Driving southeast on I-64 toward Lewisburg, you won’t see a sign for the battlefield of White Sulphur Springs. At the unassuming intersection of Route 60 and Poca- hontas Trail, where for two scorching days in 1863 cavalry thundered and cannons roared, you won’t find a monument or a museum, only a faded white road- side historical marker near the cradle of a Hardee’s drive-thru. The shopping center with a Food Lion and a carwash is called “Battleground Crossing,” but it hard- ly does justice to one of West Virginia’s bloodiest and most eclectic Civil War clashes—one whose origins point straight back to West Virginia statehood itself.

In early August 1863, West Virginia had been a state for less than two months. Its authority was fragile. State government was still under construction in its capital at Wheeling. So too were the courts. American law largely depends on precedent, and all of the legal records young West Virginia needed were back in Vir- ginia—in Richmond, the beating heart of the Con- federacy.

However, a full set of duplicate records, as Union lead- ers knew, was housed at the courthouse in late summer of 1863. With the capital of Appeals occasion- ally held sessions. A raid by mounted forces might, they speculated, cut swiftly southward into Rebel-held Greenbrier County, nab the law books, and deliver them to the new seat of Mountain State government.

The roar of musket and cannon fire soon filled the morn- ing air. “[Musket balls], shells, grape and shot [were] fly- ing with fearful havoc in all directions, doing the work of death,” recalled one Union soldier of the 3rd West Vir- ginia Regiment. Attack and counterattack swirled across the field as Averell frantically deployed his men from the narrow pass.

The battle, which raged until nightfall and picked up again the next day, was largely between (West) Virginians. Four of Averell’s six units were raised from counties of the new state. Colonel Patton himself called Charleston home, and the nucleus of his brigade, the 22nd Virginia Infan- try, was composed primarily of men from nine southern West Virginia counties who had fought in almost every major engagement in West Virginia since the war began.

But by the time Averell cut the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, the vaunted law books were no longer an objec- tion—the Confederates had evacuated the duplicates to Rich- mond to prevent another raid. Today, the hallowed field of Droop Mountain is a state park, but few signs re- main of the preceding bitter struggle that took place less than two miles from the present-day Greenbrier Resort. At a time when both the law and the legacy of the Civil War are under close reexamination, perhaps the Battle of White Sulphur Springs, too, is worth another look.

“The law library at Lewisburg […] rightfully belongs to the new State of West Virginia.”

In August 1863, therefore, Brigadier General William Woods Averell rode out for Lewisburg with a mixed force of men from West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—the Fourth Separate Brigade. The brigade was mostly mounted infantry, the better to cross wooded, mountainous terrain, and a few with bushwhackers. A dashing but disciplined West Point cavalryman knew the game was up. Averell’s men pulled a fighting withdrawal back into Rocky Gap, chopping down trees to slow Patton’s pursuing rebels. The brigade returned to Beverly on August 31, exhausted, after twen- ty-seven days in the saddle.

The Battle of White Sulphur Springs saw roughly 350 killed and wounded. While that number pales in compar- ison to slaughters like Antietam and Gettysburg, it still represents about ten percent of total combatants; many of the veterans later contended it was their most ferocious combat experience. Wounded of both sides were taken to the Greenbrier Resort (not the current structure), and many dead were buried on its grounds, where they fell on the battlefield, or in Lewisburg.

Averell launched two more raids some months later, with more success. The Battle of Droop Mountain on Novem- ber 6 drove the last major Confederate forces from West Virginia, most of them troops that had prevailed against him on August 26-27.

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A LITERARY BOONE?

In the annals of West Virginia pulp curiosities, it may be difficult to come across anything stranger than The Wolf Demon, or The Queen of the Kanawha, written in 1878 by Albert W. Aiken. Taking place in and around the Point Pleasant of the colonial frontier, Aiken’s dime novel romp is chock full of stereotypical noble savages, hearty frontiersmen, and damsels in distress—far more likely drawn from stock characters than any real inhabitants of the area.

Shawnee characters are especially thinly drawn, and modern readers will quickly lose count of the racist archetypes. The novel’s primary villain, however, is the titular Wolf Demon, who may or may not have supernatural origins, and from whom the Shawnee themselves needed saving. And the man for the job—just one in a dizzyingly large cast of characters—is none other than the stoic frontier hero Daniel Boone. Boone did, of course, reside along West Virginia’s Kanawha River for a time, but his iron-jawed depiction in The Wolf Demon doesn’t seem particularly grounded in research, and his struggle to track this lupine bogeyman appears purely fictional.

Aiken’s text reflects little actual history of West Virginia in the 1700s and 1800s, but the journey can be embarked upon for free online at Northern Illinois University’s Nickels and Dimes database, at https://dimenovels.lib.niu.edu.

Cover of The Wolf Demon, 1878. Courtesy of the Nickels and Dimes online database, Joss House Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University.

EVENTS JUNE - JULY 2021

Always check with the venue or hosting organization of an event before attending, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as schedules may change without the knowledge of the Council. For more information, you can also visit the calendar on our website, www.wvhumanities.org.

JUN

Jun 5 Delbert Bailey - Opening of the Cool Exhibit. Sterling Spencer Sculpture Garden and Richwood Heritage Center. Richwood. 1pm
Jun 5 Black History in Summers County - Exhibit open thru Sept 5. Campbell Flannagan Murrell House Museum. Hinton. 1-4pm
Jun 9 Virtual Folklore Apprenticeship Showcase - Traditional Appalachian Herbals & Indoor Wild Herb Walk with Leonie Hobbie & Jon Falcon. Info at wvfolk.org. 12-1pm
Jun 11-20 WV Shakespeare Festival - Two weeks in June. Village of Barboursville Park Amphitheatre, Barboursville.
Jun 17 Virtual Folklore Apprenticeship Showcase - “Sleep to ‘Shade’”, Sleep Humanities & Textile Arts with Kathy Evans and Margaret Branning. Info at wvfolk.org. 12-1pm
Jun 19 Oxenace - “History Alive!” Hosted by Tygart Lake State Park. 7pm

JUL

Jul 1 Abigail Adams - History Alive! Hosted by Blackwater Falls State Park. 2pm
Jul 10 Oxenace - History Alive! Hosted by Beech Fork State Park. 7pm
Jul 16-18 Maria Peeld - Presentations by potter and watercolorist. Pricketts Fort State Park. Fairmont. 10a-4p
Jul 17 Author’s Corner - presentations by local authors. Sterling Spencer Sculpture Garden. Richwood Heritage Center. Richwood. 1pm
Jul 17 Carl Ruby Bradley - History Alive! Hosted by Beech Fork State Park. 7pm
Jul 18 Gabriel Arthur - History Alive! Hosted by Beech Fork State Park. 7pm
Jul 31 Timber Industry Exhibit - Grand opening week thru Sept 3. Richwood Heritage Center, Richwood. 11a-4p