



West Virginia Historical Society

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**The Boyd B. Stutler Collection:
Bringing John Brown's Legacy Back to
West Virginia**

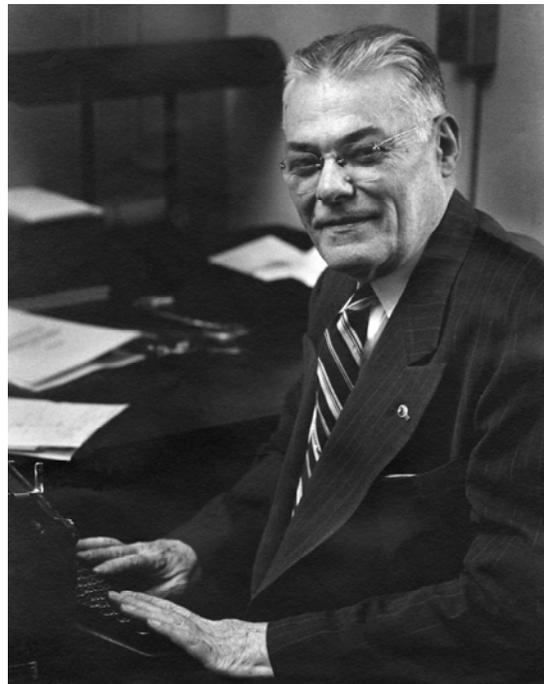
By Stan Bumgardner¹

(Stan Bumgardner is a free-lance historian and museum consultant. He has worked for the WV State Department of Archives and History and the WV State Museum. He is author of *Charleston* (2006) and the 1996 *The Children's Home Society of West Virginia: Children – Yesterday, Today Tomorrow*. He has a BA in history from Marshall University and the MA in Public history from WVU)

Ironically, one of the most famous figures from West Virginia history never lived permanently in what would become the Mountain State. For seven weeks in the fall of 1859, however, John Brown guaranteed his place in West Virginia and U.S. history. His raid on the U.S. Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry polarized the nation over the slavery issue. Following his hanging at Charlestown (now Charles Town), many northerners considered

Brown a martyr who had sacrificed his life to end slavery; most southerners viewed him as a traitorous villain.²

These intense feelings led to a fascination with anything related to the



Boyd Stutler

deceased abolitionist. During the Civil War, Union and Confederate troops who passed through Harpers Ferry and Charlestown collected souvenirs from the raid and hanging—or at least items they thought were related to Brown. Townspeople became adept at fabricating imitation Brown artifacts. Local newspapers jokingly compared the fake collectibles, such as supposed chunks of timber from Brown’s scaffold, to the lucrative medieval business of selling pieces of the cross to unsuspecting Crusaders.

The obsession over Brown artifacts did not end with the Civil War. John Brown artifacts—both real and fake—spread across the country. The popularity of Brown memorabilia continued throughout the 1900s and into the 21st century. Perhaps the most avid 20th-century collector was Boyd Blynn Stutler.

The Life and Work of Boyd B. Stutler

Stutler was born in Gilmer County, West Virginia, in 1889. He was elected mayor of Grantsville at age 22. During World War I, he served in the 80th (Blue Ridge) Division, 314th Field Artillery, and fought in the Meuse-Argonne campaign. After returning to West Virginia, he worked for the *Logan Banner* and *State Gazette* newspapers. While serving as printing clerk to the secretary of state, he witnessed the devastating capitol fire on January 3, 1921.³

About this time, Stutler began amassing what would become a vast collection of correspondence, artifacts, images, poetry, books, and thousands of miscellaneous items related to

Brown, the Civil War, and West Virginia history. Stutler paid book and antique dealers in major cities to watch for original Brown items. The collection eventually grew to a reported 80,000 items weighing more than four tons.⁴

Stutler went to great lengths tracking down and authenticating items. He became one of the leading experts in detecting *fakes*. Stutler noted, “I am naturally suspicious of bricks, pikes, handcuffs and slave shackles obtained at Harpers Ferry.” He later referred to the Brown souvenir business as the “brick racket” and “pike game.”⁵

While many historians focus on the rare Brown items, Stutler’s primary interest was general West Virginia history, as his son William observed, “First, you must understand that my father was a dedicated West Virginian.”⁶ Although less well known than the Brown material, Stutler’s collection contains a wealth of state and local items, including genealogies of Calhoun County families.

Another collecting focus reflects Stutler’s lifelong interest in the American Legion, stemming from his service in the Blue Ridge Division. From 1936 to 1954, he was managing editor of *The American Legion Magazine*. During World War II, he also served as editor of the *National Legionnaire* and was at the scene of intense fighting in the Philippines in 1944. After returning to the states, he chaired the West Virginia War History Commission. He later was chairman of the John Brown Centennial Commission and president of the West Virginia Historical Society. He also

served on the state centennial and Civil War centennial commissions.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Stutler wrote extensively about Brown and the Civil War. His articles were published in *American Heritage*, *West Virginia History*, and *Ohio History*. A series of articles were bound into the collection *West Virginia in the Civil War*. With Phil Conley, he coauthored the popular eighth-grade textbook *West Virginia: Yesterday and Today*. He also wrote a short book *Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! The Story of "John Brown's Body" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic."* The book, published in 1960, examined the history of these two songs that share the same melody. His collection contains dozens of early copies of "John Brown's Body" sheet music.

Stutler's crowning work, however, was never completed. He had intended for many years to write a definitive John Brown biography. Stutler died in Charleston in 1970 at age 80 without finishing the manuscript.⁷

The Boyd B. Stutler Collection

Stutler's legacy lives on through his research, writings, and collection. During the last two decades of Stutler's life, the historical community had begun to recognize him as the leading authority on Brown materials. Robert Munn, former dean of Library Services at West Virginia University, described Stutler's holdings as the "finest single collection on John Brown in existence."⁸ Prior to Stutler's death, West Virginia University attempted to purchase the collection. With the hope of the Brown biography still lingering, Stutler refused the offer.⁹

After Stutler's death, William Stutler selected Dr. Ralph Newman of the Abraham Lincoln Book Store in Chicago to market the collection. Newman priced the materials at \$150,000 and offered the state of West Virginia first refusal. Carolyn Zinn, then director of the Department of Archives and History, pitched the idea to Governor Arch Moore and noted Newman "would be most willing to negotiate." The state declined to make the acquisition. Meanwhile, a West Virginia University official personally examined the collection but was willing to commit only \$65,000 on behalf of the West Virginia and Regional History Collection. Newman's hefty price tag had knocked the state's two largest archival repositories out of the running.¹⁰

The story took a turn in 1975, when Newman was convicted of backdating tax records related to Richard Nixon's vice-presidential papers. Due to Newman's conviction and lack of marketing success, William Stutler hired the Charleston public relations firm of John Deitz & Associates to sell the collection.

The firm was run by John Deitz and James Welden, former aides to Governor Moore. Fearing the collection would be split up among private collectors or lost to another state, Moore authorized the collection's purchase. He considered the material a great addition to the state archives and state museum, which had been relocated to the new Science and Culture Center on the Capitol Complex in 1976. On January 14, 1977, three days before Moore left office, the

state bought the collection from the estate for \$127,500, using money from the West Virginia American Bicentennial Commission and the governor's contingency fund. Deitz & Associates received a \$30,000 commission.¹¹

The Stutler Collection provided the state archives and state museum with their most nationally significant objects, including more than 100 letters written by Brown, a pike and sword used in the raid, a lock and key from Brown's jail cell, and the rope reportedly used in the hanging. In terms of primary-source documents, the collection was one of the first of national importance obtained by the archives.

A controversy ensued when the Stutler collection was delivered to the Cultural Center. Individuals who had seen the collection over the years, including William Stutler, asserted some pieces had disappeared since Stutler's death. An examination of the state archives's collection inventory adds some validity to this theory.

The accession file contains three partial inventories from the period between Stutler's death and the state's acquisition. In 1971, Newman inventoried the collection's letters but provided only a general listing of other items (e.g., 2,500 books, 70 scrapbooks, 225 pieces of sheet music). He failed to mention any artifacts. Newman's second partial inventory closely paralleled the first but specified 25 artifacts, "including a pike used at the Harper's Ferry Raid, a rifle used on the same occasion and other museum items." Notably, the third partial

inventory, by Deitz & Associates in 1976, omitted any mention of the rifle; the collection delivered to the Cultural Center did not include a rifle.¹²

Other discrepancies exist between Newman's inventories and the Deitz & Associates' assessment. The number of autographs, letters, and manuscripts decreases by exactly 100; the count of combined books and pamphlets is down by 100; sheet music numbers 50 less; and the prints and broadsides decrease by 50. Since Stutler never inventoried his collection, the mystery of the potential missing pieces may never be solved. There are two leading explanations: (1) Some of the items were removed and sold from the collection after Stutler's death or (2) Newman and Deitz & Associates categorized items differently, i.e. Deitz & Associates might have labeled 50 of the *prints and broadsides* as *research records*. The second explanation, however, fails to explain the rifle disappearance.

As a footnote, *Charleston Gazette* editor James Haught later insinuated unethical actions were involved in the collection's acquisition. After the purchase, Homer Hanna Jr. and David Carruthers, the respective attorney and accountant for the Stutler estate, assessed the collection's tax value at \$50,000, raising questions about its monetary worth. When asked about the \$50,000 assessment, Hanna and Carruthers pointed to a previously unpublicized appraisal by Newman. Despite the \$150,000 pricetag and eventual \$127,500 sale, Newman had appraised the collection for \$50,000 in 1970. An explanation has never been given as to why the collection was sold

to West Virginia for more than 250 percent of its assessed value.¹³

National Significance of the Collection

Despite the possible overpayment at the time, the collection has been a valuable addition to the West Virginia Division of Culture and History for research and exhibition purposes.¹⁴ The agency mounted exhibits of the artifacts and documents at West Virginia Independence Hall in Wheeling in 1982 and at the Cultural Center in 1983. Many of Stutler's objects were used in a Civil War exhibit that opened at the Cultural Center in 1999 and will be included in new displays at the state museum, when it reopens following renovations.

In 1999, the state archives placed online a searchable database comprising more than 20,000 digital images from the Stutler Collection, including more than 100 original Brown letters and manuscripts and more than 1000 photographs.¹⁵ The initial database was funded in part by one of the first National Leadership Grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The grant recognized the national significance of the collection and Boyd Stutler's lifetime of work.

The database can be accessed at <http://www.wvculture.org/history/wvmemory/implsintro.html>.

¹ The author thanks the following individuals for taking time to review and contribute to this article: Fredrick Armstrong, Debra Basham, Joe Geiger, Mary Johnson, and Ginny Painter.

² In "John Brown and the Oberlin Lands," *West Virginia History* 12(3): 183-99, Boyd Stutler notes that Brown explored lands in Tyler County in April and May 1840 on behalf of Oberlin College. He stayed with "Squire William Underwood" at Ripley Mills, present Alma.

³ All biographical information for Boyd Stutler has been gleaned from "Historian, Ex-Legion Editor Dies," *Charleston Daily Mail*, February 19, 1970; "Famous West Virginians," (Charleston) *Sunday Gazette-Mail*, December 16, 1962; William Stutler, letter to the author, February 6, 1988.

⁴ *Charleston Daily Mail*, October 25, 1983; and Debra Basham, personal communications with the author, February 8, 1988, and June 27, 2006.

⁵ "Portrait of a Collector: Boyd B. Stutler," *The Collector*, February 18, 1982.

⁶ William Stutler, letter to the author, February 6, 1988.

⁷ *Ibid.* The only document in the collection resembling this is a 39-page draft manuscript written by Stutler in 1930: *Captain John Brown and Harpers Ferry—The Story of the Raid and the Old Fire Engine House Known as John Brown's Fort*. It is unclear whether (1) this is a beginning draft of the book his son mentioned, (2) Stutler never started the definitive Brown biography, or (3) the manuscript was separated from the collection at some point.

"John Brown: Famed Collection Returned, Placed in Cultural Center," (Charleston) *Sunday Gazette-Mail*, June 20, 1976.

⁹ William Stutler, letter to the author, February 6, 1988.

¹⁰ Ralph G. Newman, letter to Carolyn Zinn, June 30, 1971, West Virginia State Archives, Stutler Collection Accession File (hereafter Accession File); Carolyn Zinn, memorandum to Arch A. Moore, Jr., June 30, 1971, Accession File; Carolyn J. Zinn, letter to Ralph G. Newman, July 2, 1971, Accession File; and George Parkinson, former curator of the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia University, personal communication with author, February 1988.

¹¹ "Worth of John Brown Artifacts in Question," *Charleston Gazette*, November

29, 1979; "Stutler Collection of John Brown Materials Bought," *Charleston Gazette*, January 17, 1977.

¹² All information about inventories is from the following documents in the Accession File: Ralph G. Newman, "The Boyd B. Stutler Collection of John Brown Materials, Etc.," 1971; Ralph G. Newman, "The Boyd B. Stutler Collection of Books, Manuscripts & Other Historical Materials Relating to the Life & Time of John Brown," n.d.; and John Deitz & Associates, "The Boyd B. Stutler John Brown Collection," 1976.

¹³ "Worth of John Brown Artifacts in Question," *Charleston Gazette*, November 29, 1979.

¹⁴ The state archives and state museum were placed under the Department of Culture and History in 1977; the department became a division in 1989.

¹⁵ Since the conclusion of the grant, the state archives staff has added more than 4,000 additional images.

West Virginia Historical Society 2006 Annual Meeting

The West Virginia Historical Society held its annual meeting and program in the North Briefing Room of The Cultural Center on Friday evening at 7:00 p.m. on 29 September 2006. President Michael Shock introduced the speaker, Dr. Allen Loughry, II, who spoke to the twelve members and guests present on his book, *Don't Buy Another Vote, I Won't Pay for a Landslide*. The speaker addressed the role of vote buying and corruption in West Virginia, citing specific events

and periods when it was more prevalent. He also addressed a number of his reform points, which he considered necessary to implement to eliminate the historical problem and voter apathy. Dr. Loughry invited questions from those present and he was favored with quite a few.

Following the presentation of the program, President Shock held a brief meeting of members present. He called the meeting to order at 8:50.

Participating in the meeting were Joe Geiger, Larry Legge, Dr. Kenneth Bailey, Cheryl Withrow,

Secretary Armstrong made a quick presentation of the minutes from the 2005 program and noted a few items carried out during the past year. Larry Legge moved to approve the minutes and Ken Bailey seconded the motion. Motion passed.

In the absence of Treasurer Bill McNeel, Fredrick Armstrong, to whom he had sent his report, read the balance and income and expenses for the year. He reported that the society's balance was about the same as 2005, the balance being \$11,514.06. Of this, \$1,933.73 was in checking and the remainder in savings. Primary income had been from dues and expenses for the publication and distribution of the newsletter. (Copy of Treasurer's Report attached to official minutes.) On motion by Larry Legge, seconded by Ken Bailey, the Treasurer's Report was accepted.

Larry Legge, chairman of the nominating committee reported the slate of officers for 2007-08. Michael

Shock, President, Joe Geiger, Vice-president, Fredrick Armstrong, Secretary, William McNeel, Treasurer, Regional Vice-presidents district one - Rodney Pyles and Margaret Brennan, district two - Dr. William Dean and Cheryl Withrow, district three - Dr. Robert Conte and Larry Legge. and for newsletter editor, Dr. Bailey. On motion by Ken Bailey, seconded by Joe Geiger, slate was elected.

President Shock reported on History Day for February 22, 2007 and the need for members to assist. It was decided to hold an executive meeting on Tuesday, October 23, 2006 for this purpose.

As the hour had reached closing time, Ken Bailey moved to adjourn and President Shock declared the meeting adjourned at 9 p.m.

Respectively submitted,

Fredrick H. Armstrong

This Marion County mine dates to the early 1900s and the pictorial history traces the community's development from then to the present. Contact Trudy Lemly, P. O. Box 206, Carolina WV 26563 for details.

HISTORY DAY SCHEDULED FOR FEBRUARY 22, 2007

The annual History Day celebration at the West Virginia Legislature is scheduled for February 22. The event is intended to highlight the State's history and historical preservation efforts before Delegates and Senators in the West Virginia Legislature with a view toward enlisting their support for financial aid to the State's historical community.

CAROLINA MINE

A Northern West Virginia Coal Camp, by Trudy Lemley and Irene Ice

A new photographic history of Carolina Mine has been prepared and is now available.