

Fall 1991

## WVRHC Newsletter, Fall/Winter 1991

West Virginia & Regional History Center

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/wvrhc-newsletters>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

West Virginia & Regional History Center, "WVRHC Newsletter, Fall/Winter 1991" (1991). *West Virginia & Regional History Center Newsletters*. 65.

<https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/wvrhc-newsletters/65>

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the West Virginia & Regional History Center at The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in West Virginia & Regional History Center Newsletters by an authorized administrator of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact [researchrepository@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:researchrepository@mail.wvu.edu).

# West Virginia and Regional History Collection

## NEWSLETTER

Volume 7, No. 3

West Virginia University Libraries

Fall/Winter 1991

### THE JAMES EDWARD DAVIS COLLECTION

Jim Davis was dedicated to expanding the dimensions of art. Dissatisfied with the flat “three-dimensional illusions” of tradition, he spent the better part of his life searching for ways to instill motion, change and time in his work. This search carried him through many styles and mediums and ultimately earned him a place among the pioneers of “light art” and abstract film making.

An extensive body of works and memoirs by this important West Virginia native was recently donated to the West Virginia University Libraries and the Regional History Collection.

Born in Clarksburg in 1901, Davis once attributed his life-long obsession with moving light and color to his experiences growing up in a glass industry center. “I can remember from my earliest childhood days they had these itinerant glassblowers who would set up their little shops and blow glass—ships and birds—and I would stand there by the hour and watch. That fascination has never left me.”

He began painting as a child but never considered a career in art (“didn’t know one existed,” in his words) until after he was enrolled in Princeton University in 1919. Floundering initially in the bachelor of science program, his discovery of the art and architecture department as well as his own talent and inclination led him to switch majors during his second year. He graduated with honors three years later, in 1923.

From Princeton Davis continued his studies at the National Academy of Design in New York City, and subsequently in Europe. In Paris he enrolled in a variety of schools, the most important of which was the Academie Colarossi where he worked primarily with Andre L’Hote. According to his memoirs, his studies “ran the whole artistic gamut, including cubism.”

Returning from abroad in 1927, Davis worked on a freelance basis in New York City for several years before the stock market crash and Depression led him to turn to teaching. He taught for several years at a private academy in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, before accepting a position at Princeton in 1936. His summers during this period were spent primarily in his studio back home in Clarksburg which he dubbed “The Barn.”

Throughout these years Davis produced a steady stream of paintings and sketches in oil, watercolor and pastel, some figural,



*James Edward Davis (1901-1974), circa 1955.*

some abstract, and landscapes depicting wherever he went. This work is colorful, vigorous and prolific. Despite its dynamic quality, however, Davis became increasingly obsessed with getting his work “to move” and increasingly dissatisfied with his ability to do so.

During the mid-1930s he began experimenting with new materials and techniques towards this end. Armed with a small Kodak Brownie camera he began photographing moving figures at a sufficiently slow film speed to capture the progress of their movements. The blurred, semitransparent results were then

West Virginia and Regional History Collection NEWSLETTER. A triannual publication of the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at the West Virginia University Library, Colson Hall, Morgantown, West Virginia 26506. (304)293-3536.  
 STAFF: David Bartlett, Annette Cotter, John Cuthbert, Kenneth Fones-Wolf, Harold Forbes, Duryea Kemp, Martha Neville, Larry Sypolt, Christelle Venham, Danny Williams.  
 EDITOR: John Cuthbert ISSN 1041 - 8695

interpreted as a series of abstract line drawings which he referred to as "paths of motion."

In order to intensify the illusion of space in his work, Davis began experimenting with plastic, both as a ground and an overlay. Quite by accident he noticed one day that sunlight passing through a piece of acetate had cast a reflection upon his wall which was remarkably similar to his "path of motion" images. Enthralled at the effect, and with the principles behind it, he began incorporating light in his work.

Soon he was illuminating painted layers of acetate which were superimposed in a convex fashion over a white back-



James E. Davis, "American Architecture [Clarksburg, West Virginia]" pencil on paper, 1932.

ground. He found the sense of depth and the marvelous interplay of shadow and reflection which resulted to be most satisfying. Another breakthrough occurred as he was shifting the direction of his light source one day. He noticed that when the light moved so did the painting—the shapes, the colors—"It really was like a religious experience!" he once commented.

Finding it easier to move his artwork than his light source he began creating three-dimensional works in plastic and plexiglass that when suspended and set in motion sent light reflections and refractions dancing in all directions. He devised a method of projecting these "light interceptors" onto a translucent screen and began giving public demonstrations for friends, colleagues and eventually museums. Some found the exhibitions confusing. Others found them fascinating. After a private showing in



James E. Davis, "Country Store," pencil on paper, 1932.

1946, Frank Lloyd Wright commented: "This is the answer to everything—it makes everything else obsolete. This is the direction in which we all must follow."

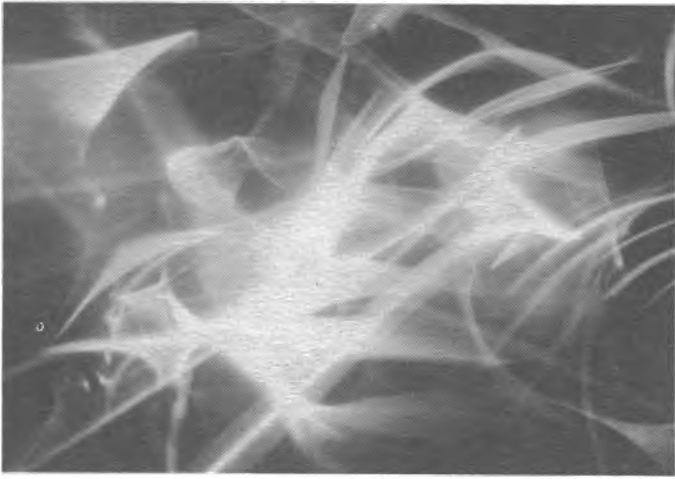
Davis, however, was still troubled by several problems. Perhaps foremost was his concern about the fugitive nature of his work. As a painter he was used to creating tangible records of his creative efforts. He had evolved somehow into a performer. And in addition to being exhausting, his performances left too much to chance. There were too many variables for him to control.

He had been documenting his "light art" images through still photography for some time before a friend suggested that perhaps film was more appropriate. In film Davis found the panacea for which he had been searching. In addition to forming an enduring and easily exhibited statement, it enabled him, through creative camera work and skillful editing, to gain a level of control which removed much of the random nature from his work.

He made his first film in 1946. Three years later he was recognized with an award at an International Festival of Experi-



James E. Davis, "Transparency," two sheets of overlapping acetate, "illuminated for color shadows," 1944.



James E. Davis, "Reflections-Prismatic Filter," 1963.

mental Films in Belgium. Other films and other awards followed in the ensuing years.

While Davis occasionally wove distorted images from nature into his films in order to draw "analogies" between the real world and the abstract, he continued to work primarily with colored light reflections produced by his mobiles. His short

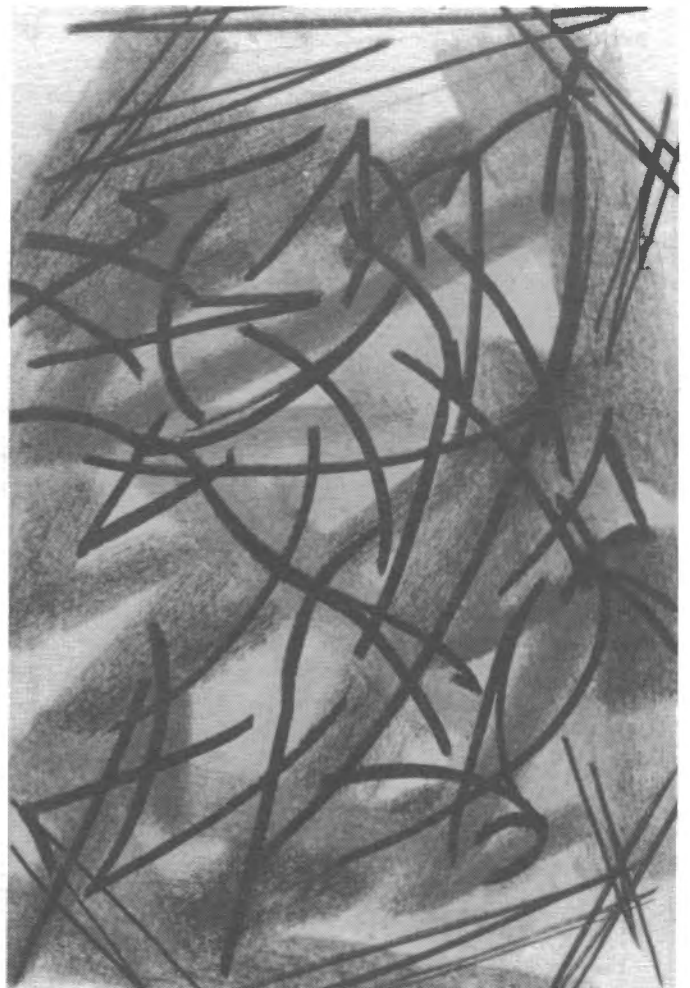
films, averaging about ten minutes in length, were often accompanied by original music, sometimes composed and arranged by his Princeton colleague, composer Frank Lewin. Davis felt strongly that there was a natural affinity between art and music and often drew parallels between the two when describing the rationale and intent of his work:

"Just as the musician organizes rhythms of sound in order to stimulate and produce an emotional response, so I organize visual rhythms of moving form and color. Also like the musician, who doesn't use the sounds of nature but invented sounds, produced by various instruments, I use invented forms of color which I produce artificially with brightly colored plastics. I set them in motion, play light upon them and film what happens. Obviously I am not trying to present facts or tell a story. I am trying to stir the creative imagination...."

Despite his own inclination, Davis digressed twice into the "semidocumentary" area during his early years as a film maker. During a visit to Frank Lloyd Wright in Arizona in 1950, the architect insisted that Davis make a film on Wright's famous "Taliesin" buildings near Madison, Wisconsin, and Phoenix, Arizona, respectively. Davis reluctantly complied. Wright was reportedly thrilled with the results; Davis was not. The following



James E. Davis, "Figure Study," pencil on paper, 1934.



James E. Davis, "Path of Motion," pencil on paper, 1949.







*William Parker Foulke, ca. 1850. Source: West Virginia History, 44, (Summer 1983) p. 300.*

colony on his Meadow River property. Writing in 1826, he praised the New Harmony, Indiana, colony of the Scottish utopian and industrialist Robert Owen and suggested that "perhaps a scheme of similar cast may likewise succeed on our property . . . and possibly lead to a consummation highly beneficial to many."

Unfortunately, Jeremiah Parker died the following year leaving control of the lands to his brother, William, who had built his own fortune by outfitting prospective pioneers. Like Jeremiah, he had an interest in the settlement of western lands and internal improvements and shared his brother's Quaker reform spirit, including an active involvement in antislavery societies. Regarding the Meadow River lands, however, William was no reformer. In 1828 he advocated selling tracts, "even at a very reduced price" rather than hope that European immigration or an improved economy would increase the land's value. In particular, William despaired of Andrew Jackson's destruction of the U.S. Bank and opposition to government funding for roads and canals. "It is greatly to be deplored," he wrote in 1834, "that our President cannot see the wretchedness his measures are bringing upon the People."

For 17 years, William Parker complained that the lands were a nuisance: competing claims were filed by squatters, several counties might charge taxes for the same land, and there appeared to be little sympathy for absentee owners.

Neither Richard nor William Parker ever married, so when William died in 1845, control of the Meadow River lands passed to their nephew, William Parker Foulke. Foulke had actually begun serving as William Parker's attorney several years earlier, and was the first of the family's speculators to visit western Virginia to personally supervise the administration of the lands. The papers in the West Virginia and Regional History Collection contain more than 200 letters written to or by Foulke during the 20 years he managed the estate. Of particular note is the correspondence between Foulke, his father and his uncle during the 1840s. Foulke provided detailed accounts of business transactions, but more importantly, he offered observations of the people, the lands, the houses, transportation, politics, and the social lives of this roughhewn, sparsely settled region.

The papers are an especially rich source for understanding the complex interaction of settlers, local courts, land agents, and absentee owners during the period of Foulke's control. Included are maps, survey plats, survey field notes, extracts of land grants and deeds, land schedules, and expense accounts, which reveal the contest for title to these rich lands long before the emergence of the coal and timber barons of the late 19th century.

One of the more mysterious characters represented in the collection is James Cogan Warren, who began serving as the agent for the Parker family as early as 1819. Indeed, much of the correspondence is between Warren and the Parker and Foulke families, whom Warren represented for over thirty years, handling sales, paying taxes, and pursuing ejectments when necessary. In return for his toils, he received one-third of all the proceeds from sales of the Meadow River lands. But Warren was largely free to negotiate the price of the sales, and some of the lands he purchased himself, suggesting a possible conflict of interest. As the lands passed from one generation to the next, Warren made claims that he had actually acquired lands from the estate for less than the stated price "because it was thought inexpedient to give an appearance of valuation so low."

When William Parker Foulke took over in 1845, Warren's relationship with the family turned sour. In January 1846, Warren wrote to the executors of William Parker's estate that he stood to lose most of his expected remuneration from the past 30 years. He thought this unfair, for "had I not paid unremitting attention to the lands the most valuable would ere now have passed into the possession of squatters."

Over the ensuing 140 years, family neglect, competing claims, rash sales, family disputes, taxes, and court expenses depleted the amount of land claimed by William Parker Foulke's heirs. Attempts at conducting tobacco or timber businesses and at convincing coal companies to open mining operations rarely succeeded at a higher level than just covering tax payments.

Although many absentee land speculators made their fortunes in West Virginia lands, the Foulke Family Land Papers in the West Virginia and Regional History Collection reveal that the practice is both much older than we know, and not always as profitable as we imagine.

## SELECTED ACCESSIONS LIST



"Weighty Matters," magazine cover by illustrator Leslie Thrasher, Saturday Evening Post, October 3, 1936. One of the most popular magazine cover illustrations of the early twentieth century, "Weighty Matters" has often been misattributed to Norman Rockwell, who was a great admirer of Thrasher's work.

**Adams, Julia Davis. Papers, 1918-74. 1 ft. Gift, 1991.  
A&M 2963 Addendum.**

Typescripts, clippings, publications, photos and photo albums of John W. Davis and his daughter, Julia Davis Adams, including photos of his Presidential campaign, photo albums, and copies of his diary from the period when he was ambassador to Great Britain, and papers and photos of Julia D. Adams.

**Buck, Pearl S. Papers, 1931-44. 6 in. Acquired, 1991.  
A&M 727 Addendum.**

Plays, articles, short stories, book reviews, speeches, book forewords, introductions, newsclippings, and photos by and about Pearl S. Buck.

**Canning, Thomas S., 1911-1989. 8 ft. Gift, 1991. A&M  
3098.**

Scores, sketchbooks, sound recordings, papers, and photographs of composer Thomas S. Canning. A native of Pennsylvania, Canning was educated at Oberlin College and the University of Rochester. He was on the faculty at Morningside College,



*Thomas Scribner Canning (1911-1989), August 1936.*

Sioux City, Iowa; Indiana University of Pennsylvania; University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; University of Rochester, New York; and University of Hull, United Kingdom (exchange professor). He joined the faculty at West Virginia University in 1963 and spent the remainder of his career there. Included are manuscripts, completed scores, and sound recordings of most of Canning's works as well as lectures, awards, and photographs from throughout his career.

**Foulke Family. Papers, 1784-1914. 18 in. Acquired, 1991.  
A&M 3075.**

Papers of the administration of the Foulke family's lands on the Meadow River, principally in Fayette County, but also including land in Nicholas and Greenbrier counties. The acquisition of large tracts of land by this prominent Philadelphia family in what is now southern West Virginia began in the 1780s with the partnership of Jeremiah Warder and Richard Parker. In the 1840s, nearly 3/4 of this land (estimated at around 40,000 acres) came under the control of William Parker and later his nephew, William Parker Foulke. The collection, which contains correspondence, deeds, agreements, land surveys and descriptions, and legal documents dating primarily from the 1840s and 1850s, concerns the Foulke family's efforts to protect its claims and to sell or lease tracts of land. The period from 1845 to 1854 appears to have been an especially contentious one for competing land claims in the area. Much of the administration of this land was undertaken by the family's agents, especially James C. Warren, or through correspondence with such lawyers as Samuel Price.

**Heiskell, H. B. 1 volume, 1847-1954. 1 in. Loaned for  
microfilming, 1991. A&M 3099.**

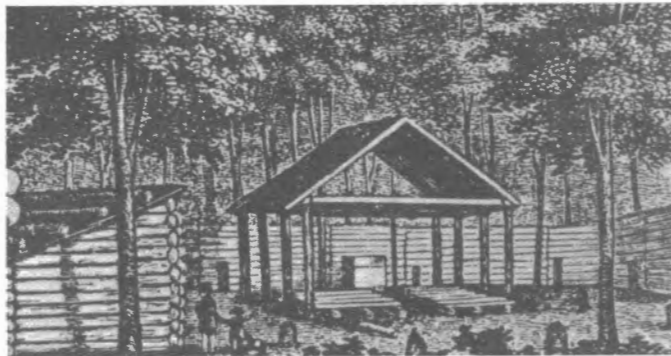
A diary of an overland frontier journey to the California gold fields by H. B. Heiskell. The account is about traveling from the Rockies to the Sierras. As part of a wagon train, Heiskell mentions fellow passengers and the daily events of the journey. He notes in detail the scenery, particularly the character of the



soil and streams. Mention is made of Native Americans/First Nations Peoples, namely the Paiute, Shoshone and Ute. Rumors are related about prices in California, the death of President Polk, and the Mormon settlement at Salt Lake City. The volume also contains a scrapbook portion composed of newspaper clippings about various members of the Heiskell family of Tennessee and related families such as Wallace, Roberts, Frierson and Witzmann.

**Oak Grove Baptist Church. Volume and papers, 1853-1959. 2 in. Loaned for microfilming, 1991. A&M 3096.**

Articles of faith, rules of decorum, meeting minutes, membership rolls, and a church history of a Taylor County church of the Regular Baptist denomination. The records reflect the growth and problems of a church which changed its name and location from Laurel Run to Oak Grove and part of whose records were lost in a fire. Mention is also made of belonging to the local Goshen Baptist Association, whose most prominent member is the historic sister church, Forks of Cheat Baptist.



*"A Religious Encampment in the Mountains, In 1885."*

**Pulaski Iron Company. Volumes, 1913-23. 18 in. Acquired, 1991. A&M 3101.**

Seven volumes of typescript copies relating to land titles held by the Pulaski Iron Company. The volumes include deeds, leases, chancery suits and correspondence concerning land titles



*"Erecting Bee Hive Coke Ovens," McDowell or Mercer County, circa 1890.*



held by a Virginia firm in McDowell County, West Virginia. Mention is included of exceptions for rights-of-way, public utilities, and school lots, and of improvements and development of the land as well as determination of the legality of titles. Five volumes concern settlement of a title for lands of the Bouvier-Iaeger Coal Land Company, one volume relates the exchange of land between the Watson Coal Company and the Houston Collieries Company, and one volume pertains to the acquisition of the Shawnee Coal and Coke Company with particular mention being made of its coke ovens.

**Thrasher, Leslie. Papers, photos and volumes, 1912-87. 1 ft. Loaned for microfilming, 1991. A&M 3097.**

Correspondence, sketches, illustrations and papers of a magazine illustrator, Leslie Thrasher (1889-1936), originally from Piedmont, West Virginia. Best known for the humor in his illustrations, his career started in 1912 after he had finished attending the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the Ecole de Grande Chaumiere in Paris. During World War I he was part of the camouflage regiment of the 40th Engineers, U.S. Army, serving in France, where he was wounded by poison gas at the Battle of Belleau Wood. At the height of his career in the 1920s and 1930s he did many magazine covers for the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Liberty Magazine* as well as advertisements for Fisk Tire and Cream of Wheat, among others. Thrasher is often compared as an artist to his rival and friend Norman Rockwell, and more than likely would have been as famous as Rockwell if he had not died in 1936 as a result of an accidental fire at his home on Long Island, New York. He is also noted for often using his hometown scenes, relatives and friends



*Season's Greetings!*

*Christmas in Grafton, West Virginia, ca. 1900. Photo by W.R. Loar.*

as models for his illustrations. Most of the correspondence is that of his daughter, the donor, and involves exhibits and sales of his art.

West Virginia and Regional History Collection Newsletter  
 Colson Hall  
 Morgantown, WV 26506

Nonprofit Organization  
 U.S. Postage  
 PAID  
 Morgantown, WV  
 Permit No. 34



*"If it doesn't move, the hell with it,"  
 Jim Davis. See story, page 1.*