Blanche Lazzell Papers Document Artist’s Career

Blanche Lazzell must have seemed an unlikely revolutionary to her professors at WVU around the turn of the century. The daughter of a local farmer of modest means, she was a petite and quiet young woman, and quite conservative in her tastes. Yet, within a few years of her graduation in 1905 she was mingling with the avant garde leaders of modern art.

A recent donation of Lazzell papers to the Regional History Collection sheds considerable light upon the artist’s early life. Included is a series of sketches stemming from Lazzell’s studies at WVU nearly a century ago.

Born in Maidsville, Monongalia County, on 10 October 1878, Neta Blanche Lazzelle (she later dropped her first name as well as the final “e” in her last name) was the ninth of ten children. Family tradition holds that it was almost by chance that she embarked upon a road that would eventually lead her into the highest circles of international art. Her parents, Cornelius and Mary Lazzelle, were determined to see that at least one of their ten children received a college education. Blanche happened to be the one.

Her education began at West Virginia Wesleyan College (then West Virginia Conference Seminary) from which she received a diploma in 1898. She studied briefly thereafter at the South Carolina Co-Educational Institute before entering West Virginia University in 1901.

Initially enrolled as a special student in the School of Arts and Sciences, she decided to pursue a diploma in the University’s recently established School of Fine Arts. The department had but a single faculty member at the time, Eva Emma Hubbard, who had been in charge of the School since its founding in 1897. A Wheeling native and a product of local seminaries, Hubbard had studied art in New York City with Carl Heck during the 1880s. A second faculty member, William Jackson Leonard, joined the department in 1902. A New Hampshire native, Leonard had studied under Jean Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant at the Academie Julien and Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.

Old WVU bulletins give some idea of Lazzell’s curriculum: Professor Leonard taught elementary and advanced drawing as well as the history of art while Ms. Hubbard was responsible for teaching perspective and “isometric” drawing, painting and the principles of color and design.

Graduating in 1905, Lazzell taught locally for a couple of years. She earned additional income by decorating china and porcelain brooches, and retouching photos for a local photographer, L.E. Friend. By 1908 she had acquired the means to continue her art studies at the Art Students League in New York. Among her teachers there...
was William Merritt Chase, one of the nation’s leading artist/teachers at the time.

The next stop on the young artist’s itinerary was Paris where a new style of painting called “cubism” was gaining acceptance. Defined later in life by Lazzell as “the organization of flat planes of color, with an interplay of space, instead of perspective” the style was introduced by Pablo Picasso and George Braque in 1909. Lazzell absorbed the radical principles of cubism and the philosophy of abstraction through studies with Charles Guerin and David Rosen at the Académie Moderne.

Returning briefly to West Virginia on the eve of World War I, Lazzell established a studio in Provincetown, Massachusetts in 1915. The scenic fishing village had become a haven for artists who were displaced by the war. Here, reunited with a band of her Parisian colleagues, she helped to develop a new art form that would interest her for the remainder of her life—the “Provincetown print.”

Whereas woodcut printmakers had traditionally employed a separate block for each color area in creating color prints, the Provincetown printers developed a single-block process in which color areas are separated from one another by large grooves cut deep into the block. The result is a print which is divided up into varying color fields by the white lines which are left by these grooves.

The Provincetown print owes its existence to a handful of artists with a common interest in printmaking who gathered in Provincetown in the spring of 1915. Among this group were four women—Ada Gilmore, Mildred McMillan, Ethel Mars, and Maud Squires—all of whom had experimented with woodcut printmaking in Paris shortly before the war. They were joined by B.J.O. Nordfeldt who had studied Japanese woodcut methods in England and who is credited with introducing the single-block, or “white-line” process. Blanche Lazzell was initiated into this group during the summer of 1916, learning the “white-line” technique from Ada Gilmore’s husband, Oliver Chaffee. Two years later Lazzell participated in the first exhibition of the Provincetown Printers as the group came to be known. Her works gained immediate acclaim and she became one of the form’s chief proponents.

During a second trip to Paris in the early 1920s, Lazzell renewed her study of abstract art. Her work with the Provincetown print had given her a special understanding of two-dimensional space and color. Studying with leading French abstractionists, she began exhibiting cubist paintings at the Salon d’Automne in 1923. She continued to participate in the Salon’s exhibitions for many years after her return to Provincetown in 1925.

Blanche Lazzell (fourth from left) in the “The Seven Widows,” West Virginia Conference Seminary (West Virginia Wesleyan College), 23 September 1897.

Lazzell hard at work in her Provincetown studio in 1932.
Blanche Lazzell emerged as one of America's foremost abstract artists in the ensuing years. She exhibited widely, primarily in the Northeast, doing six or eight one-woman shows a year. She taught painting and wood-block print-making in her Provincetown studio each summer. Though her paintings throughout this period were primarily abstract, she continued to do prints depicting her seaside environs and the flowers which she cultivated about her studio.

During the depression years she found employment with various federal relief programs including the Works Progress Administration. As one of only two West Virginia artists involved in WPA programs, several assignments brought her temporarily back to Morgantown. During the fall of 1934 she was commissioned to paint a large mural for the Monongalia County Courthouse. Entitled "Justice," the painting hung for many years behind the judge's desk in the circuit courtroom. The painting is now in the West Virginia University Permanent Art Collection.

Other commissions included a series of color wood-block prints of various historic Morgantown landmarks. Family members recall that the artist spent the better part of one visit to Morgantown sketching potential subject matter from the back seat of a nephew's car. Three prints were completed: "The Waitman T. Willey House," "The West Virginia University Campus," and "The Monongahela at Morgantown."

The exact number of works she completed for WPA programs is unknown but a list numbering well over a hundred pieces is contained among the artist's papers. A niece recalls that a government representative, "Mr. Perkins," visited her aunt's studio regularly for several years to pick up her work.

Lazzell continued to work and teach in Provincetown throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Occasionally, out of financial exigency, she remained in her studio all year. Normally, however, she passed the harsher months of the year in New York City arranging for exhibits of her work and scouting the galleries for new trends and ideas. She constantly sought to enrich her knowledge of art through contact with other artists and their work. Herself a master and teacher for decades, in 1938 she began studying with abstractionist Hans Hofmann in Provincetown. She continued to do so for several years. Perhaps he learned as much from their relationship as she did.

During the summer of 1949, in recognition of the Provincetown colony's substantial contribution to the development of contemporary American art, the Provincetown Art Association held a series of programs along with a major exhibit entitled "Forum 49." Special attention was focused upon the work of four pioneer abstractionists one of whom was Blanche Lazzell. A major event in the art world, Hans Hofmann, Adolph Gottlieb, George Biddle, Serge Chermayeff and many other important figures came to pay homage to the ground-breaking achievements of the Provincetown artists. A review of the exhibit by art critic Elaine deKooning hailed Lazzell's work as the "most contemporary."

Participants in "Forum 49." Lazzell is seated on the right end of the second row.

Interest in Lazzell's artwork waned in the years immediately following her death in 1956, but a retrospective exhibit at West Virginia University led to a dramatic rediscovery of her achievements in 1979. Four years later her work played a central role in an exhibition of the Provincetown printers at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. These and subsequent exhibits have firmly established Blanche Lazzell's position among the vanguard of American Modernism.

**THE LAZZELL ARCHIVES**

A meticulous record keeper, Blanche Lazzell amassed an extensive collection of personal papers during her lifetime. Embracing notes, diaries, account books, press releases, exhibit catalogs and voluminous correspondence, these archives document the important aspects of her artistic career.

Upon Lazzell's death this material was transferred to the home of the artist's nephew James C. Reed in Morgantown. West Virginia University Art Curator John Clarkson drew upon these archives when preparing a catalog to the 1979 Lazzell retrospective. Clarkson's work led others to the Reed's Park Street home including representatives of the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. Recognizing the great research value of the artist's papers, Smithsonian staff asked to borrow the collection for preservation microfilming. Not long after this was accomplished Mr. Reed decided to place much of the original material in the Smithsonian as well. Perhaps for sentimental reasons Mr. Reed chose to hold on to some of the collection's contents—particularly items with family connections such as greeting cards, personal mementos and photographs. Shortly before his death in 1988, Reed donated these and other materials relating to his aunt's work to the Regional History Collection.

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WVU Women’s Centenary

The West Virginia Collection is helping with a university-wide celebration which will commemorate the admission of women to WVU in 1889 and the first graduation of women in 1891. The WVU Women’s Centenary Celebration, 1989-1991, has a steering committee which is co-chaired by Judith Stitzel, Director for the Center for Women’s Studies—which is sponsoring the event—and Margaret Lucas, Dean of the College of Creative Arts. Stitzel describes the Centenary as an opportunity “to learn how WVU is continually shaped and reshaped by the women and men who pass through its doors.”

As the home of the University archives, the Regional History Collection is assisting researchers in finding information about the first women students. Who were they, where did they come from, what were their lives like during their undergraduate years, and what happened to them after graduation are some of the questions being asked. Our existing collections are providing answers, but frequently there are lacunae in the historical record, the result of a collecting bias which slighted gender-related issues in favor of economic, political, and military history. This has been an opportunity to discover what the strengths and weaknesses of our collections are with respect to women’s history, and as the Center for Women’s Studies gathers photographs, oral histories, and manuscripts, the Collection will serve as a repository for them. If you have or know about materials which will contribute to the Centenary celebration, please call or write to either the West Virginia Collection (304-293-3536) or the Center for Women’s Studies (304-293-7261).

There was a long-standing tradition of educating both men and women in the Morgantown area. Monongalia Academy was incorporated in 1814 for the education of males, and, in 1833, its trustees founded a female seminary, which, on the eve of the Civil War, became Woodburn Female Seminary. Meanwhile, across the border in Ohio there was an example which these Virginia educators might have followed. New England Congregationalists introduced coeducation at the college level to the United States when Oberlin College opened its doors in 1833. It gave its first degrees to women in 1841, and as a stronghold of abolitionist sentiment was the first college to admit blacks, doing so in 1835. Nevertheless, segregation of the sexes remained the rule in Morgantown, and WVU was established by law in 1867 as a university which admitted white men only.

Before the University was two years old, however, the faculty debated the topic and women were allowed to attend classes on an informal basis. But it was not until 1877 that the legislature was asked to reverse itself and to admit women. Declining enrollments in the 1880’s seems to have decided the matter and in 1889 the state legislature passed a law which made WVU coeducational.

Only after the landmark decision of Brown vs. The Board of Education in 1954 were black Americans of either sex enrolled as undergraduate students at the University.

West Virginia Day Celebration to Focus on Public Education

"Educating All the People: Public Schools in West Virginia," is the theme of the third annual West Virginia Day Celebration which will be held on 20 June 1989. Co-sponsored by West Virginia University and the University Libraries, this year's celebration is modeled on last year's successful format with the addition of a birthday picnic and an evening concert which are designed to make the event a little more of a family affair.

Following a tradition which was firmly established last June, a complimentary copy of this year's commemorative poster will be awarded to the first 126 visitors to this year's theme exhibit in Elizabeth Moore Hall!

We hope that the Regional History Association is well represented at this affair which promises to be as enjoyable as it is enlightening.

Schedule of Events

8:30-11:30 a.m. HISTORICAL FORUM

8:30-9:00 a.m. Welcome. Coffee and donuts served in the Robert C. Byrd Reading Room, West Virginia Collection, Colson Hall

9:00-11:30 a.m. "PERSPECTIVES ON 126 YEARS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN WEST VIRGINIA, PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE."

Speakers:

Dr. Ancella Bickley, WVU graduate and West Virginia Educator.

Dr. Berlin Chapman, Professor Emeritus, Oklahoma State University, and author of EDUCATION IN CENTRAL WEST VIRGINIA;

Dr. George Parkinson, Curator, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, WVU;

Dr. Diane Reinhard, Dean, College of Human Resources and Education, WVU;

Dr. Lillian Waugh, Program Associate, Center for Women's Studies, WVU;

Moderator: Vaughn Kiger, Visiting Committee for WVU Libraries.

9:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m. EXHIBIT: "Early Statehood Treasures from the West Virginia and Regional History Collection." Appalachian Room, Charles C. Wise, Jr. Library.

9:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m. OPEN HOUSE AND EXHIBIT, College of Mineral and Energy Resources, White Hall.

12:00-2:00 p.m. BIRTHDAY PICNIC. Elizabeth Moore Hall lawn. Mountainlair will provide food for sale or bring your own lunch.

12:00-2:00 p.m. APPALACHIAN FOLK MUSIC. Elizabeth Moore Hall lawn.

12:00-4:30 p.m. EXHIBIT: "Educating All the People." E. Moore Hall. 126 commemorative posters will be awarded to the first 126 visitors.

1:00-3:00 p.m. OPEN HOUSE. Women's Studies Program, Clark Hall.

1:00-3:00 p.m. OPEN HOUSE AND EXHIBIT. Public History and History of Science and Technology Program, Woodburn Hall. Tours of historic buildings on the downtown campus.

7:30-8:30 p.m. CONCERT: WVU School of Music Faculty. Wise Library lawn.

New Members, West Virginia and Regional History Association

PATRON MEMBERS
Mr. and Mrs. Edward B. Hoover, Steinhatchee, FL

REGULAR MEMBERS
M. Bailey, Vienna, WV
William Beeler, Athens, OH
Jo Ann Casner, Carrollton, MD
Ms. Anna Mae Chandler, Morgantown, WV
Mrs. Madeline W. Crickard, Beverly, WV
Neville E. Dilley, Louisville, KY
Mrs. Doris Eickbush, Cheyenne, WY
Robert Fetters, Chillicothe, OH
Craig Holland, Royal Oak, MI
Thomas M. Hunter, Cornwall, PA
Marlene Jones, Fairmont, WV
S.M. Lantz, Grottoes, VA
Ruth Monteleone, New Orleans, LA
George Purcell, Van Nuys, CA
Virginia Swift, Edina, MN
Arthur Thomas, Pennsburg, PA
Hung Yuan Tu, Ridgecrest, CA
Paul Widem, Kensington, MD
Rosemarie Zagarri, Takoma Park, MD
Most notable is an assemblage of over 300 of the artist’s personal photographs. The pictures range from school photos taken at West Virginia Wesleyan in the 1890s to photographs of Ms. Lazzell and the participants in "Forum 49." Of special interest is a series of sketches dating from the artist’s student days at WVU. The works afford insight both into the artist’s early progress and the nature of the University’s early art program.

Perhaps because the tie between Blanche Lazzell and West Virginia University is such a strong one, we are especially grateful to receive these important materials.

John Cuthbert
Associate Curator

Selected Accessions List


In an unpublished essay, Boswell, editor of the Labor Argus (Charleston's socialist newspaper), describes labor strife in the coalfields at Paint Creek and Cabin Creek. Boswell adamantly opposes Gov. Hatfield's settlement of the dispute and the role of the UMWA in accepting it. In particular, Boswell castigates Thomas Haggerty, a field marshal for the union, for compromising with capitalists whom Boswell believes to be the enemy of labor.


A scrapbook kept by Agnes Peebles, a counselor at a Monongalia County summer camp for underprivileged children, many from Scotts Run. Though run by the Presbyterian Church, the camp was secular in nature and open to youths of all faiths. Included are photographs, song sheets, letters, and reports.


Genealogical research compiled by Raymond H. Coburn on the Coburn/Cobun family and allied families (Queen, Radcliff Coburn/Cobun and Brady) of north-central West Virginia. Research extends back nine generations and covers military service data as well as names of those who first settled in the region, such as Charles Queen, Jr., a pioneer settler of Harrison County.
Interviews and book reviews regarding the life and works of author Julia M. Davis. Interviews center on the author's family history as it pertains to her career. She discusses her father, John W. Davis, who was the 1924 Democratic Presidential nominee, and also her maternal grandparents, who resided in Jefferson County and witnessed the trial and execution of John Brown. Based upon their memoirs and those of their neighbors she wrote a successful play, "The Anvil," about the Brown raid for the West Virginia centennial. The author also discusses the influence of Melville Davisson Post upon her career. Included are a pair of reviews of the body of her literature.

ALS from Peter Garnall of Wheeling to his nephew Mordecai Garnall of Pensacola, Florida, regarding the presidential election of 1840. The author predicts a sweeping victory by William Henry Harrison over Martin Van Buren and states that the Wheeling area is strong in its support of Harrison. He notes the occurrence of several mass political meetings in Wheeling with several thousand participants.

Letters to home by a pair of Ohio brothers serving in the Union army. James M. Hartley served in the Ohio 116th Volunteer Infantry, Company B, stationed at Romney, West Virginia; Winchester, Virginia; Sharpsburg, Maryland; Martinsburg, West Virginia and Richmond, Virginia. Thomas J. Hartley served in an unidentified Ohio regiment at Camp Ripley, Ohio; Stanford, Kentucky and Nicholasville, Kentucky. These letters, most being from James M. Hartley, reflect conditions in the U.S. Army in the field during the Civil War. They mention late payroll payments and occasional shortages of food rations. The correspondence of James M. Hartley contains comments on the battles of Antietam and Chancellorsville and the siege of Richmond.

Letters to home by Jacob Lester of the 1st Veterans New York Cavalry, while stationed in West Virginia which the author refers to as the new state of Kanawha. Written from Clarksburg, Middletown, Kelly's Creek, and Camp Piatt, Lester describes the surrender of Confederates, the discharge of Union troops and the fighting he and his unit did in the Shenandoah Valley, particularly around Harpers Ferry.

An autographed copy of The Night of the Hunter by Davis Grubb along with illustrative sketches and comments by the author inside the covers and throughout the book.

Grubb states that his inspiration for this novel was the Quiet Dell murders of Harry Powers, and his own youthful experiences in Marshall and Harrison counties, West Virginia. Grubb admits to basing the character of Rachel on a person he knew when young who "was more beautiful than my poor powers can portray."

Genealogical data and a letter of Ebenezer Wilson Patton. Patton's letter to M.L. Paullus, Greenfield, Indiana from Clarksburg, West Virginia concerns business, politics, and religion in Clarksburg. In particular Patton describes Methodist churches, Northern and Southern, black and white and notes that Clarksburg is a mecca to blacks in the state because of its churches and free schools. He states that radicalism is unpopular in West Virginia due to the burden of excessive taxation, and mentions a constitutional convention in Charleston called to correct the political defects of the state government.

Correspondence, membership lists, forms, descriptions and by-laws of a self-help cooperative organized and instituted in the vicinity of Scotts Run during the latter part of the Great Depression. A newly ordained minister, Trubee was sent to Scotts Run at the request of local volunteers by the Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church. His assignment was to conduct religious services and to improve living conditions for the unemployed mining families who had not been resettled at Arthurdale. With guidance from Hjalmer Rutzbek of Merom, Indiana, the manager of an institute to aid in the development of self-help organizations, Trubee and the community formed a cooperative that operated a bakery, gardens and food processing (canning) center. Trubee also worked to improve drinking water and sanitation, medical and dental services and recreational facilities in the community. In documenting this work, Trubee's papers reflect the severity of the Great Depression and its persistence up to the eve of America's entry into World War II.
The Reciprocal Economy Project provided money that could be used for community gardens. Scotts Run residents formed a cooperative group to handle their garden harvest. The co-op canned vegetables for the community, ran a bakery and sold fresh vegetables to a Fairmont wholesaler. The canning center, which operated twenty-four hours a day, produced an average of 60,000 cans a season.


Correspondence, book reviews, certificates and pictures of Waddell, a pioneer black veterinarian and author. Waddell's books (People Are the Funniest Animals, The Black Man in Veterinary Medicine, Universal Veterinaryanism, and Historical Facts of the Black Veterinarian) document the little known contributions of Afro-Americans from ante-bellum times to the present in the field of veterinary science.


A compilation of West Virginia farm business records and year-end analyses. This electronic service was provided for cooperating farmers by ELEAC (an acronym for Easy, Low-Cost, Flexible, Accurate, Complete) sponsored in cooperation with land-grant institutions by the United States Department of Agriculture. The program's purpose was to help farmers determine tax status, credit rating and, generally, to facilitate farm management decisions through the analysis of costs for labor, feed, machinery, capital turnover, and production.


Minutes of a Michigan-based company, that had drilling operations in Ritchie County. The records reveal the financial obstacles encountered by the company and how they were resolved. There are also published annual reports for several years indicating changes in market conditions, particularly regarding the foreign export of oil.