

# A Guide to the Edwin Fisher Conger Papers, 1900-1979

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## Descriptive Summary

### Collection number

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### Abstract

The Edwin Fisher Conger papers focus primarily on several of Conger's business operations, specifically the production of treated telephone and electrical poles. Two of Conger's chief operations, Norfolk Creosoting Company and the Piedmont Wood Preserving Company (later simply the Piedmont Company) figure most heavily in the collection, along with information regarding Conger's first endeavor in this field, E.F. Conger Creosoting Company, his extensive timber holdings near Aiken, South Carolina, and his financial, social, and philanthropic dealings as a wealthy businessman living in Virginia.

### Creator

Conger, Edwin Fisher

### Size

3 linear feet (165 Folders).

### Repository

Virginia Historical Society

# Administrative Information

## Access Restrictions

Collection is open to research.

## Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

## Acquisition Information

Gift of the estate of Vivion Conger LeBow, Arlington, Va., in 2007. Accessioned September 30, 2013.

## Processing Information

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# Biographical/Historical Information

New Jersey native Edwin Fisher Conger became intrigued with forestry as a child and learned much from his lumberman father, especially in regard to the growth, harvesting and uses of chestnut poles and timber. Beginning in 1909, he attended the Biltmore Forest School, on the famous Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, where he came under the life-long influence of German forester Dr. Charles Alwin Schenck, the chief instructor there. Graduating in 1910, Conger secured a position with the Western Electric Company, where he put in long hours as a chestnut pole inspector. During this period he also became acquainted with the processes of pole and timber preservation through the application of a mixture of chemicals known as creosote.

Around 1915 he went to work for Lowesville Lumber Company in Lynchburg, and eventually took over the firm and recreated it as E. F. Conger Creosoting Company, whose main client initially proved to be elements of the Bell Telephone System. Conger set up treatment plants in Shipman and Natural Bridge, Virginia, and eventually in Waynesboro, which ultimately led to his purchase of the Virginia Creosoting Company in Culpeper. A chestnut blight in the 1920s led to the closing of two of the treating plants in Virginia, but with continued demand from the telephone and power companies operating on the east coast of the United States, Conger purchased the Piedmont Wood Preserving Company, which operated a pressure-treating plant in Augusta, Georgia, in 1930, followed by the purchase of the Norfolk Creosoting Company in 1936, giving Conger a facility on deep water with the potential for coastwise and export trade. The latter he sold in the 1940s and used the proceeds to purchase Hitchcock Woods and the Cedar Creek Farm near Aiken, South Carolina. These 14,000 acres provided Conger with ample resources for his products, but he harvested wisely and committed to reforestation well before that was a general environmental practice.

He also developed contracts with the U.S. government to harvest chestnut poles from national forests in the eastern part of the country. Gradually, Conger got out of the creosoting business, having already converted Piedmont Wood Preserving simply to the Piedmont Company, divesting himself of the plant in Augusta and the company's extensive series of contracts in 1951, and converting the operation largely into an investments holding firm. He likewise sold off the E. F. Conger Company in the early 1950s to a newly constituted Piedmont Wood Preserving Company headquartered in Spartanburg, S.C., including distribution yards in Connecticut, Georgia, and Virginia; became a forestry consultant living in Staunton, Virginia; and developed a forestry center on his lands in South Carolina, partly in tribute to the work of his mentor, Dr. Charles Schenck. In later life, he served as a bank president in Charlottesville and was a generous philanthropist, supporting a number of organizations in Piedmont Virginia before his death in 1974.

# Scope and Content

This collection contains materials regarding the education and career in forestry and treated pole production of Edwin F. Conger, including an autobiography, research materials, and a photograph album relating to pole harvesting and preservation treatment (including images of operations at the Virginia Creosoting Company plant in Culpeper, Va., Norfolk Creosoting Company at Norfolk, Va., E.F. Conger Creosoting Company at Waynesboro, Va., and the Piedmont Company at Augusta, Ga., as well as pictures of Conger's teacher and lifelong mentor, Dr. Carl Alwin Schenck).

Also, includes materials (primarily photographs of operations and pole-production plants) of E. F. Conger Creosoting Company (later simply the E. F. Conger Company), headquartered in Staunton, Va., but with chief operations at Waynesboro, Va. Files include images of Edwin F. Conger at the company headquarters in

Staunton.

Also, includes records of the Norfolk Creosoting Company, with its plant and shipping facility at Norfolk, Va., including images of the plant and operations at Norfolk, materials concerning the acquisition of the Hitchcock Woods property at Aiken, S.C., title abstract to "Breezy Hill," residence of E. F. Conger and family and company headquarters in Staunton, Va., and materials concerning sale and dissolution of the company.

Also, includes records of the Piedmont Company, formed by E.F. Conger through his purchase of the Piedmont Wood Preserving Company of Augusta, Ga. The company was headquartered in Staunton but most of its operations were in Georgia and North Carolina, and its largest customer was Southeastern New England Telephone Company. Materials include a minute book of meetings of the Board of Directors (largely a family owned and operated business), records of the purchase and dissolution of Piedmont Wood Preserving Company of Augusta, Ga., photographs of plants, operations and workers (some African American), a scrapbook documenting pole production, treatment and shipping, records concerning the sale of the company assets to a newly re-constituted Piedmont Wood Preserving Company headquartered in Spartanburg, S.C., and records relating to the later operations of the Piedmont Company as an investments holding firm.

Also, include personal and family papers of Edwin F. Conger relating to his daughters, Dorothea (Conger) Eager Grand Sverker and Vivion Randolph (Conger) LeBow, his surviving grandchildren, Howard Lloyd Eager and Edwin F. Eager, for whom he served for a time as guardian; his interests in reforestation; and his philanthropic support of local Staunton historic sites and social organizations. Among these materials are also numerous photographs of family members, vacations, and other travel; materials concerning Conger's purchase and operation of a resort property at Horse Point Estates in Middlesex County, Va.; and a special file on the efforts of Mrs. James A. Higgs to secure the release of Lilly Redmond from Western State Hospital in Staunton in order to have her reside in an early prototype "halfway house" for patients recovering from bouts of mental illness.

Lastly, the collection includes some financial records of Conger's wife, Dorothea Lloyd (Tatum) Conger, as well as genealogical materials she collected primarily on the Randolph and Tatum families; and some late financial records of the Congers' daughter, Vivion (Conger) LeBow.

## Index Terms

### Keywords

Conger, Edwin Fisher, 1887-1974.

E.F. Conger Company - Records and correspondence.

Creosote.

## Arrangement

Divided into series as follows: Series 1. Edwin F. Conger, Education and Professional Life; Series 2. E.F. Conger Company; Series 3. Norfolk Creosoting Company; Series 4. Piedmont Company; Series 5. Edwin F. Conger personal files; and Series 6. Conger Family Personal Files

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### **Series 1: Edwin F. Conger, Education and Professional Life, 1910-1970**

#### **Scope and Content**

The first series in this collection provides background materials on the life and career of Edwin Fisher Conger (New Jersey native but long-time Staunton, Va., resident). His autobiography provides many helpful details on his education and entry into the pole-producing and treating business, introduces information on several of the companies he acquired and operated, and presents useful material on his lifelong interest in and support of American forestry and the influence of his forestry mentor, Dr. Carl A. Schenck (who is extensively featured later in the collection).

Among the most important pieces in this series is the photograph album (folder 4) compiled throughout Conger's business career (now disassembled for preservation purposes)-it contains important imagery of the pole-treatment business and the operations of Conger's various companies (detailed below), including images of creosoting operations, timber lands, the Virginia Creosoting Company plant in Culpeper, the Norfolk Creosoting Company plant, E.F. Conger Company plant in Waynesboro, Piedmont Company plants and yards, general operations, and tributes to Dr. Carl A. Schenck, Conger's longtime friend and forestry

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## **Series 2: E.F. Conger Company, 1928-1977**

### **Scope and Content**

Edwin F. Conger's first truly successful venture into business began with the conversion of a lumber business in Lynchburg into the E. F. Conger Creosoting Company (later simply known as the E. F. Conger Company). Like several of the companies he owned and operated, E. F. Conger Company over time become essentially a holding company for his investments, but for almost thirty years this firm produced treated poles for telephone and utilities companies throughout the eastern United States, his steadiest and most notable customer being Southeastern New England Telephone Company.

Although there are only limited records about the operations of the company here, this series contains numerous images of the company's large treatment plant built and maintained at Waynesboro, Va.

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### **Scope and Content**

Edwin F. Conger purchased and operated the Norfolk Creosoting Company for a relatively short time, but it proved to be one of his most successful ventures. Motivated by the success of E. F. Conger Company, Conger sought a facility with deep water access in order to move his operations more significantly into the coastwise trade in and supply of treated poles. The operations at Norfolk proved as important to shipping as they did to pole production and treatment.

The files here include a booklet produced by the Norfolk Creosoting Company long before Conger acquired it, along with another valuable photograph album documenting pole installation in the New York metropolitan area in the 1930s. Conger both collected writings about and wrote himself regarding pole treatment. Perhaps most interesting are the photographs showing the plant at Norfolk and its various operations. Because of the success of this venture, Conger was able to acquire a large number of acres of timber outside of Aiken, South Carolina (known by the name of one of its previous owners, the Hitchcock Woods). This provided him with an abundant supply of chestnut poles and also figured significantly in his future commitments to re-forestry and philanthropy. Through this company, Conger also purchased a stately residence in Staunton, Va. ("Breezy Hill"), which he used as a corporate headquarters (his wife served as treasurer of the company). Although the plant and some company assets were sold during World War II, the company itself did not actually dissolve until around 1950.

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### **Scope and Content**

Perhaps the largest venture Conger operated during his lengthy career, Piedmont Creosoting Company (later simply the Piedmont Company) had its headquarters in Staunton, Virginia, but largest plant and operations in Augusta, Georgia. Conger acquired the Piedmont Wood Preserving Company of Augusta in the early 1930s, dissolved the existing company, and reconstituted operations as the Piedmont Creosoting Company. This company utilized pole collection yards in Connecticut to supply New England customers, and some images of those yards are included here.

The files in this series contain the most detailed information about any of the companies Conger operated, most importantly represented by the surviving minute book of Board of Directors' meetings for most the company's history. One of the most valuable pieces in terms of knowing the nature and extent, as well as

the details, of Conger's various pole ventures comes in the form of a scrapbook (now disassembled for preservation purposes). Entitled "From Forest to Field," it was prepared for Conger's eldest daughter, Dorothea, by A. B. Carlson, in June 1951. It carefully documents through text and images the operations of the Piedmont Company, using the work operations of the Company to supply an order of southern Yellow Pine poles for the Southern New England Telephone Company. The photographs were taken in the spring of 1949 and the text was drafted subsequently by Carlson of Southern New England Telephone. Poles were acquired from the "Hitchcock Forest" near Aiken, South Carolina, owned by E. F. Conger. The company plant in Augusta at that time shipped 100,000 poles per year. Images here show the plant and forest operations and some include depictions of African American workers. Also includes images of the treatment of poles with creosote (a mixture of oils) for preservation, as well as arrangements for shipping.

As noted above, this was one of Conger's firms that eventually became a holding company for investments, and some of the last files in this series document how Conger finally got out of the pole-producing and treatment business for good in the 1950s. The pole-treatment operations in Augusta and at other facilities throughout the eastern United States were eventually sold to a new company with an old name, Piedmont Wood Preserving Company, newly headquartered in Spartanburg, S.C. The file concerning the sale contains detailed materials on existing, often long-standing, company contracts that were transferred to Piedmont Wood Preserving Company, as well as materials on the sale of other assets and business contracts to Piedmont Wood Preserving Company.

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**Series 5: Edwin F. Conger Personal Files 1916-1967**

**Scope and Content**

The materials in this series primarily focus on Edwin F. Conger's personal life and family, documenting the life a successful businessman of the first half of the twentieth century might lead and the interests his fortune might encourage and support.

**Series 5.1: Hitchcock Woods and related property, Aiken, S.C. 1953-1963**

**Scope and Content**

Edwin F. Conger personally retained a large amount of acreage in South Carolina that the success of the Norfolk Creosoting Company had enabled him to purchase. Some of the acreage was eventually sold to local interests for housing projects, some used to support the operations of the School of Forestry at the University of North Carolina (including the establishment of a professorship and scholarships), some set aside to honor Conger's lifelong friend and mentor, Dr. Carl A. Schenck, through the creation of a memorial forest and reforestation program (see also Series 5.2).

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### **Scope and Content**

Edwin F. Conger studied under German forestry specialist Dr. Carl Alwin Schenck (1868-1955) before World War I and considered him a friend and mentor throughout his life. Conger's financial successes allowed him to join with other of his fellow alumni from the Biltmore Forestry School (where Schenck operated his original school on the grounds of the Biltmore estate in North Carolina) in the years immediately preceding his mentor's passing. The files here document some of those activities through a combination of text documents and photographs. One particularly interesting and unusual item is an album (with phonograph records) documenting Dr. Schenck's return visit to America: The Cavalcade of Trees for the Great: Being the Tour of Carl Alwin Schenck in America, 1951, under the Sponsorship of the American Forestry Association and graduates of the Biltmore Forest School.

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The largest portion of this series of Edwin Conger's papers relates to his family and his personal affairs. These include financial records; files on local philanthropy in Staunton; activities involving his purchase and operation of a resort property in Middlesex County, Va., called Horse Point Estates; vacation trips and other travel; correspondence with, extensive photographs of, and files concerning trusts established for his two daughters and his grandchildren (most notably files on the divorce and remarriages of his eldest daughter, Dorothea Lloyd (Conger) Eager Grand Sverker, and the guardianship of her two surviving children, Howard Lloyd Eager and Edwin F. Eager).

One of the particularly interesting and unexpected files here concerns the Higgs/Redmond case: the

attempt of Mrs. James A. Higgs to secure release of Lilly Redmond from Western State Hospital in Staunton in order to have her reside in an early prototype "halfway house" for patients with mental illness who had partially recovered (folder 95).

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**Box 3:141**

**E. F. Conger: Photographs, Eddy Rockefeller Florida Trip, undated**  
**Box 3:142**

**E. F. Conger: Photographs, Santa Elena Cruise, 1938**  
**Box 3:143**

**E. F. Conger: Photographs, Staunton, Va., residence, 1949**  
**Box 3:144**

**E. F. Conger: Photographs, Summer, 1940**  
**Box 3:145**

**E. F. Conger: Photographs, Summer, 1941**

**Box 3:146**

**E. F. Conger: Photographs, Travel Photos, 1916**

**Box 3:147**

**E. F. Conger: Photographs, Western College for Women (Oxford, Ohio), 1941**

**Box 3:148**

**E. F. Conger: Summer Trip, 1951**

**Box 3:149**

**E. F. Conger: Sverker, Dorothea Conger Eager Grand (daughter), Divorce and Remarriage, 1947-1948**

**Box 3:150**

**E. F. Conger: Sverker, Dorothea Conger Eager Grand, Trust file, 1966-1968**

**Box 3:151**

**E. F. Conger: Tax file, 1927**

**Box 3:152**

**E. F. Conger: Tax file, 1931**

**Box 3:153**

**E. F. Conger: Tax, Trusts, and Estate Planning file, 1965**

**Box 3:154**

**E. F. Conger: Tax file, 1966**

**Box 3:155**

**E. F. Conger: Tax and Estate Planning file, 1967**

**Box 3:156**

**E. F. Conger: Travel file, 1948**

**Box 3:157**

**E. F. Conger: U.S. Interstate Route 64 file (with map of Charlottesville, Va.) (see oversized)**

**Box 3:158**

**E. F. Conger: Winter Park, Fla., trip, ca. 1948**

**Box 3:159**

**E. F. Conger: Woodrow Wilson Birthplace Foundation, Inc., 1964**

**Box 3:160**

**E. F. Conger: Woodrow Wilson Birthplace Foundation, Inc., 1965-1967**

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**E. F. Conger: Y.M.C.A., Staunton, Va., 1966**

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**Series 6: Conger Family Personal Files. 1929-1979**

**Scope and Content**

This series contains just a few files of the wife and second daughter of Edwin F. Conger. Dorothea Lloyd (Tatum) Conger (1893-1961) worked most of her years of marriage as treasurer of companies her husband acquired and operated. Some of her letters to her two daughters are found in Conger's correspondence files. The file of genealogical materials, primarily focused on her Tatum family ancestors and relations, is the largest grouping of materials of or about Mrs. Conger. A small amount of financial material relating to Vivion Randolph (Conger) LeBow (1923-2006), who left her father's papers to the Virginia Historical Society, completes the collection.

**Dorothea Lloyd (Tatum) Conger: Tax file, 1929**

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**Dorothea Lloyd (Tatum) Conger: Genealogical materials file (primarily Randolph and Tatum families) (see also oversize)**

**Box-folder** 3:164

**Vivion (Conger) LeBow: Financial file, 1974-1979**

**Box-folder** 3:165