroe Savings Bank in Monroe County is included. Other interesting items include correspondence with Major General Robert B. McClure, in China during the Second World War.


The first minute book, charter, and a photograph of the original members are included in the archives of the West Virginia University chapter of this national honorary society. The founding members included some of the most illustrious figures in WVU history. Minute book entries touch upon such topics as the induction of women into the honorary, involvement of members in student protests against final examinations during the hectic first weeks of American involvement in World War I, and the organization of a group, known as Alfa Chapter of Fi Batar Cappar, that satirized Phi Beta Kappa.


Francis M. Skillin chronicled his service in the 15th Maine Volunteers during the Civil War through letters to his family. The letters trace Skillin’s entry into the army, his training, outpost duty in Florida, and experiences in Martinsburg during the winter of 1864 and 1865. Interesting comments are made concerning criticism of Union General Neal Dow and draft evaders fleeing Maine for Canada.


This attractive, green-tinted map of antebellum Virginia, with its turnpikes, towns, and counties, depicts growth in the western section during the period. Notably, the proposed boundaries of Barbour County, created in 1843, are shown. The map appeared in Morse’s North American Atlas by S.E. Morse of Morse & Brese of New York.

Welch-Young. Survey, 1885. 20x64 ins. Acquired, 1993. Map

The survey of lands that had been granted to James Welch and James Young near the confluence of the Tygart Valley,
A number of prominent jurists, politicians, and scholars, including many of WVU's most distinguished professors, were among the charter members of the University's chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

Buckhannon, and Middle Fork rivers in 1785 was ordered by U.S. District Court in Clarksburg in 1883 as part of an ejectment suit. Benjamin Rich and George W. Jackson, apparently associated with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, sought to have David Poe, Oliver S. Zirkle, and G.W. Dunbar evicted from the lands. Earlier surveys of the Welch and Young tracts were used by the surveyors for reference. The plat map that was drawn from the survey includes surrounding communities and residences in Barbour and Randolph counties.

West Virginia and Regional History Collection NEWSLETTER
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Congressman Harley O. Staggers at the Monongalia County Courthouse.
See story on page 1.