

Spring 1991

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West Virginia and Regional History Collection

NEWSLETTER

Volume 7, No. 1

West Virginia University

Spring 1991

WEST VIRGINIA'S PIONEER INDUSTRY; SALT MAKING IN THE KANAWHA VALLEY

Did you ever pause to ponder the price of salt? Perhaps you have. Most of us realize that salt is quite a bargain, even at today's "inflated" price. It wasn't always so. Salt was a precious commodity in the days before refrigeration. In ancient times it was often used as currency, even traded ounce for ounce with gold. In eighteenth-century America salt was one of the few necessities that pioneers carried with them over the mountains.

According to one writer, an early Monongalia County storekeeper once paid \$1,000 for less than a bushel of salt. A little further south, in Harrison County, one of the first homicides in West Virginia resulted from a dispute over "a measure of salt"! Considering its value, it is no wonder that the discovery of salt in West Virginia had a profound impact upon the development of the pioneer economy.

Indeed, though its importance is little remembered today, salt triggered an industrial revolution in West Virginia long before the state's economy became linked to coal. Its manufacture spurred rapid population growth, transportation improvements, and the rise of the local banking industry. And, when salt making subsided, the economic infrastructure that it had created facilitated the development of the fuel and chemical industries which continue to influence the economic well-being of the Kanawha Valley and the state to this day.

Knowledge of West Virginia's "salt licks" actually predates the arrival of European settlers by almost a century. Local Indian tribes informed explorers as early as 1671 of the existence of salt springs on the Kanawha River. The story of Mary Ingles' travels with, and dramatic escape from, Indian captors in 1755 focused attention specifically on the salt springs near present-day Malden where the Indians put their captives to work boiling brine.

When the Indians were finally driven from the area in the 1770s, settlement along the Kanawha proceeded rapidly. Daniel Boone himself built a cabin almost directly across the river from the "great buffalo lick."

Considering the value of salt on the frontier, it didn't take long for the local settlers to realize the commercial potential of the salt springs. In 1793, Joseph Ruffner bought a tract of 502 acres at the point where Campbell's Creek flows into the Kanawha River with the intention of embarking upon salt manufacture. Four years later, Ruffner leased the parcel of land containing the great salt lick to Elisha Brooks, who pioneered salt making in the area.



A J. Q. Dickinson Company salt well in operation on the banks of the Kanawha River near Malden, West Virginia, ca. 1910.

Brooks's manufacturing process involved sinking a "gum" (a hollowed-out log, often ten feet or more in length) into the mud which surrounded the salt lick. The brine which seeped into the gum was then dipped out with a "swape" (a long pole on a pivot, with a bucket at one end) and boiled in huge iron kettles until the water evaporated. Brooks's operation consisted of 24 kettles in 1797 and was capable of producing 150 pounds of salt per day. The product sold for 8 to 10 cents per pound.

When Joseph Ruffner died in 1802, his sons, David and Joseph, inherited the springs. Over the next decade the brothers introduced several advances. By drilling into the rock at the bottom of their four-foot diameter sycamore gum they obtained

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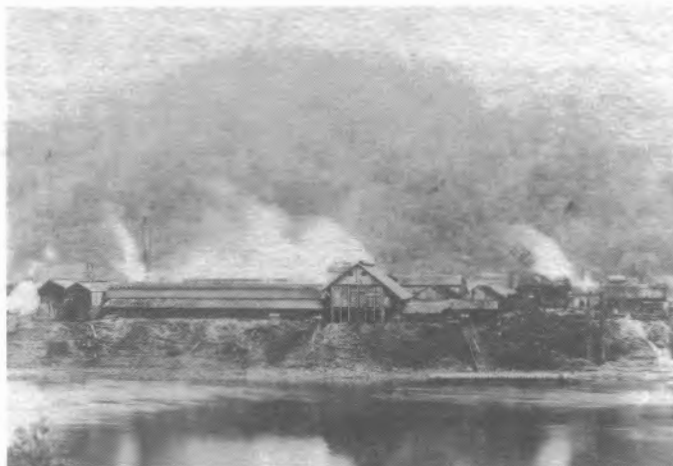
EDITOR: John Cuthbert ISSN 1041 - 8695

a brine which could produce a bushel of salt with less than half the water. Intrigued by this success, a younger Ruffner brother, Tobias, became convinced that a great saline reservoir lay further down. He constructed an auger capable of drilling deep into the rock and set to work. At a depth of 410 feet he encountered an artesian well from which spouted a stream of clear, sparkling brine. His brine could produce a bushel of salt from 45 gallons of water; Brooks had required 500 gallons.

Kanawha salt soon gained a wide reputation for its strong taste, reddish color (from iron impurities), and superior qualities for curing butter and meat. Distributed up and down the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, "the red salt from Kanawha" was considered by many to be the finest salt in the country. As a result of its popularity, others were quick to emulate the Ruffners' success. By 1814, there were 52 salt furnaces in the area which came to be known as Kanawha Salines.

The Ruffners' simple innovations were only the first of the technological advances that revolutionized the salt industry during the nineteenth century. During the 1820s, the steam engine replaced hand and horse-mill power in the drilling and pumping of new wells. And by mid-century improved drilling mechanisms, sophisticated steam furnaces and "multiple effect evaporators" made the pots and kettles of Elisha Brooks's day obsolete.

In one area, however, progress proved to be a mixed blessing. From the outset, Kanawha salt makers had eagerly sought improvements in transportation in order to expand their markets. They lobbied for a turnpike connecting the Kanawha and James rivers in order to facilitate trade with eastern Virginia, and sought navigation improvements on the Kanawha and Ohio rivers in order to reach midwestern consumers. When the steamboat made its appearance on the Ohio, several Kanawha salt makers



The Dickinson Salt Works, ca. 1910.

A note on the reverse of this photo states, "This is the only picture in existence showing salt loaded on the barge for ferrying across river where it was loaded on C&O Railroad. The New York Central Railroad had served the plant for years before this picture was taken, but due to higher freight rates by the NYC, it was still possible to ship by C&O to some points at a savings."

even invested in their own steamboat. Improved transportation brought intense competition, however, and combined with other factors, competition brought the price of salt down from \$1.50 a barrel in 1819 to just \$.30 a barrel in the 1820s. For the next four decades, Kanawha salt makers struggled vainly to limit production in the hope of easing a glutted market.

The shortage of labor west of the Alleghenies posed yet another problem. The population grew rapidly in Kanawha County between 1810 and 1850 (from under 4,000 to more than 15,000) but, ironically, the ancillary industries and services that were spawned by the salt industry siphoned off most of the available laborers. In 1830, for example, some 200 men found employment in the production of barrels for shipping salt. Hundreds more worked as blacksmiths, boat builders, and river roustabouts while still others labored in the budding coal and natural gas industries which supplied the fuel for salt production.

In truth, harsh working conditions made salt making itself an occupation to be avoided. Consequently, many local manufacturers turned to slave labor as the century progressed. By 1850, Kanawha County's slave population, at 3,140, was the highest west of the Alleghenies. Although working conditions were harsh, industrial labor often provided slaves with more autonomy than plantation labor. In addition, the proximity by river to the free state of Ohio facilitated escape from slavery. This reliance upon African-American labor continued after the Civil War. Indeed, at a time when employment opportunities were few, the salt works provided a welcome haven for many ex-slaves. One former slave, Booker T. Washington, worked for a time as a barrel loader at one of the largest Kanawha salt companies after being emancipated.

Salt production in the Kanawha Valley reached its peak in 1846 at 3,224,786 bushels. Thereafter, a decline ensued which was triggered primarily by falling prices resulting from overproduction. The decline was hastened by the Civil War, which disrupted transportation, labor, and consumer markets, and by a series of highly destructive floods that wreaked havoc along the Kanawha during the 1860s. Finally, in the post-war years, the salt industry largely abandoned the process of evaporating salt in



Young Booker T. Washington moved from a Virginia farm to this Malden house with his family after being emancipated. Washington found employment in the salt industry by day while attending elementary school at night.

favor of mining vast underground salt beds in the Midwest.

Of the many salt works located at the mouth of Campbell's Creek around 1850 only one, the J.Q. Dickinson Salt Company of Malden, survived into the twentieth century. In the absence of local competition the Dickinson Company actually thrived during the early twentieth century. Production reached its peak in 1934, just over a century after the company's founding. Bust followed closely on the heels of boom, however, for within a decade the rising cost of coal led to a halt in production.

The Dickinson Company continued to produce inorganic bromides for the photographic and pharmaceutical industries for four more decades. With the company's closing in 1985 nearly two centuries of manufacturing linked to "Genuine Kanawha Salt" came to an end.



J.Q. Dickinson Company, 1910. Salt was lifted out of the water in these vats and placed on board walkways to dry.

Recently Opened Dickinson Papers Highlight Regional History Collection's Salt Holdings

The West Virginia and Regional History Collection holds a rich collection of original source material concerning the Kanawha salt industry. In the Kanawha County Court Records, one can find the deed for Ruffner's purchase of the land on which the first salt works was established, as well as many other items relating to the legal activities of the prominent Kanawha salt makers. There are also account books for many of the early partnerships (Donnally & Steele, Twyman & Dickinson, Ruffner & Donnally, and others) which provide detail on the earliest operations. These are complemented by letters in the Lewis Family papers, the Ruffner Family papers, the Woodbridge Mercantile Firm's records, among other collections, concerning the efforts of salt manufacturers to form marketing pools or to limit salt production.

The largest and most important group of materials are the records of J. Q. Dickinson and Company. The first Dickinson

involved in salt making was John Q. Dickinson's grandfather, William, who began business under the partnership firm of Dickinson and Shrewsbury. John Q. Dickinson, who eventually gave the company its name, was born in Bedford County, Virginia, in 1831. After serving in the Virginia Cavalry during the Civil War, he took over the salt business in Malden and steered the company through difficult times. As other salt makers ceased production, J. Q. Dickinson & Co. became the sole manufacturers of "Kanawha Salt."

The Dickinson & Co. records in the West Virginia Collection include the company's correspondence, ledgers, and journals documenting this important firm from the 1870s through the 1940s, the period when John Q. and later his son, Charles C. Dickinson, ran the business. Particularly noteworthy in the more

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**MALDEN,
WEST VIRGINIA**

Among the many saline-derivative products offered by the Dickinson Company was "Dust-Lay" which, according to this advertisement, was capable of "dust proofing" virtually any road surface.

than 20 reels of records already microfilmed for preservation purposes, is the voluminous correspondence on the wide-ranging business and social activities of these prominent Kanawha County citizens. Included are letters relating to church building and Sunday School affairs in Malden, the acquisition of property for the Girl Scouts, production during World War I, and the Kanawha County Law and Order League.

The Dickinsons' business activities were not limited to salt. The records document their skills and operations in coal mining, banking (John Q. Dickinson was one of the founders of the Kanawha Valley Bank), oil and gas drilling, and even sugar production on lands the Dickinsons acquired in Cuba.

Indeed, much of the history of West Virginia's economic development in the early twentieth century can be traced through the Dickinson family back to Kanawha Salt. Thus, although the closing of the Dickinson Company in 1985 ended almost 200 years of salt making on the Kanawha, this pioneer industry continues to make its presence felt in present-day West Virginia.

Early West Virginia Art and Artists Subject of Research

If our readers were called to ponder the history of the arts in West Virginia, chances are that fiddle tunes and quilts would come more readily to mind than fine paintings and symphonies. Indeed, West Virginia's rich folk arts heritage is one of the Mountain State's most celebrated assets, and in recognition of that heritage, folk festivals, workshops and traditional arts studies programs flourish today throughout the state and region.



"A View of the Cheat River, W. Va." by William S. Young, 1872. West Virginia Art Collection, West Virginia University Libraries.

Largely eclipsed by this celebration of the vernacular, are the study and appreciation of the state's considerable heritage in what some historians have referred to as the "cultivated" areas of the arts.

Consider the following data from the West Virginia Business Directory: there were 31 piano dealers in West Virginia in 1900; there were 347 music teachers — 26 in Wheeling alone. "Opera houses" and "Music Halls" existed in almost every town of any size — Wheeling (2), Martinsburg (2), Charleston, Huntington, Clarksburg — and occasionally in smaller settlements like Mannington, Spencer and Salem, as well. There were 49 brass and bugle bands, and four "orchestras," at least one of which was "symphonic." An earlier Wheeling directory lists five "singing societies" in that city in 1884: the Arion, the Beethoven, the Germania, the Maennerchor and the Mozart societies! Clearly, West Virginia's musical past is more diverse than we often recognize today.

Perhaps even less well known is the history of the fine arts in the Mountain State. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a good paragraph on the topic. According to Interim Curator John Cuthbert, the story of West Virginia art history is a long and



"The Falls of the Kanawa [sic], West Virginia," by John H. B. Latrobe, ca. 1835. Collection of Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV.

interesting one. Cuthbert is currently studying early West Virginia art history with the assistance of a WVU Faculty Senate Research Grant.

The earliest Western art with West Virginia roots, Cuthbert notes, stems from the exploration and early settlement era. In the age before photography, artists were essential in documenting the flora and fauna as well as the topographical features that were encountered during exploration. Many explorers were artists in their own right. Included in this group are early botanists and naturalists such as John Bartram and J.J. Audubon, both of whom are known to have visited the region.

The state's subsequent artistic development paralleled that of West Virginia's neighboring states. The need for commercial art grew as trade centers developed within the Eastern Panhandle and along the Ohio and other river valleys. Successful farmers and merchants in these areas comprised a new market which the nation's adventurous itinerant portrait painters eagerly filled.

Current events, curiosity and the search for new horizons eventually brought a host of illustrators, artist-reporters and landscape painters into the region, including many of America's leading artists — Thomas Doughty, Russell Smith, Frederick E. Church, to name a few.

Scenic Harpers Ferry became one of the most oft-depicted towns in America during the early nineteenth century. Its strategic location at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers assured the continuance of its popularity during the later nineteenth century as well, when civil war gripped the nation. Winslow Homer, Thomas Nast, and Alfred R. Waud number among the legion of artist-reporters and illustrators who visited the area during that cataclysm.

Gradually, the state produced native talent in men such as David Hunter Strother and William Robinson Leigh, and in women such as Blanche Lazzell.

Born in Martinsburg in 1816, Strother was the highest-paid illustrator in America during the 1850s. Later a Civil War soldier and U.S. ambassador to Mexico, his penname, "Porte Crayon," was a household word in mid-nineteenth century America.

William Robinson Leigh was born in Berkeley County in 1866. After studies in New York and Europe, he went west to make his mark alongside Frederick Remington and Charles Marion Russell as one of the nation's foremost illustrators of the Old West.

Monongalia County's Blanche Lazzell headed in the opposite direction to fulfill her destiny. After earning two degrees in art at WVU she travelled to Paris, where she absorbed the principles of modern art from the leading lights of the avant garde. Transplanting and developing these theories in Provincetown, Massachusetts, she is considered today to be one of the foremost pioneers of modern art in America.

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Otis Rice, *Montgomery*

While Strother, Leigh and Lazzell are certainly among the most notable West Virginia artists of the past, they are by no means the only ones. In fact, Cuthbert's study has yielded information about several hundred artists ranging from sign painters and china decorators to portraitists and landscape painters, native or just passing through.

As noted above, little information regarding the topic exists in print. Thus, most of Cuthbert's data has been drawn from old newspapers, census returns, city directories and other archival resources. Occasionally, information has been acquired directly from the artists' descendants, collectors who own their work, or local historians having knowledge of a particular artist who may have worked in their area.

Indeed, readers with a knowledge of artists or artwork relating to the state, dating from the colonial era up to the project cutoff date of 1914, are urged to contact Dr. Cuthbert.

**West Virginia Day Poster to Feature Captain
John Smith's Map of Virginia**

Explorers, pioneers and Native Americans will come under scrutiny on June 20, 1991, when the University celebrates West Virginia's 128th birthday. Focusing generally upon pioneers and the frontier in America and, specifically, upon the settlement era in West Virginia history, this year's program will include all the traditional elements as well as a few new ones!

In accordance with a time-honored tradition, 128 copies of the 1991 commemorative West Virginia Day poster will be awarded to the first 128 visitors to the theme exhibit in the Mountainlair's Grandview Gallery. The poster will feature the Regional History Collection's exquisite copy of one of the most influential, and most beautiful, maps of early Virginia — the 1630 Hondius-Blaeu imprint of Captain John Smith's NOVA VIRGINIAE TABULA.

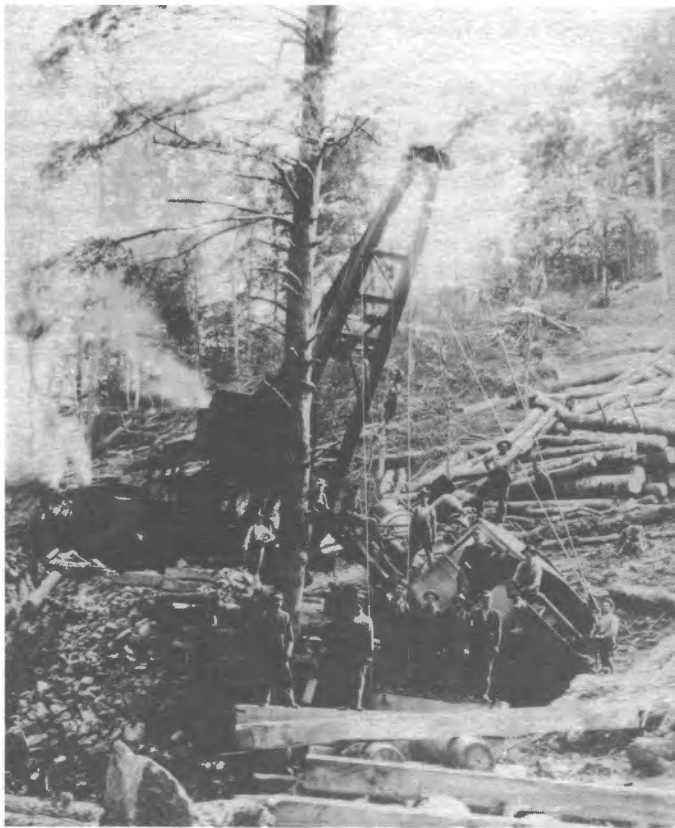


NOVA VIRGINIAE TABULA. Based on the hand-drawn maps of Captain John Smith, this 1630 Dutch map provided many Europeans with their first glimpse of the New World.

SELECTED ACCESSIONS LIST

Bagdon, Philip. Volumes and papers, 1876-1976. 2 1/2 ft. Loan for photoduplication, 1991. A&M 3070.

Notes compiled by Philip Bagdon, which were used by Dr. Roy Clarkson to complete his history of the logging town of Cass entitled *Beyond Leatherbark: The Cass Saga* (Parsons, WV: McClain Printing Co., 1990). Bagdon's notes, composed of maps, tables, quotes from newspapers, correspondence, and business records, are arranged chronologically and topically, covering subjects important to the history of Cass, the Greenbrier River Valley and east-central West Virginia. Subjects mentioned are land purchases, timber appraisals, railroads, conservation and forest management, the lumber industry, and local social and economic development. Prominent names mentioned are Joseph K. Cass, James C. Lacey, John G. Luke, Edwin Mower, S. E. Slaymaker, E. P. Shaffer.



Logs and locomotives in Pocahontas County, ca. 1900.

Canaan Valley Alliance. Papers, pamphlets, and photos, 1979-1984. 2 ft. Gift, 1991. A&M 2781.

The correspondence, newsletters, photographs, and brochures, with related newspaper clippings and government publications, of a nonprofit conservation organization, the Canaan Valley Alliance, formed to oppose the Allegheny Power Company's proposed Davis Power Project. The Project would have built a dam and created a lake in Canaan Valley, displacing its original wetlands. The records document the mobilization of an effective campaign on an ecological issue. The Alliance, together with other environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, successfully opposed dam construction in the Canaan Valley.

Clutter, George W. Papers, 1846-1855. 96 pages. Transfer, 1991. A&M 3079.

The Mexican War letters of Capt. George W. Clutter of the Monongalia "Mountain Boys," attached to the United States 13th Regiment, Company B. The letters contain information about recruitment and deployment of the unit. Clutter describes in detail the land and customs of Mexico, particularly the territory between Vera Cruz and Mexico City.

[His expressed opinions are indicative of expansionist attitudes then prevalent among Americans.]

Creigh, Thomas. Ledger, 1833-41. 1 volume. Transfer, 1991. A&M 3078.

Thomas Creigh, a Greenbrier County pioneer and land speculator, was a long-time Lewisburg merchant. Born in 1766 in Ireland, he emigrated to America and settled in Greenbrier County in the 1790s. He became a relative, through marriage, of Col. John Stuart, a local prominent citizen. This ledger documents the trading activity of his general store, and is especially reflective of the bartering system which characterized much of the nineteenth century rural economy. Included in the front of the volume is an index of customers which lists many noted Lewisburg residents, including Col. Stuart and Samuel Price.

A. & R. Fisher. Ledger, 1840-1851. 1 volume. Acquired, 1991. A&M 3077.

The ledger of a Wheeling paper manufacturing company of the 1830s and 1840s, operated under the partnership of Archibald and Robert Fisher. The ledger is principally a cash book of receipts and payments from 1840 to 1844 for labor, supplies, sales, repairs, and improvements. Noted for production of coarser types of papers often used for stationery, their Point paper mill employed 17 workers. The company's products were sold throughout the Ohio and Mississippi valleys with a total annual production worth about \$45,000. There are also entries (1844-1851) concerning the settlement of debts and trusts for A. & R. Fisher, as well as the eventual purchase of the Point mill by Alexander Armstrong.

Good Hope Baptist Church. Records, 1822-1969. 6 volumes. Loan for photoduplication, 1991. A&M 3069.

Minutes, membership lists and financial reports of the Good Hope Baptist Church in Reedy, Roane County, which was the leader among area churches belonging to the Good Hope Association. The minutes contain information about baptisms, membership transferrals, the appointment of church officials, church property, and the disciplining of church members. The earliest volume contains the church's rules of governance and later volumes contain the articles of the church's constitution.

Goshorn Family. Daybooks, 1827-1874. 3 volumes. A&M 2426, Addendum.

Daybooks of a Wheeling area farmer, land speculator, landlord and merchant named John Goshorn. The volumes document Goshorn's business activities of investment, rent collection, routine disbursements for labor and farm equipment and the operation of his auction business in Wheeling. Included are copies of his business correspondence indicating his financial importance as a Northern Panhandle antebellum entrepreneur.

Hebron Baptist Church. Records, 1833-1972. 2 volumes. Loan for photoduplication, 1991. A&M 3047.

Minutes, membership lists, church covenants and declarations of faith of the Hebron Baptist Church, located in rural Marion County. Also, a history of the church composed by Mrs. Dore Urich, the wife of a recent church pastor, that recounts the terms of service of its ministers, church membership growth, change of church location and building improvement from log cabin to the present modernized structure.

New River Field Coal Company Records. Papers and volumes, 1878-1956. 11 ft. Transfer, 1991. A&M 2570.

The records of New River Field coal companies located in the vicinity of Fayette County including South Side Coal Co., Scotia Coal Co., New River Co., Star Coal and Coke Co., Cannelton Coal Co., and Dana Bros. Co. The records span the early twentieth century (primarily 1919-1956), occasionally dating back to the 1890s. Correspondents include coal operator associations such as the New River Coal Operators Association, the United Mine Workers of America, and state and federal agencies. Among the topics covered by the correspondence are equipment and supplies, insurance, pensions, and legal matters. Other papers include contracts, leases, deeds, audits and petitions, and store inventories, orders and accounts. There are also production and labor cost reports, royalty reports, coal analysis reports, mine

inventory and inspection reports, and foreman and shipping reports. The ledgers include a coal sales book, a store daybook, rent books, company journals, and payroll record and time books. The records of these companies are representative of the coal mining industry at one of its peak periods in a significant coal producing region of the state.

Parkersburg Typographical Union #357. Papers, 1917-1983. 2 1/2 ft. Gift, 1991. A&M 3073.

The records of an International Typographical Union local comprised of printers working for the Parkersburg Sentinel and the Parkersburg News, which were owned by H. C. Ogden. Included are executive board minutes, correspondence, contracts, apprentice, membership and financial records. There are also copies of the International Typographical Union Bulletin. Topics covered include grievances, arbitrations, negotiations, union policy, jurisdiction disputes and changes in technology, particularly computerization.

Russell, Joshua and William. Daybooks and Ledgers, 1822-1857. 6 volumes, Transfer, 1991. A&M 3071.

Partners in a Sistersville general store, Joshua and William Russell conducted business along either side of the Ohio River between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. These daybooks and ledgers document the trade of their Sistersville store, recording

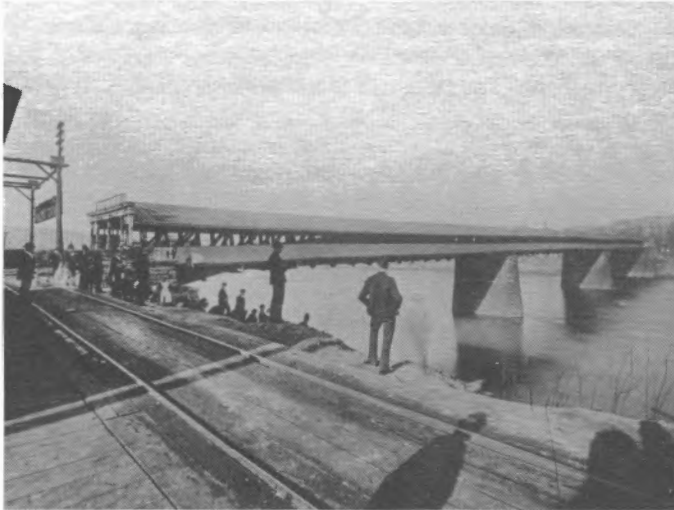


The General Office Staff of the New River Coal Company, 1913.

daily transactions with many examples of barter payment in labor or agricultural goods, and running accounts for each customer. The ledgers include a name index, balances owed and means of payment, and make frequent references to the occupations and residences of the customers.

Soil Conservation Society of America. West Virginia Chapter. Papers, 1946-1965. 1/2 ft. Gift, 1991. A&M 3072.

The West Virginia chapter of a national environmental association of conservation professionals. The chapter was comprised primarily of federal, state and academic employees of such organizations and institutions as the United States Forest Service, West Virginia University, and the West Virginia State Conserva-



Built by the Zane Family during the 1830s and 40s, the Back River Bridge connected Wheeling Island to Belmont, Ohio. Photo ca. 1890. Gift, 1991.

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Colson Hall
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A Dickinson Company salt well. See story page 1.

tion Commission. Arranged chronologically, the records include annual meeting programs, executive council meeting minutes, correspondence, newsletters, speeches, reports, and presentations. The society's purpose was to serve as a medium for exchanging information, "to promote and advance all phases of the science of conservation of soil and water resources," and "to represent, advance and protect the standards of the science of soil and water conservation."

Vincent, George A. Volumes and papers, 1894-1929. 1 1/2 ft. Transfer, 1991. A&M 3068.

The papers of George A. Vincent, a Fairmont lawyer and Marion County judge. Included are case papers and ledgers as well as a series of daily diaries, which not only chronicle his professional life but also provide insight into his personal life, including his avid interest in history and his involvement in building a library in Fairmont.

West Virginia Country Life Movement. Papers, 1919-1927. 2 ft. Gift, 1991. A&M 3050.

Completed questionnaire score sheets, alphabetized by community, of the West Virginia Country Life Movement. Sponsored nationally by the Federal Council of Churches, the goal of the Country Life Movement was to improve social conditions in rural communities throughout the United States. In West Virginia, the Movement worked in cooperation with the West Virginia University Extension Service. The score cards provided a survey format to facilitate evaluation of a set of categories—health, community spirit, schools, churches, agriculture, business and recreation. Also included are programs, newsclippings, and correspondence, especially about water project improvements in some of the communities.

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