

Waitman T. Willey (1811-1900) Papers, 1862-1900 A&M 1361

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Title Statement

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Author: Staff of the West Virginia & Regional History Center

Publication Statement

Publisher: West Virginia and Regional History Center

1549 University Ave.
P.O. Box 6069
Morgantown, WV 26506-6069
Business Number: 304-293-3536
wvrhcref@westvirginia.libanswers.com
URL: <https://wvrhc.lib.wvu.edu>



Profile Description

Creation: This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on 2026-06-18 13:44:30 -0400.

Language Usage: Description is written in: English, Latin script.

Descriptive Rules: Describing Archives: A Content Standard

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Unit Date

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English .

Abstract

Papers of Waitman T. Willey (1811-1900), one of the founders of West Virginia. This collection includes letters to Harrison Hagans outlining the varied nature of opposition to the New State in Congress and Willey's position on slavery; letter from the Quartermaster General requesting support of a reorganization bill; cards and social invitations; and obituary clippings.

Creator

Willey, Waitman T. (Waitman Thomas), 1811-1900

Extent

0.1 Linear Feet Summary: 1/2 in. (1 folder)

Physical Location

West Virginia and Regional History Center / West Virginia University / 1549 University Avenue / P.O. Box 6069 / Morgantown, WV 26506-6069 / Phone: 304-293-3536 / URL: West Virginia & Regional History Center

Repository

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Biographical / Historical

Waitman Thomas Willey, West Virginia pioneer, lawyer, Methodist churchman, and United States Senator, was born October 18, 1811, at Buffalo Creek, Virginia (near Fairmont in Marion County, West Virginia), the son of William Willey, Jr., former Revolutionary War soldier under General Anthony Wayne, and Sarah Barnes, a member of a prominent family of northwestern Virginia.

Willey's first twelve years were spent at Buffalo Creek where his father's farm was a frontier homestead isolated from the few towns in the area. In 1823, the family (which now included stepmother, Mary McCormack Willey) moved to a farm on the Monongahela River in Monongalia County near present-day Rivesville. Here, Willey received a rudimentary formal education with readings from the classics and the Bible.

In 1827, Willey walked the forty miles from his home to Uniontown, Pennsylvania to attend Madison College (later Allegheny College) where he excelled in classical studies and mathematics. After three and one half years he received a B.A. degree, and then read law in the office of Philip Doddridge and John Campbell in Wellsburg, Brooke County, Virginia. He was admitted to the bar in 1833; in addition, he received an M.A. degree from Augusta College in Kentucky in 1834.

Willey settled in Morgantown, Monongalia County, Virginia, in 1832, with his wife Elizabeth, daughter of Patrick Ray, a prominent citizen of Morgantown who was Clerk of the Court and a founder of the Morgantown Female Academy (to which he gave his home). The Willey family subsequently included seven children: Mary Ellen, wife of Dr. M.L. Casselberry of Morgantown; Sarah Barnes, wife of J. Marshall Hagans, distinguished judge; William Patrick, professor of law at West Virginia University; Julia, wife of Major William McGrew, Union Army officer, West Virginia state senator, and Morgantown banker; Thomas Ray, United States government clerk in the Interior Department; Louisa, unmarried, who remained at home; and John Byrne, deputy clerk of Monongalia County.

Waitman T. Willey maintained a successful and lucrative law practice in Morgantown for 67 years. He served as Monongalia County Clerk and clerk of the Circuit Superior Court from 1841 to 1852, and was Morgantown's first Superintendent of Schools. Willey had an early interest in politics and was an active

member of the conservative Whig Party: he served as an elector for the Harrison-Tyler election of 1840, was an unsuccessful Whig candidate for Congress in 1852, an unsuccessful Opposition (Whig Party) candidate for Lt. Governor of Virginia in 1859, and a delegate to the Constitutional Union Party convention which nominated Bell and Everett for President and Vice President in 1860. In 1850, Willey had been a delegate to the Virginia Constitutional Convention where he championed western Virginia interests, white manhood suffrage, and governmental reforms. Again, in 1861, he was a delegate to the Virginia Convention that voted for secession (Willey voted against it). In the subsequent, Pro-Union, reorganized legislature (the "Restored Government of Virginia at Wheeling"), Willey was elected to Congress to complete the term of James M. Mason for two years. While in the Senate, Willey actively introduced legislation to admit West Virginia into the Union. The Reorganized Government proposed a new state Constitution that Willey supported in Congress in 1862. Following revision of the proposal to include emancipation of slaves and a favorable referendum by the West Virginia voters, statehood was achieved in 1863.

Willey returned to the Senate in 1863 and was elected to the full six-year term in 1865. During his tenure, he initially opposed Republican lawmakers over issues involving the war, confiscation of rebel property, and slavery. But because of his "ardent support" of the Union, Willey's political views evolved through the years to support Republican aims, including national emancipation of slaves and disenfranchisement of disloyal citizens. He considered the latter appropriate in order to keep "southern sympathizers" from gaining control of West Virginia and perhaps reuniting the state with Virginia. Although Willey was aligned with conservative Republicans in the Senate, he did vote for the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the Reconstruction Acts, the removal of President Johnson, and the 14th and 15th Amendments. He opposed the Freedman's Bureau and the Enforcement Acts of 1870. Many in West Virginia opposed Republican Party policies, and in 1870 the party lost control of state government. Willey left the Senate in 1871 and returned to his Morgantown law practice and the County Clerkship (1882-1890).

Willey remained active in politics throughout his later life. He served in the 1872 State Constitutional Convention and supported Republican Party policies and candidates, and was chairman of the West Virginia delegation to the GOP National Convention in 1876. He also continued his active service in the Methodist Church where he was an advocate for lay participation in the national conference and served as delegate from West Virginia in 1880. Willey was much in demand as a public speaker throughout his life -- he was called, "old man eloquent" -- because of his commanding appearance, "thrilling" voice, evident sincerity, and knowledge. He spoke frequently on Temperance, Methodist beliefs, politics, the classics, and history. He collected a large library, wrote numerous articles and a biography of Philip Doddridge. He received several honorary degrees, including LLD from Allegheny College and West Virginia University. Willey's last public appearance was at the funeral of Governor Pierpont when he gave a "stirring" eulogy. He was 88 years of age.

Waitman T. Willey, "Grand Old Man of West Virginia," died May 2, 1900, at his home, Chancery Hill, in Morgantown. His funeral was the largest ever held in Morgantown to that time. He was interred in Oak Grove Cemetery.

Notes:

1. In June, 1861, Willey was not present at the second convention in Wheeling at which the Reorganized Government of Virginia was established in preparation for statehood. His father and stepmother were fatally ill at the time and he was at home.
2. Willey never wrote a history of the statehood deliberations, politics, or conventions. He felt he was too biased to do justice to the history. No history was ever written by the participants.

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Prepared by Carole B. Boyd, M.D., 2000.

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3, 1361

Keywords

Monongalia County (W. Va.)

Politics and government.

Statehood politics -- West Virginia

Politicians -- United States

West Virginia -- Politics and government

United States -- Politics and government

Secession

Hagans, Harrison.

Wiley, Waitman T. (Waitman Thomas), 1811-1900

United States. Congress. Senate