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Documenting 'Herstories' in the Ohio Valley at The Filson

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Collection Essay

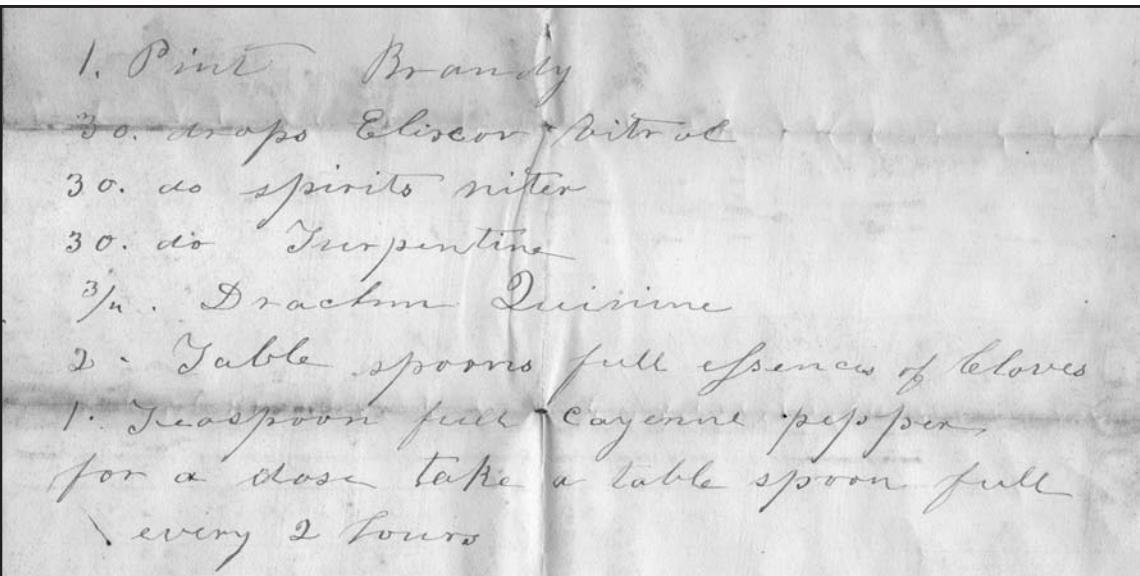
Documenting “Herstories” in the Ohio Valley at The Filson

The influence of women on the history of Kentucky and the Ohio Valley cannot be over-estimated. Women’s actions have impacted virtually every aspect of life in the region, including politics, education, social activities, war, the domestic sphere and courtship, religion and morality, and the arts. As part of its mission to collect, preserve, and share the stories of Kentucky and the Ohio Valley, The Filson holds many collections that document women’s contributions to the region’s history, their struggles and triumphs, and the contours of their daily lives, including interactions with family, peers, neighbors, and business associates. What follows, then, is a brief description of a few collections researchers interested in the history of women in the Ohio Valley may find useful. Those seeking a broad picture of women’s daily lives over a significant period of time will find several unique resources at The Filson, including the Corlis-Respass Family Papers, the Blackburn Family Papers, and the Bullitt-Chenoweth Family Papers.



Julia Ann Tevis (1799-1880) and the Science Hill class of 1860.

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Cure for fever and ague, family recipe from Corlis-Respass Papers.

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The Corlis-Respass Family Papers feature eighty folders of correspondence created by three generations of women discussing daily life, farming, medicine, religion, land, children, family, education, and business. Mary Ann Corlis described both her experience as a newcomer to Kentucky in 1815 and raising her children as a widow. Letters from Elizabeth and Harriet Corlis depict their experiences in school in the 1820s, and later letters from Harriet explain how she managed the Corlis farm in Bourbon County, Kentucky, after her father's death in 1839. Correspondence from Susan C. R. Respass offers researchers insight into her time as a student at the Science Hill Female Academy in Shelbyville, Kentucky, in the 1850s. Harriet (Corlis) Meacham left a wealth of correspondence from the 1840s through the 1860s that discusses daily life, children, and family matters. Additional correspondence from other female descendants of the Corlis and Respass families paint a rich view of women's lives in Kentucky over a significant time period.¹

The Blackburn Family Papers offer a similar resource for the years 1840 to 1896. These papers contain a wide range of letters from women who discuss their concerns, duties, social and economic views, health, and family life. In February 1857, for example, Henrietta Blackburn described her life as a widow with two children, living with her mother:

I try to accommodate Ma & assist her in every way I can, though I've been less than usual this winter for the baby is a great care to me particularly at night & I've not been well for months. I would not give up Mary though she were ten times the care. Poor Mary could feel no anxiety about her little orphan to know how tenderly I cherish her & how fond of me, she is.

While the Blackburn Family papers do not cover a span of time as broad as some other collections, they nevertheless offer a fascinating window into the lives of women in the second half of the nineteenth century.²

The Bullitt-Chenoweth Family Papers contain correspondence from 1786 to 1930, primarily between the women of the Bullitt, Chenoweth, and Fry families, and their friends. The letters depict women’s roles and lives at the Oxmoor family estate while William C. Bullitt, his wife Mildred Ann Fry Bullitt, and their children lived there. They also offer glimpses of life at nineteenth-century frontier army posts in Alabama, Mississippi, and Minnesota territories. In a November 1851 letter, Susan Bullitt Dixon wrote:

My journey to Cumberland was as sluggish, uneventful, and melancholy as the winding of a brook through a sandy plain, or ‘the Desert of Sahara.’ An old woman was fascinated by my bonnet and after gaping at me for an hour, as a prelude to acquaintance asked me the *time of day* (what an insight into human nature that she was)[;] she gave me the history of self and family and wound up by telling me ‘she had two brothers, one a blacksmith, and one a Congressman from Iowa (!!!).’ ‘The Congressman’ was unmarried. I have no doubt but I shall have Benjamin Randall, Congressman, at my feet shortly.

Other such letters provide insight into the nature of nineteenth century courtship and romantic rituals.³

These and other family papers document women’s daily lives. In contrast, the Louisville Women’s City Club Records portray the public activities of the region’s women and the range of social issues that concerned them. Members of the city club involved themselves in the political, educational, and social life of the region, participating in city planning and supporting educational reforms, anti-littering campaigns, and various war efforts. Club records include meeting minutes from 1917 through the 1970s, as well as correspondence, pamphlets, financial records, and bulletins. The Susan Brooks collection includes a speech delivered by Withers Smith that reveals the determination of many women in the region to secure the right to vote: “I come before you with an appeal for justice. The women of America are in bondage. We are slaves to the King. I want to say to you that we are living contrary to the foundation of this government.” Securing the right to vote constituted a major step for women, enabling them to make their influence felt in politics and other areas of public life.⁴

Women recognized that education represented a key component of their efforts to better their social status. As early as January 1838, a young woman learned that “The influence of women is beginning to be felt, and in proportion as their minds are cultivated, are their rights respected.” Many women considered education essential to enhancing their ability to influence society, and the records

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Womans Suffrage Speech.
 By Leed Withers Smith.

I was walking down the street
 a few days ago, I met and old acqu-
 -aintance of mine: He said, he
 understood I had gotten to be quite
 a suffragist; I told him I had
 always been a suffragist, but was
 just beginning to let the people know
 it. I asked him what he thought
 of votes for women; he said he
 thought it would be all right; if
 women could give up the fashions
 long enough to take up the affairs
 of the government; in fact he said
 if they would only give up those
 abominable large hats he would
 be willing for them to vote. I said
 we cant do that; he said he did not
 see any reason why; I said men man-
 ufactured those hats for us to wear
 and we would be afraid of offending

Transcription of Withers Smith Suffrage Speech from Susan Brooks Papers.

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of the Science Hill Female Academy reflect this insight. Julia Ann Tevis established Science Hill in 1825 in Shelbyville, Kentucky, with the motto: “Woman’s mind is limitless. Help it grow.” Tevis believed in providing a comprehensive education for young women, as opposed to teaching them how to run a household, and the school curriculum included science and math. While many records from the years when Tevis directed the school no longer exist, many documents from the subsequent Poynter administration remain. These include school records, correspondence, photographs, newspaper articles, catalogs, and miscellaneous papers. The collection reveals the resounding success of Science Hill, and that many women took advantage of the educational opportunities offered there.⁵

In addition to politics and education, Ohio Valley women created and became members of a variety of prominent social clubs. The Filson holds over one hundred years of records for one such organization, the Monday Afternoon



Sarah Short Barnes (1846-1919),
founder of the Monday Afternoon Club.
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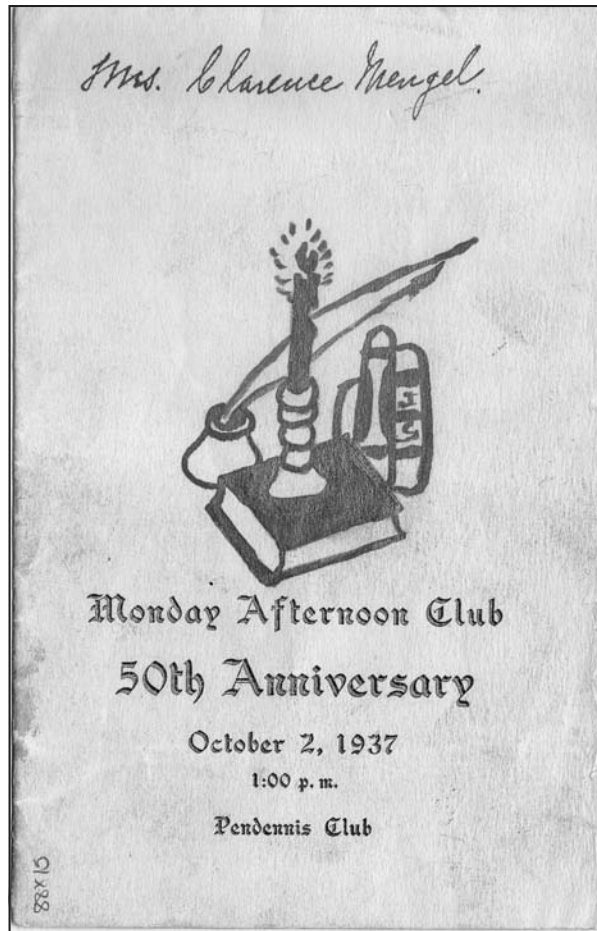
Club, a women’s study group. Each week, a member of the club wrote a paper and presented it to the members.

Records of the club contain minute books from 1912 to 2002, treasurer’s log books from 1903 to 1934, a memory book for 1887-1912, yearly manuals from 1894 to 2002, and miscellaneous material, including some yearly reports, weekly essays, and newspaper clippings. In a pre-

sentation entitled “Love Notes on Libraries,” Mary Norris Helm described “The Highland Library” as “the first library I became aware of—located on Cherokee Road and Highland Avenue.” “In the summer beginning in 1910,”

Helm reminisced, “my sisters, Kitty, Barbara, and Lydia, would push me in a gocart three blocks down the street to make their selections and load the cart with books. On the home trip I had a choice of walking or riding with books piled on top of me.”⁶

While some women focused their energies on social clubs and domestic politics, others traveled to foreign lands to serve their country. The papers of Elizabeth Kathleen Hansbrough offer a fascinating portrait of a woman who served her country overseas during the early twentieth century. A Shelbyville, Kentucky, native, Hansbrough served as a U.S. Army nurse. Her papers include letters written to her family while she was stationed in the Philippines, and while traveling in Asia and Europe. Her correspondence describes Corregidor, Manila, and surrounding areas; American medical personnel; U.S. airmen and other acquaintances; Hansbrough’s social life, hospital duties, and travels; and contemporary racial attitudes, particularly toward the Filipinos. In March 1926, for example, Hansbrough described the burial customs of the Igorrote people of the Philippines:



Program cover for the fiftieth anniversary of the Monday Afternoon Club, October 2, 1937.
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Tuesday morning we witnessed the military funeral of an Igorrote soldier who had died. They were to take his body to his home way up in the Bontoc Mountains—five days journey. A combat wagon carried the body 30 kilometers then bearers would wrap the body in canvas + leash it to a pole + carry for 24 hours, then fresh bearers would take the job. There were all sorts of tales out about how they conduct their burial ‘celebrations.’ Some say that at nightfall of the first day the bearers would *disembowel* the corpse, then start in the ‘smoking’ process—but some say he would not be ‘smoked’ till they reached his home. Anyway the military authorities got this message from the lead man’s father via constabulary officers at Bontoc: ‘Hasten the corpse; it will melt!’ They evidently wanted said corpse to be intact so they could smoke it properly + thereby have sufficient reason for the great celebration.

Hansbrough made a conscious effort to share her wide experiences with her family, offering researchers an invaluable chronicle of her life and times.⁷



Photograph of man and elephant, taken by
Elizabeth Kathleen Hansbrough (1892-1971), likely Bangkok, Siam, 1935.
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The records of other women include more personal perspectives on matters of life, death, and spirituality. Mary K. Craddock’s diaries present one woman’s description of her faith and shifting relationship with God between 1824 and 1854. Craddock’s mood swung between extremes of despair and joy in direct relationship to her religious feelings and convictions. In February 1842, for example, Craddock wrote:

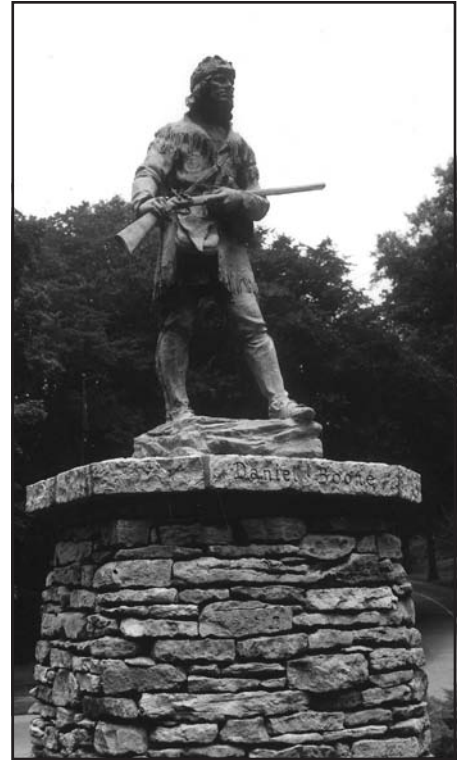
I have yet to lament *self evil*. I find that my will is not swaled up in the will of God. My heart is still unresigned, which leads to discontent. Yet I find access to a throne of grace and then I am with my whole heart often enabled to throw myself and my all in the hands of God by confessing my unworthyness, so that I am enabled to come from my closet much Comforted.

In contrast to Craddock’s personal memoir, other women considered it their duty to spread their faith, joining organizations like the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Adairville, Kentucky, Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The society’s meeting minutes record attendance, dues, and proceedings, including readings, songs, prayers, and exhortations. The collection includes two printed pamphlets, the first describing a society meeting, and the second recounting missionary work among Native Americans. The latter pamphlet notes: “We are there with our Church-buildings and schools waiting to welcome the multitudes that will rush into the territory, as they did not long ago in Oklahoma. There is a great future before the Church, in the glory of which our devoted women will

have a full share. May the pillar of fire and of cloud go before!” Spirituality remained a key component in the lives of many Ohio Valley women, whether they professed their faith to others or questioned their own beliefs.⁸

Finally, women in the Ohio Valley had enormous influence on the arts, and among the most notable female artists in the region was Louisville-born Enid Yandell, a sculptor who achieved widespread recognition. Family correspondence between 1878 and 1930 traces Yandell’s life and work as an art student at the Cincinnati Art Academy; as a pupil of Philip Martiny and Lorado Taft in Chicago, Karl Bitter in New York, and Frederick MacMonnies and Auguste Rodin in Paris; and finally as an accomplished sculptor in New York City and Edgartown, Massachusetts. Letters from family members, especially her mother Louise Elliston Yandell, provide insight into the personal and social lives of a prominent Louisville family, and reveal the family’s financial struggles as the widowed mother worked to provide the best opportunities for her children. Correspondence between 1887 and 1929 concerns Yandell’s professional career, her various commissioned works, the acquaintances and friendships she formed with prominent people, and her social work, especially with orphaned children during World War I. The collection also includes Yandell’s rough sketches and watercolor paintings; her instructional art books and reference material; scrapbooks she compiled containing newspaper clippings and articles about her and other artists’ life, career, and work; exhibition catalogs; price lists; art journals and other periodicals, some containing articles written by and about Yandell; information about the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition and public sculpture in Providence, Rhode Island; and German and French architectural, ornamental, and free standing sculpture design data. While few women made as large a mark as Yandell, many women actively engaged in the arts and gained recognition for their contributions.⁹

Women continue to wield tremendous influence in the life and history of the Ohio Valley, and The Filson remains committed to gathering and making the records of women available to researchers. The collections described in this essay offer a small taste of the wide range of materials documenting the lives of Kentucky and Ohio Valley women held by The Filson. From artist Enid Yandell,



Statue of Daniel Boone by Enid Yandell (1870-1934), Cherokee Park, Louisville, Kentucky.
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to teacher Julia Ann Tevis, to nurse Elizabeth Kathleen Hansbrough, to the many other women who continue to teach, inspire, serve, and create history in countless other ways, The Filson works to collect their stories and make them available to interested researchers.

Eric Willey
Associate Curator

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| 1 Corlis-Respass Family Papers, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter FHS). | 6 Mary Norris Helm, “Love Notes on Libraries,” in Various Weekly Papers, Monday Afternoon Club Records, FHS. |
| 2 Henrietta Blackburn to Em, Feb. 17, 1857, Blackburn Family Papers, FHS. | 7 Elizabeth Kathleen Hansbrough to “Dearest Mother,” Mar. 3, 1926, Elizabeth Kathleen Hansbrough Papers. See also Elizabeth Kathleen Hansbrough Added Papers, both FHS. |
| 3 Susan Bullitt Dixon to Miss Helen and Mr. Bullitt, Nov. 10, 1851, Bullitt-Chenoweth Family Papers, FHS. | 8 Mary K. Craddock Diary, Feb. 1 1842, Mary K. Craddock Diaries; and “The Indian Mission,” Mar. 1898, in Women’s Foreign Missionary Society Records, both FHS. |
| 4 Louisville Women’s City Club Records; Withers Smith Speech, n.d., Susan Frances Brooks Papers, both FHS. | 9 Enid Bland Yandell Papers, FHS. |
| 5 F. C. Offutt to Mary Offut, Jan. 25, 1838, Moxley-Offut Papers; Science Hill Female Academy Records, both FHS. | |