Edden Hammons Collection Offers Vintage Fiddle Music to Public

Edden Hammons was such a homebody that his extraordinary musical talent remained a local secret during his lifetime. An inhabitant of mountainous east central West Virginia, he was reckoned by most of his regional neighbors to be perhaps the finest area fiddler of all time, yet, the urge to leave family and home for broader acclaim never overcame him.

Now, thanks to a series of field recordings made by folklorist Louis W. Chappell back in 1947, Hammons’ music is available to a wider audience.

The Edden Hammons Collection, an album containing fifteen fiddle tunes performed by Hammons has just been released by the West Virginia University Press. The album is co-edited by West Virginia and Regional History Collection assistant curator John Cuthbert and Alan Jabbour who is director of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

Hammons, who lived from about 1874 to 1955, was a member of a dynamic mountain clan that migrated from Kentucky to West Virginia at the beginning of the Civil War. A family steeped deeply in tradition, the current generation of Hammonses was first placed in the spotlight back in 1973 when the Library of Congress issued an album featuring both music and reminiscences. Astounded by the family’s collective memory and sense of tradition as much as by their music, a small but devoted group of international enthusiasts lauded the album.

When old field recordings of progenitor Edden Hammons were acquired by the West Virginia and Regional History Collection several years later, plans for the eventual release of an Edden Hammons album ensued. Those plans came to fruition with the release of The Edden Hammons Collection in December. The album comes complete with an illustrated booklet entitled Edden Hammons, His Life and Music.

Surrounded by a family of talented fiddlers, Hammons played the first tunes he learned from his father and uncles on an instrument made from a crooked-neck gourd. As his playing progressed and his repertory of tunes grew, he graduated to a store-bought fiddle.

Following the tradition of the Hammons men, Edden never worked at a steady job—indeed cash jobs were few in the mountains during his time. Instead he filled his days with fiddling, making moonshine, subsistence farming, hunting and fishing. He earned money by whittling ax handles, playing for dances and digging ginseng.

To capture Hammons’ colorful personality, Cuthbert includes in the biographical sketch reminiscences of (continued on page 2)
continued

Edden Hammons Collection

Hammons' three living children, Smith Hammons, Alice Hammons Wilfong and Emma Hammons Triplett. They provide a rich store of anecdotes regarding their father's eccentric life style and exploits ranging from his prowess as a fisherman to the time he was arrested for transporting a suitcase full of homemade whiskey.

They also recall his winning style at local fiddle contests and recount a rare loss to a fiddler which may have been the result of questionable officiating. They remember that on weekends the Hammons household became a gathering place of musicians and musical enthusiasts. To escape unwelcome visitors, Hammons resorted to camping trips or visits to relatives.

The recordings from which the album is taken were made by folklorist Chappell during an ambitious field recording project to document West Virginia's fading musical traditions between 1937-47. A professor at West Virginia University and author of John Henry: A Folklore Study, Chappell recorded nearly 100 performers and 2,000 tunes during that period. A comprehensive catalog and guide to the recordings, edited by Cuthbert, entitled West Virginia Folk Music, was published by West Virginia University Press in 1982.

Among the tunes on the album is "Washington's March," a melody either composed by early family members or at least uniquely preserved by them. Hammons won the 1939 Greenbrier Valley Championship playing this tune. He had learned it "59 years ago and first played it on a gourd covered by a deerskin."

Jabbour analyzes the structure of the various tunes and speculates about their origin. In addition to "Washington's March," the album includes such tunes as "Fine Times at Our House," "Arkansas Traveler," "Love Nancy," "Shaking Off the Acorns," and "Falls of Richmond."

The Edden Hammons Collection album may be ordered for $10.95, plus $.125 for postage and handling, from the West Virginia University Press, Wise Library, P.O. Box 6069, Morgantown, West Virginia 26506-6069.

McChesney's Death

There was a remarkable occurrence earlier this year which illustrates the purpose of this newsletter as well as the reason why the Regional History Collection has a Visiting Committee.

We receive many catalogs from manuscript dealers, though they rarely describe materials within our area of interest—West Virginia and the Appalachian region. Yet, recently a catalog arrived which offered for sale eyewitness accounts of the death, in Tucker County, of Lt. Robert McChesney of the 14th Virginia Cavalry whom the dealer proclaimed to be "perhaps the first Virginia soldier to die on the battlefield" as well as "one of the first martyrs of the Civil War." Offered, too, was a photograph of McChesney which was reproduced in the catalog. It is a striking view of a young Confederate officer in uniform, seated, grasping a sword in his right hand. Fully bearded, he glares at us from a cabinet photo with a look of fierce determination on his handsome face. In fact, he looks quite dangerous, as indeed he proved to be.

Being on the lookout for manuscripts like these, we ordered them on approval. When they arrived at Colson Hall, they proved to be few in number, two photographs and several letters, two of which were eyewitness accounts of McChesney's death. As the letters told the story, he was ambushed on 28 June 1861 when he attempted to break up an election and capture Union troops who were guarding a polling place near St. George. Accompanying him were twenty to thirty men, with whom he planned to "draw the enemy into ambush." While half his force lay in wait, the remainder went onward. On the way they met "two citizens . . . working potatoes in a field" who told them that there was a "regiment of Infantry and a regiment of cavalry" and advised them to withdraw. Taking a hint, McChesney's men "remonstrated" with him "not to go" but "he got off his horse and fitted his saddle blanket and mounted and said I am going and the man that don't
follow me is a coward . . . .” He gave the command “forward march,” and reluctantly the small party advanced down a road with mountains on both sides, “so that we were hemmed in all around.” Suddenly, three hundred infantry appeared to the rear making a retreat impossible. As “cavalry came up the road” from the other direction, both sides exchanged fire. There were few options, “we either had to go into the mountain or be killed or captured . . . .” McChesney and one of his men, Ab Paxton, saw things differently however: they attacked the enemy. The Lieutenant was armed with a “double barrel shot gun, 9 buck shot in each barrel, [a] brace of pistols and sabre and he shot all his Loads and used his saber, and got through and 150 yds up the road before he and his horse was both killed.” Paxton, although seriously wounded, survived, but later met his demise when his horse, who was evidently blind, fell over a steep precipice.

For obvious reasons, the Collection wanted these items: they describe a small but dramatic event at the outbreak of the Civil War, in a county which would become part of West Virginia. The symbolism involved was remarkable. This early clash of arms on the eve of the Battle of Philippi prefigures the character of a war which would resolve fundamental issues, like the future of slavery and majority rule. A rash, Confederate cavalry officer leads what seems, in retrospect, to be a suicide attack against overwhelming odds, and Union troops protect a polling place—the very essence of democracy. What a vehicle to illustrate larger themes which are often difficult to grasp!

As I looked through this new collection, I remembered having heard historians say that extant manuscripts regarding West Virginia history during the statehood period had been preserved and that acquisition of new primary source material was a low priority. The point being made, I guess, was that the time of archivists should be spent cataloging, not accessioning. Another concern was the cost involved. Although we receive many fine collections as gifts, others, like the McChesney papers, must be bought and paid for. The price tag in this case was $1,050.00, an unusually reasonable price for such items, and, fortunately, one we could afford. Perhaps a description of collections lost because we could not afford them, as is often the case, would be more instructive. Yet, whether or not the story has a happy or sad ending, the lesson is the same: to preserve the heritage of West Virginia, the Regional History Collection needs a substantial endowment.

This fund-raising effort has begun, but it needs to assume a more ambitious scope, and to accomplish this goal a visiting committee of approximately twenty people has been formed, representing all regions of West Virginia and the various constituencies interested in its history. The Collection will continue to depend upon the philanthropy of those who donate manuscripts, and the Committee will encourage such giving too, but hopefully, a growing endowment will enable history, like that of McChesney’s fanatical attack on the federal election, to be saved for our children; otherwise, what for us appears as a long ago struggle, for our grandchildren will seem vague and devoid of local color. They deserve to see McChesney’s portrait and read the account of his death.

So a Visiting Committee will help us build an endowment, and it will be on the lookout for appropriate acquisitions wherever they may be, in dealers’ catalogs or in attics. Equally important it will provide advice and counsel, reviewing our work on a regular basis. This newsletter will assist this effort by informing the public of new accessions and other activities regarding the preservation of our state’s heritage. If any reader would like to help, I urge you to contact me or a committee member in your area.

George Parkinson  
Curator

Visiting Committee

John Stealey III—Chairman, Shepherdstown
William Adler, Weston
Robert Conte, White Sulphur Springs
Charles Daugherty, Institute
Dorothy Davis, Salem
William Dickson, Ronceverte
Florena E. Duling, Scherr
Sue S. Farnsworth, Wheeling
Beverly Fluty, Wheeling
Helen S. Gerwig, Parkersburg
Beth Hager, Huntington
Holly Hoover, Wheeling
Vaughn Kiger, Morgantown
Thomas J. Knight, Morgantown
Margaret Little, Morgantown
Brooks McCabe, Charleston
Susan Maxwell, Clarksburg
Fred Newbraugh, Berkeley Springs
Otis Rice, Montgomery
Small Town Life Subject of Photographer’s Career

Imagine a hazy, hot summer afternoon in a turn-of-the-century town. A solitary horse kicks up some dust as he pulls a buggy into the shade of a front porch. A dog barks at children playing in a yard. Up the street, a coal bucket and iron pots hanging from a porch roof advertise the dry goods store.

For nearly half a century, this small-town scene was the subject of photographer Jacob H. Gerbrick's work. The proprietor of Gerbrick Studio and Camera Shop in Martinsburg recorded daily life in the towns and country throughout West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle. He was also an avid collector of old regional photographs.

The fruits of Gerbrick's life-long labors are now part of the Collection's photo archives. Gerbrick operated his studio in Martinsburg from 1919 to the mid-1960s. The majority of the photographs were taken in Martinsburg, Shepherdstown, Charles Town and Harpers Ferry. The work ranged from photographs of buildings and streets, churches and residences, to fraternal organizations, businesses, weddings and Martinsburg's annual Apple Blossom Festival. Other photographs depict graduating classes at Shepherd College, Storer College and regional schools.

A photograph of the front of the J. C. Penney Co. establishment shows that the mid-summer clearance sale was under way. More than forty years ago, women's sheer dresses were 98 cents, and men's wash suits, at $3.98, were guaranteed not to shrink!

The Gerbrick photographs provide a vivid documentary of everyday life in the Eastern Panhandle of the state. They are a welcome addition to our holdings and should prove useful to our many researchers who are looking for historic photographs.

West Virginia Newspaper Project Continuing

Anyone who has ever undertaken serious historical study is well aware of the value of old newspapers. As a chronicle of society, newspapers report history from a contemporary perspective, often in the most intimate detail. In addition to eyewitness testimony, they offer editorials, obituaries, humor, and of course advertising, all of which provide the researcher with a sense of context—a feel for the times.

Since the first issue of The Potowmack Guardian came off the press in 1790, nearly 1,400 newspapers have been published in West Virginia. Embracing such stalwart dailies as the 135-year-old Wheeling Intelligencer, and also short-lived topical titles like the Temperance Star, the Derrick Herald, or The Knapsack, which was published by the 5th Virginia Volunteers during the Civil War, the state's journalistic history is fascinating.

Charged with documenting and preserving this important legacy, the Regional History Collection is continuing its efforts to locate, preserve and establish bibliographic control over all surviving West Virginia newspapers. The present thrust actually began two years ago when the Collection officially embarked upon the West Virginia Newspaper Project as part of a nationwide newspaper preservation program being sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Having completed a preliminary survey of the holdings of more than 200 state and national repositories and private collections the job of coordinating a broad microfilming and preservation program lies ahead.

The by-product of the project, a comprehensive catalogue to West Virginia newspapers, will be entered into the nationwide computer catalogue system established by the Library of Congress and the Online Computer Library Center in Columbus, Ohio. Researchers across the nation will then have access to the information at any of the 5,000 OCLC terminals that are currently in use at libraries and historical societies throughout North America.

According to project director Harold Forbes, the West Virginia and Regional History Collection currently maintains the most extensive collection of state newspapers in existence. Holdings include about 14,000 reels of microfilmed material and copies of the area's first newspaper, The Potowmack Guardian which was established in Shepherdstown in November, 1790. All newspapers, whether original or microfilmed, are stored in special, environmentally controlled areas designed to preserve them.

Anyone with a knowledge of West Virginia newspapers that may have thus far escaped attention is urged to write or call us.
Selected Accessions List


A brief account of the Civil War battle, written by L. Johnson and illustrated by the author with drawings of the Union Camp, courthouse, and schoolhouse at Beverly, Virginia.


The papers and receipts of sheriff Daniel Lefevre that reflect county business and his legal practice with similar papers of other nearby residents. Also letters, documents and newscuttings concerning the socio-economic, antebellum and Civil War history of Berkeley County, Virginia and Maryland. Included are slave inventories containing descriptions and prices, and letters about the treatment of slaves and their conduct. Specific reference is made to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin.


Diary and photographs of Willard C. Westfall of Little Otter, West Virginia, who served with the Civilian Conservation Corps at Camp P-57 at Rupert, West Virginia.

The journal follows Westfall’s service in the Corps from training at Fort Knox to his discharge. It details day to day life in the camp. The collection also includes a songbook, “Standard Songs, Old and New,” which was used in camp.

An 82-page manuscript order and letter book (29 July 1861-13 February 1862, Virginia) of the Confederate States Army of the Northwest detailing the operations of the Cheat or Valley Mountain campaign of 10-15 September 1861 and the “Romney Campaign” of 9 January-5 February 1862. Both campaigns were unsuccessful efforts to dislodge Federal forces from the upper Potomac region.

The earliest confrontation between McClellan and Jackson and Lee (the latter operating through surrogates) is also chronicled. The letter book illustrates the indefinite chain of command in the early Confederate Army and portrays the Army's efforts to institutionalize itself. Included are copies of 3 signed Autograph documents, 35 signed Documents, and 8 Letters signed by the later confederate General, C. L. Stevenson, the Adjutant General of the Army of the Northwest commanded by General W. W. Loring.

Noteworthy are the letters written during the Romney Campaign on the days of 9, 25, 28, 29 January 1862 which indicate the suspicions of W. W. Loring and C. L. Stevenson regarding the wisdom and motives of their deployment by T. J. Jackson. The letters cite intelligence reports concerning the actions of Federal troops in and around Cumberland including construction of pontoon bridges to cross the Potomac. Also noteworthy is an 11 October 1861 letter from W. W. Loring praising the forces under his command at Cheat Mountain for their minor victory in an engagement. The letter indicates the friction between Loring and R. E. Lee, who had earlier failed to hold the same mountain from a major Federal assault.


The papers of Isaac Coston's Clarksburg laundry including employee insurance records (1934-1953) which give vital statistics and wage scales, federal tax returns from 1950-1955, stock information from the 1930s-1950s, blueprints of the building (1958) and photographs of employees at work (1914).


Minutes of the church, 1817-1910, and of the Parkersburg Baptist Association, 1819-1869. Lists and reports of member churches, including Hughes River, Marietta, Bethesda, Sampson Creek, Mount Zion, Reedy Creek, and Elizabeth. Lists of early members (white and black) of the First Baptist Church 1817-1844. An historical sketch of the Parkersburg Baptist Association written by Rev. J. W. Carter in 1869, with a statistical report on member churches, 1818-1869.


Letters to Keadle's family in Williamson, West Virginia, written while he served with the first American army regiment on active duty in France during World War I. Keadle was stationed in Paris and Tours, serving as a clerk. Subjects include his reaction to French customs, wartime civilian life in Paris, fashions and popular entertainers of the day and celebrations held by the American troops.


Written by an unidentified Protestant Episcopal minister as a record of his journey from Upper Marlboro, Maryland, to Randolph County, West Virginia, to inspect a parcel of land that he had acquired. Documents early West Virginia travel, accommodations, and religious practices.


Letters, photographs, typewritten manuscripts and genealogical notes of Minnie Kendall Lowther, West Virginia historian. Research material, notes, pictures and manuscripts of her books, History of Ritchie County and Mount Vernon.
Matewan Massacre. Papers, 1914-1934. 18 items.
Purchase. A&M 2962.

Correspondence between Harold Houston, chief attorney for UMWA District 17, and Floyd Evans of the legal firm of Evans and Sampelle concerning trials after the "Matewan Massacre." Legal affidavits pertaining to the miners' trials of 1922 in Charles Town, West Virginia, and to Red Jacket Coal and Coke Co. and Hitchman Coal and Coke Co's suits against John L. Lewis and John Mitchell of the UMWA. Proclamations of Governor E. F. Morgan concerning the 1921 Mingo County mine strikes. An affidavit dated 1934, complaining of unauthorized union dues checkoffs by the Lang Coal Co. of Eskdale, West Virginia.

McChesney Brothers. Papers, 1853-70. 20 pages.

Five letters concerning the death of Lt. Robert McChesney. (1) St. George, VA, 2 July 1861 from Mary Lee; (2) Holly Wood, VA, 26 Jan. 1863 from Bie Hansbrough; (3) Staunton, VA, 6 May 1889 from W. D. Reynolds; (4) King's River, CA 28 Dec. 1883 from H. Maxwell; (5) St. George, WV, 10 June 1884 from H. Maxwell. Two photographs, one of Lieutenant Robert McChesney in his 14th Virginia Cavalry Militia uniform and the other of Captain Alexander G. McChesney, M.D., 11th Virginia Cavalry, C.S.A. Also a letter from Robert McChesney's commanding officer Capt. J. R. McNutt, 1 May 1861 and his militia commission signed 14 May 1853 by Governor Joseph Johnson appointing McNutt a 1st Lt., 5th Cavalry Regiment, 13th Brigade, Virginia Militia.

Lt. Robert McChesney was killed 29 June 1861 in Tucker County when Federal soldiers ambushed his unit. Thus, he is possibly the first Confederate soldier to die in the Civil War.


Miscellaneous items, dealing mainly with the southern counties of West Virginia, particularly the Miller family of Logan County. Contents include a letter from B. F. Miller of Enterprise, Oregon, to his brother, John S. Miller of Logan, two letters from Tollison Shumat of Raleigh County to his daughter, Clara Shumat Miller, and a letter from John L. Miller of Virginia to Mr. and Mrs. John S. Miller of Logan, describing President Harding's funeral.

Also a letter from West Virginia Governor G. W. Atkinson to Mingo County Prosecutor John L. Stafford (9 Aug. 1899), concerning the extradition and prosecution of the Hatfields, and a sentence of death pronounced on Laban T. Walken in Wayne Co. (1879).

Photographs of Boone County and West Virginia University have been transferred to the Prints Collection.


Civil and criminal cases, deeds, land settlements, estate settlements, bonds, decrees, attachments. Also election records and county road and surveyor reports.


Personal papers of William F. Randolph (1800-61), his father and several of his children. Randolph's father, Jonathan, a Harrison Co. justice of the peace, and his predecessors were prominent landowner farmers near Salem. William F. Randolph who also owned a farm south of Salem on Greenbrier Run, was a surveyor, and later a justice of the peace of early Doddridge Co. Papers concern the estate of Jonathan Randolph and the legal conflict between Isaac Randolph, his son, and other heirs (1848-60), the estate of William F.'s son Ezra Randolph (1854), court settlements in which William F. Randolph was involved (mainly Samuel Bond and Jane Van Horn), W. F. Randolph's business papers regarding the Salem–Harrisisville turnpike (1852-60). Other papers concern land, taxes and debts, local business, stores, churches, schools, and news subscription receipts and records of Randolph and his children. Also W. F. Randolph's estate proceedings (1824-60) and other manuscripts developed on the basis of this collection by the donor about the Randolph family and early Doddridge County.

Papers of William Rumsey, West Virginia University Agricultural Experiment Station entomologist and photographer. Includes correspondence from a friend at Cornell University, Rumsey’s student essays and diaries (1880-1925) and family photographs.

Rumsey’s photographs were transferred to the West Virginia Collection in the 1950s and were placed in the Agricultural Experiment Station and West Virginia Glass Plate Negative Photograph Collections.


Land deeds, indentures, and plat surveys of Tyler County plus the will of Samuel Underwood.

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