WVRHC Newsletter, Spring 1993

West Virginia & Regional History Center

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When pondering the early settlement of the Virginia frontier, one generally conjures up images of trappers and yeoman farmers, roughhewn forts and isolated log cabins, and a landscape of almost overwhelming bounty. Massive chimneys spewing thick black smoke do not usually enter this picture, nor do company stores, immigrant workers, and a feudal labor system.

These elements of industrial society are firmly entrenched in West Virginia’s modern history, but the pristine wilderness of western Virginia was not the scene of such industry—right? Wrong! Industrialists, skilled craftsmen, and menial laborers were among the first frontiersmen, and iron production pioneered among the western industries.

An extensive collection of Monongahela Valley iron industry ledgers currently being microfilmed at the Regional History Collection sheds considerable light upon the iron industry at the turn of the nineteenth century. Loaned for duplication by the Uniontown Public Library in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, the records meticulously document business activities of firms in present-day Preston County, West Virginia, and Fayette County, Pennsylvania.

The history of iron-making in western Virginia actually dates back to the early eighteenth century. As early as 1714, Virginia’s Royal Governor Alexander Spotswood encouraged the settlement of German iron workers and miners in western Virginia with the enticement of free passage to America, land, and tax exemptions. Spotswood established the iron town of Germanna along the Rapidan River in an attempt to accomplish the dual goals of industrializing his colony and protecting its western border through the creation of a frontier outpost. The industry spread into the Shenandoah Valley soon afterwards due to its abundance in the raw materials needed for production—iron ore, wood, limestone, and water—and eventually took root in present-day West Virginia. Historians note the production of iron on Lord Fairfax’s estate in present-day Jefferson County in 1742. George Washington was so impressed by the quality of iron at the site that he recommended the establishment of the federal arsenal and gun works at nearby Harpers Ferry several decades later.

The iron industry continued to move west as the century progressed. By the century’s end iron furnaces began to dot the Monongahela Valley. The Morgantown vicinity became one of several regional iron-making centers. More than 1200 men were eventually employed in iron production in the area, and the Jackson Iron Works along the Cheat River are said to have been the best in Virginia.

Western Virginia’s iron market included the interior regions of the country from Ohio to New Orleans. Western iron was especially important during the international trade embargoes of the first decade of the nineteenth century and during the War of 1812, when iron was needed to supply military and naval efforts in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys and Great Lakes region. Due
to its proximity and accessibility to these markets the Wheeling area surpassed all other regional iron-making centers in production and importance as the century wore on. Known for decades as “Nail City,” Wheeling long rivaled Pittsburgh in iron production. In 1832, a large iron mill was built at Wheeling with a daily output of 5,000 pounds of nails. By 1834, the city boasted four foundries and four steam engine works.

Western Virginia’s iron industry continued to flourish until the 1880s. Its subsequent decline came about because of the availability of higher quality iron ore from Minnesota’s Mesabi Range.

Among the records which are currently being microfilmed are ledgers of the Union Furnace, Union Iron Works, Union Forge, Centre Furnace, and Mount Vernon Furnace, all of which were properties of the first Trans-Allegheny iron manufacturer, Isaac Meason, Sr. Also, a ledger of the Greenville Furnace, one of the several iron furnaces operated by the Jackson Family in the Cheat River region, is included.

Isaac Meason came to present-day Fayette County, Pennsylvania, before the American Revolution and settled in what he believed to be part of his native Virginia. Acquiring huge amounts of land, Meason joined several other pioneers of the area in prospecting for iron. As early as 1780, the surveyor for Yohogania County (as Virginia had designated that region) registered a state warrant to Benjamin Johnston for 500 acres “situate on the waters of the Yohogania [Youghiogheny], to include a Bank of Iron Ore.” This is the first historic note of iron ore west of the Allegheny Mountains.

Meason won the race to be the first iron producer in the region when in 1789 he built Union Furnace next to Dunbar Creek in Dunbar Township, Fayette County, Pennsylvania. Iron ore for the furnace was mined from an outcrop of conglomerate rock about 80 feet above the creek. By 1794, Meason had joined with Moses Dillon and John Gibson to enlarge the furnace and relocate it on the opposite bank of the creek.

Meason, Dillon & Co. manufactured pig iron for use by forges and foundries and molded some cast iron products such as stoves, pots, and kettles. In 1794, the firm was successful enough to advertise in the Pittsburgh Gazette, and eventually, products from the furnace and nearby forges reached the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Included among the product line were salt kettles for the fledgling Kanawha Valley salt industry and sugar kettles for Louisiana planters.

The Eastern Panhandle was an important iron-producing region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This furnace was built on Waters Run in Hardy County.

Isaac Meason used Union Furnace as a base for the creation of a large iron works, known as Union Iron Works. The iron works included two forges, a gristmill, sawmill, shoe and harness shop, and a plantation house which still stands. Hundreds of workers’ houses also were built on Meason’s plantation, and he, along with his sons, Isaac, Jr. and Thomas, operated a store, which dealt largely in barter. A furnaceman at the Union Iron Works once remarked that he conducted business for three years and saw only ten dollars in cash.

Isaac Meason provided careers in the iron business for his two sons. He built Mount Vernon Furnace for Isaac, Jr. on the headwaters of Mountz Creek in Bullskin Township of Fayette County in 1795 and enlarged it in 1801. Mount Vernon Furnace produced pig and cast iron from ore that was mined along Chestnut Ridge, three-fourths of a mile south of the furnace.

In 1808, Meason built Centre Furnace (alternately known as Pallafox, Mount Braddock, Warren, and Dunbar Furnace) along Glade Run, near its juncture with Dunbar Creek for his son, Thomas.
When he died in 1818, Isaac Meason, Sr. was the wealthiest man in Fayette County. Following his death, Isaac, Jr. continued in the iron business until his law career took precedence. Despite his withdrawal, Union Iron Works continued operation for nearly fifty years under various operators.

The development of iron manufacturing in Fayette County directly influenced the birth of the iron industry in neighboring Monongalia County, which included Preston County at the time. Fayette Countian Samuel Jackson relocated on Cheat River in Monongalia County about 1800, and built the Jackson or Cheat Iron Works which eventually developed into a complex system of roads, houses, mills, boat yards, and furnaces, including the Henry Clay Furnace in Coopers Rock State Forest. When he died in 1818, his son, Josiah, succeeded him in the iron business and improved upon his father’s holdings.

Josiah Jackson became involved with Walter Carlile in the operation of Greenville Furnace at the head of Big Laurel Run in northwestern Preston County in 1818. The furnace ledger reveals that Jackson’s main interest in the furnace was the production of additional pig iron for his nail manufacturing enterprise.

The Greenville Furnace, like all early ones, was a cold blast furnace which depended upon blasts of air from a large water-powered bellows to fan the flame in the furnace. About 5,000 pounds of ore, 1500 pounds of limestone and 174 bushels of charcoal comprised the furnace “charge” which was carted to the top of the furnace and dumped into it. The limestone served as a “flux”—which combined with impurities in the iron ore and caused them to melt and float to the top of melted iron. Charcoal was used to ignite the fire and served as a fuel and “reducing agent.” The reducing agent produced carbon monoxide which combined with the oxygen that was released from the melting ore and carried it away, a necessary step in making metallic iron. During the smelting, founders drew the melted slag (limestone and impurities) out of the furnace through a drain hole. After four or five hours, a plug was removed, and molten iron flowed along trenches outside the furnace and into molds arranged along the trenches so that they resembled little pigs nursing from their mother. Thus, the cooled, hardened cakes of iron were known as “pig iron.”

This drawing depicts the process of iron smelting at Taylor Furnace near Winchester. Iron production required enormous amounts of iron ore, limestone, charcoal, and water.
The Henry Clay Iron Furnace was part of the Cheat Iron Works. Its remains may be seen in Coopers Rock State Forest.

Each year about 250 acres of hardwood timber were used to supply the vast amounts of charcoal needed by a furnace. Colliers dug shallow pits or trenches to provide a level area and built cribs out of wood, and filled them with 30 to 40 cords of cut wood in two tiers. They covered the piles with leaves to make them airtight, and then heaped dirt on top. Kindling wood was placed in a chimney in each stack and set on fire; then the draft through the chimney was controlled. By opening and closing holes in the bottom of the piles, colliers drew the fire to different parts of the wood stacks. After about six days, about 1,500 bushels of charcoal was produced. Ledgers indicate that often furnace operations ceased for two or three days at a time while the workers waited for enough charcoal to continue.

The product from Greenville Furnace was transported along a three-mile tram road, loaded onto wagons, and taken by road to another tram road that led to Jackson's Cheat Iron Works. Some of the iron was sold to other manufacturers in the local area or along the Cheat-Monongahela-Ohio water routes.

According to the Greenville ledger, Carlile ran the day-to-day business of the furnace and a store and boarding house that were associated with it. The store furnished a market for local farmers to sell their goods and supplied the boarding house and the iron workers and their families.

Jackson appears to have withdrawn from participation in the Greenville Furnace within a decade of its construction. Carlile continued to struggle with its operation for several more years before the business failed. According to local historian Samuel T. Wiley, "he carried his enterprise to completion under the most trying vicissitudes of fortune." Perhaps without the outlet of iron sales to the Cheat Iron Works and the lack of Jackson's support, Carlile was unable to succeed without his own capital. Transportation costs from the isolated furnace were high, but Carlile's personal debts to the company doubtless contributed to his business failure. Furnace ledgers show that Carlile was the store's best credit customer.

Included among the Regional History Collection's holdings are a group of ledgers kept by Preston County merchant Harrison Hagans, who succeeded Walter Carlile as operator of the Greenville Furnace. Hagans headed a consortium of investors, mostly from Boston, who attempted to develop the Preston County iron industry in subsequent decades. Ironically, westward expansion which had given birth to the Trans-Allegheny iron industry also spelled its death when the Minnesota iron fields opened during the 1880s. By World War I, only one iron mine remained in West Virginia—near Harpers Ferry. Although foundries and steel mills prospered in the area, they did so without local iron. Yet, a lasting impression was made by the iron industry of pioneer days. The industry drew thousands of people into the region, and ghost towns long dotted the hillsides where they once flourished. Virgin forests were cut and the landscape was changed in many areas long before lumbermen swarmed to the state after the Civil War. Attention was drawn to the area's coal resources as coal and coke were chosen over charcoal for iron production in the mid-1800s. Farmers and manufacturers as far away as the Mississippi Valley as well as armies and navies—pitted against the British, Indians, Mexicans, and fellow Americans—depended upon the region's iron industry for implements, ammunition, and weapons. Though the early iron men are gone, and the industry has faded, they hold an important place in the conquest of the frontier.

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SEN. HARLEY M. KILGORE PAPERS ACQUIRED

The Regional History Collection's outstanding archival resources regarding West Virginia political history were considerably augmented last fall by the addition of 58 linear feet of papers of the late U.S. Senator Harley M. Kilgore. Transferred from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, which is operated by the National Archives and Records Administration in Hyde Park, New York, the papers join other Kilgore papers which were donated to the Regional History Collection by the senator and his widow during the 1950s.

Senator Kilgore was born in Harrison County on January 11, 1893. He graduated from Mannington High School and received a law degree from West Virginia University in 1914. Before establishing his law practice in Beckley in 1916, he worked in the state's oil fields and as a teacher in Hancock and Raleigh counties. Kilgore served in the army as a captain during World War I and continued his military service in the National Guard until 1953, when he retired as a lieutenant colonel. In politics, he served as Beckley city recorder and as Criminal Court judge in Raleigh County. With support from organized labor and backing from West Virginia Democratic boss Matthew M. Neely, Kilgore was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1940 as an ardent supporter of the New Deal. During his Senate service, he rose to chair the Judiciary and National Defense Program committees. He became a strong backer of Harry S. Truman's presidency and a vocal opponent to McCarthyism. Poor health dogged him during his third term, and Kilgore died in Bethesda Naval Hospital on February 28, 1956. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

As noted above, the Regional History Collection's recent acquisition of Kilgore's papers represents but one of a series of donations which began in 1952. Kilgore, himself, donated a transcript of a radio broadcast which was made by him and David C. Mearns. In 1957, the senator's widow and his secretary prepared and sent 18 feet of material to the Regional History Collection. Mrs. Kilgore made two additional gifts of the senator's papers in 1958.

The present accession comprises political and legislative files, including papers of the Judiciary Committee and other committees on which Kilgore served as a member, as well as correspondence with constituents, federal and state agencies, and fellow politicians. The papers were originally placed in the Roosevelt Library because of Kilgore's close association with President Roosevelt. Roosevelt Library staff felt, however, that the papers belonged in West Virginia. The transfer was made last October with the approval of the Archivist of the United States, and the papers are currently being processed for integration into the Regional History Collection.

The Harley M. Kilgore Papers are but one of twenty-three collections of papers of West Virginia U.S. senators which the Regional History Collection houses. These include the papers of Senator Robert C. Byrd, for whom the reading room at the Collection is named. Additional political papers at the Regional History Collection include those of sixteen of West Virginia's thirty governors and twenty-four of the state's U.S. representatives.
"West Virginia: Land of Plenty" will form the theme of the 7th annual West Virginia Day Celebration, which will occur on Friday, June 18, 1993. In addition to the traditional noon-hour birthday party in the Mountainlair, participants will explore the past, present, and future utilization of the Mountain State's natural resource wealth during a morning forum and an afternoon exhibit. Featured upon this year’s poster is a breathtaking view of the Tygart River near Grafton painted by the noted American landscape painter William L. Sonntag.

West Virginia Day Program of Events
June 18, 1993

Historical Forum ................................................... 8:30-11:30
Speakers:
Ms. Judith S. Rodd—Board of Directors, Cooper's Rock Foundation
Dr. John E. Stealey III—Professor of History, Shepherd College
Dr. Bernard L. Allen—Professor of History and Philosophy, WVU Parkersburg
Dr. Roy B. Clarkson—Professor Emeritus, Department of Biology, WVU
Dr. Ken Sullivan—Editor, Goldenseal magazine
Dr. James B. Kotcon—Assistant Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences, WVU

West Virginia Day Birthday Party ........................ 11:30-1:00
Featuring Ray Hicks—"Friends and Neighbors"

Cutting of West Virginia Birthday Cake ................. 12:30
Commons Area, Mountainlair

Historical Exhibit ................................................... 12:00-5:30
Grandview Gallery, Mountainlair

WVU Alumni Association ........................................... 4:00

120th Anniversary Celebration ............................ Martin Hall

SELECTED ACCESSIONS LIST


William D. Barons' papers include his professional files as a professor of history at West Virginia University for nearly forty years. Barns also was a past president and founding member of the West Virginia Historical Association of College and University Teachers. Copies of his writings, including histories of the Barns Family, are also found in the papers.


An essay by Margaret Little entitled "Clinton Furnace—End of the Iron Age" traces the history of the Monongalia County iron furnace and focuses upon Wheeling industrialist George Hardman, who gave the historic name to the furnace and, consequently, the community and surrounding district.


These papers cover the period of Kilgore's representation of West Virginia in the U.S. Senate and join others which the senator's family donated to the West Virginia Collection shortly after his death. The contents include political files, legislative...
files, papers related to Kilgore’s chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee and his other committee assignments, correspondence with Federal and West Virginia state agencies, general correspondence and speeches and other writings. The papers pertain to various topics, including West Virginia’s economy, the coal industry, and postwar Germany. The collection joins previously acquired Kilgore papers which cover the same period as well as his years as a criminal court judge in Raleigh County.


A field book belonging to botanist E. Meade McNeill, biology professor at Concord College, forms this collection. The notes document plant life in the Shawnee Lake, Bluestone River, and Brush Creek Falls areas of Mercer County; the New River area in Summers County; Cranberry Glades; and Seneca Rocks. Parts of the notes were published in the botany journal *Castanea*.


The Perfection Garment Company was established in Martinsburg in 1905 and produced muslin skirts through World War I and underwear during the war era. The company switched to dresses in the early 1920s. It weathered the Depression comparatively well and aided in producing military textile needs during World War II. In the 1950s, Perfection Garment Company struggled with labor problems and, while it was a last survivor among the textile companies of the eastern panhandle, labor strife eventually led to its decline. Six hundred workers were employed by Perfection in the early 1950s, and it is at that time that the payroll and production records in this collection start. The records cover the years to 1991, when the company ceased operation. Also included are some records for the company’s Winchester, Virginia, plant.


John Rogers, a native of Fayette County, Pennsylvania, was one of Morgantown’s pioneer industrialists and merchants. The earliest item among the papers is a 1788 land map for property in present-day Marion County. However, most of the collection consists of letters addressed to Rogers which pertain to his business activities, including wool and iron trading. A number of letters are from Rogers’ nephews, who were close business associates. Two Civil War letters in the collection were written by a Morgantown soldier assigned to the U.S. War Department. The papers supplement other collections of Rogers’ letters and business records held by the West Virginia Collection.


The papers of this Ritchie County family span three generations. While the early correspondence and papers of the collection involve older family members, later correspondence deals mostly with youth and their friends. Some fine examples of postcards of the period are included in the collection. The World War I letters and postcards of Hiram W. Shephard during his military training in Virginia and his service in France are particularly noteworthy.


The Southern Appalachian Botanical Club was founded in 1935 through the efforts of West Virginia University Biology Department employees Earl L. Core and Elizabeth Ann Bartholomew and was headquartered at WVU for nearly fifty years. Its records include organizational and membership records, election results, minutes of meetings, records related to the publication of the club journal, *Castanea*, financial records, correspondence, and notes of botanical projects and specimen exchange programs. The West Virginia Collection has been designated as the ongoing repository of the club archives.


A letter from James Tenney of Nicholas County (present-day Braxton County) to his uncle, John Tenney of Luzerne, New York, detailing the former’s journey from New York to western Virginia via Richmond. The letter discusses the Kanawha Valley salt industry and the lumber industry which developed along the Elk River in support of it.

This portion of the UMWA Health and Retirement Fund Archives pertains to the retention of medical and health services for use by Fund participants. The papers include correspondence and legal documentation related to the services.


The archives include correspondence, organizational bylaws and minutes, records of Academy meetings and the publication and distribution of the proceedings, and membership records. Much of the material relates to the Junior Academy of Science and Science Talent Fund. The West Virginia Academy of Science was established at West Virginia University in 1924.


As part of West Virginia University’s 125th anniversary, the University’s Office of Institutional Advancement undertook a project to seek family histories and lore from people whose families had 125-year-old roots in West Virginia. The project resulted in the collection of 428 genealogical accounts of West Virginia families with ties to 47 counties. Many of the histories discuss family connections to West Virginia University.