

America's most important trial:

John Brown At Charles Town

by Brian McGinty

John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry has been the subject of dozens of books and hundreds of articles. It is one of the best-known events of the turbulent years leading up to the Civil War, and in this, its 150th anniversary year, it is being remembered with programs, symposiums, and exhibits in West Virginia – and all over the United States. Until now, however, the trial that followed so swiftly on Brown's raid has never been the subject of a full-length, fully researched book.

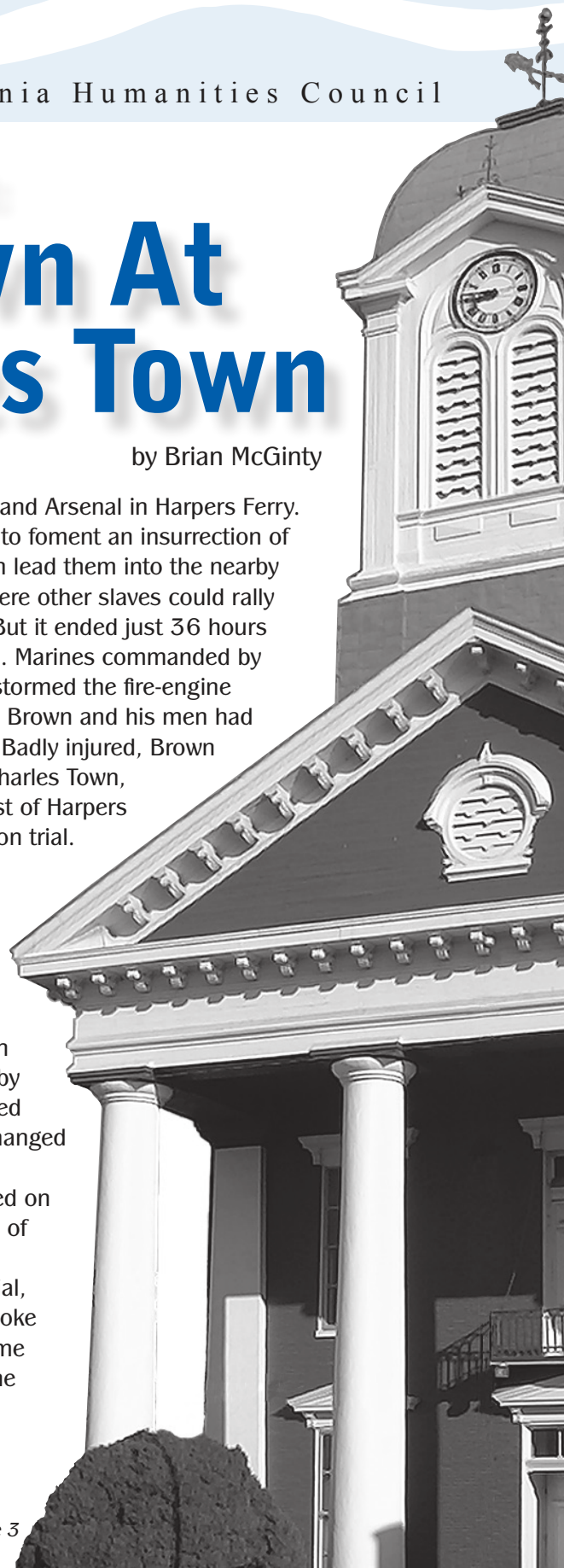
I remedied that neglect in *John Brown's Trial*, just published by Harvard University Press. Although acknowledging the importance of the Harpers Ferry raid, my new book makes it clear that Brown's trial, which took place in the Jefferson County Courthouse in Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia), was even more important. More than any other event, it focused attention on the growing controversy over slavery; it crystallized opinions North and South about what should be done to resolve the controversy; and it powerfully impelled the nation toward the great military conflict that erupted a little more than a year later.

Brown's raid began late in the evening of October 16, 1859, when he led a party of 21 armed men into the United

States Armory and Arsenal in Harpers Ferry. His object was to foment an insurrection of slaves and then lead them into the nearby mountains, where other slaves could rally around them. But it ended just 36 hours later, when U.S. Marines commanded by Robert E. Lee stormed the fire-engine house in which Brown and his men had sought refuge. Badly injured, Brown was taken to Charles Town, eight miles west of Harpers Ferry, and put on trial. After four days of courtroom drama, during most of which he lay wounded on a cot, Brown was convicted by a jury, sentenced to death, and hanged from a gallows hurriedly erected on the south edge of town.

During the trial, John Brown spoke from time to time to the judge, the attorneys, and the jurors. He put occasional questions to

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Historian Brian McGinty will open our observance of the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War and West Virginia statehood with a 6:00 p.m. October 15 lecture at the Jefferson County Courthouse (above) in Charles Town. It is the same historic structure in which John Brown was condemned to hang in the fall of 1859, in what McGinty argues was the most important trial in American history. The Humanities Council thanks Judge David Sanders for his assistance with this program.

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2009

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What's New

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The board meets
October 23, 2009,
at the MacFarland-
Hubbard House.
Open to the public.

The big 150:

We published our first editorial on the subject of the West Virginia Sesquicentennial a little over a year ago, in the summer of 2008. Since that time, an official commission has been appointed and is now doing business. Bravo!

Legislation creating the Sesquicentennial Commission defines the period to be commemorated as running “from the time of John Brown’s raid through the formation of the State of West Virginia and the conclusion of the American Civil War.” That makes sense. Brown’s actions clearly marked the tipping point toward war, and it is impossible

to separate the birth of West Virginia from the context of wartime events. After all, the decisive Battle of Gettysburg followed less than two weeks later and not so far away.

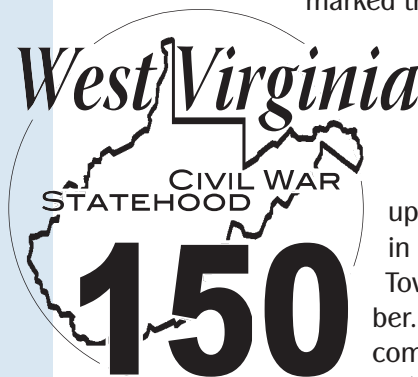
This means the Sesquicentennial truly is upon us. John Brown stormed into Harpers Ferry in October 1859, was tried in nearby Charles Town in November, and hanged there in December. The 150th anniversary of all those events comes before the end of this year.

We at the Humanities Council applaud the Governor and Legislature upon forming the Sesquicentennial Commission, and we wish the commissioners the very best in their important task. They may count on us to do our part. We will get Council programming under way right on time, with an October 15 lecture on Brown’s trial in the very courthouse where it took place. And we are among the major sponsors of the October 14-17 “John Brown Remembered” symposium at Harpers Ferry.

From there we’ll follow the drumbeat of events leading to the creation of West Virginia and beyond. It promises to be a busy time, no doubt involving dozens of events before we close out the commemoration in 2015.

To tie things together, we are introducing the special “West Virginia 150” logo you see here. It will mark our Sesquicentennial programs, and you may watch for it statewide over the next few years.

— Ken Sullivan



People & Mountains is published quarterly by the West Virginia Humanities Council.

A state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the West Virginia Humanities Council serves West Virginia through grants and direct programs in the humanities.

We welcome reader letters, freelance manuscripts, and financial contributions. Please address all correspondence to West Virginia Humanities Council 1310 Kanawha Boulevard, East Charleston, WV 25301 or email sonis@wvhumanities.org.

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The Council seeks nominations for its program committee citizen members, who are drawn from schools, colleges, and the general public. The deadline for nominations is November 1. The committee recommends grant-funding decisions to the board of directors. Contact Amy Saunders for details at (304)346-8500 or saunders@wvhumanities.org.

Continued from page 1

witnesses, and he repeatedly reminded everyone that he had been promised a fair trial. Most notably, he took advantage of the opportunity the law allowed him to make a statement in his own words, uninterrupted by attorneys' questions, before sentence was passed. His final statement was taken down by the newspaper reporters who crowded Charles Town, sent over telegraph wires that had been extended to the town for the specific purpose of covering the trial, and reprinted on the front pages of newspapers all over the country.

Brown's courtroom language was simple, but strong and earnest. His words inspired listeners in Charles Town, and readers all over the country, with their intensity. He did not deny that he was guilty of crimes defined in the statute books of Virginia, but he denied any intention of killing or injuring Virginians, or of destroying their property. He said that he had come to Harpers Ferry solely for the purpose of freeing the slaves — of dealing a crippling blow to the cruel institution that held millions of Americans in bondage. "I deny everything," he said, "but what I have all along admitted, of a design on my part to free slaves. . . . Now if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle

my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country, whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say let it be done."

Brown's words and courtroom conduct won him the grudging admiration of even his adversaries. Virginia's Governor Henry Wise, who supervised many of the arrangements for

"When the news from Charles Town reached the nation, it aroused previously unsuspected support in the North for the abolition of slavery and grim opposition in the South."

Brown's trial and execution and who later served as a Confederate general, was so impressed that he proclaimed John Brown "a man of clear head, of courage, fortitude and simple ingenuousness." And he said that Brown inspired him "with his integrity, as a man of truth."

What would history's verdict on Brown have been if there had been no trial? If he had been shot and killed during the fighting in Harpers Ferry, or lynched by the mob that hungered for vengeance after he was captured? Or if Governor Wise had convened a court martial and condemned him to death within hours of his capture? (The

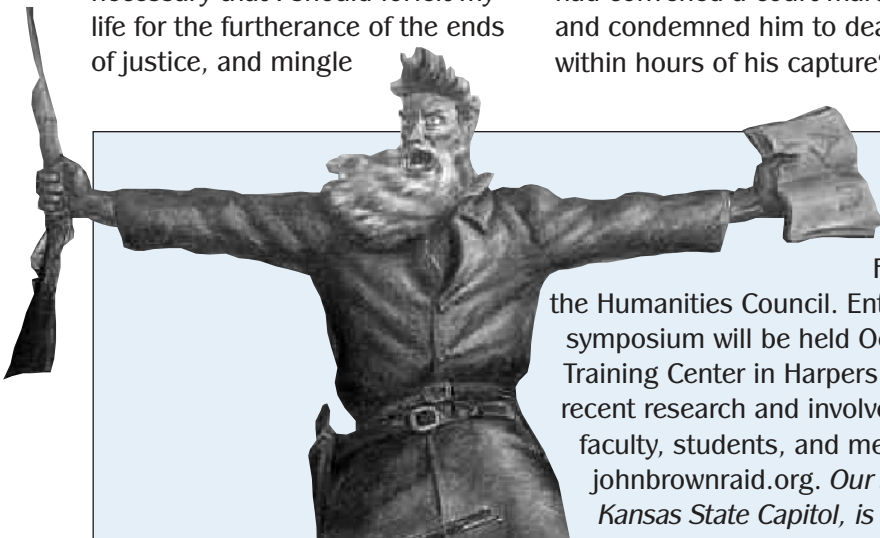
governor had wanted to do just that, but he arrived in Harpers Ferry too late.) If there had been no indictment, no examination and cross-examination of witnesses, no jury, no verdict, no sentence, Brown would never have had an opportunity to address the court. He could not have made the statements later quoted by newspaper reporters and reprinted in history books — statements

condemning slavery and defending his efforts to bring it to an end. He would be known ever after for his violence in Harpers Ferry, but not for his eloquence in Charles Town. History would have dismissed him as an extremist who was willing to take the law into his own hands, a fanatic who was willing to shed innocent life to achieve a political goal, but was caught in the act and stopped.

But the trial did take place. Brown did speak, and his words were heard. And he was convicted, sentenced, and executed by hanging. When the news from Charles Town reached the nation, it aroused previously unsuspected support in the North for the abolition of slavery, and it sparked grim opposition in the South. Thanks in large part to John Brown's words and conduct, the nation was set on the course toward secession and Civil War — and the abolition of slavery.

I consider it the most important trial in the history of the United States.

The Harpers Ferry Historical Association is hosting a symposium on John Brown and his 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, supported by a major grant from the Humanities Council. Entitled "John Brown Remembered," the symposium will be held October 14-17 at the Stephen T. Mather Training Center in Harpers Ferry. The symposium provides a forum for recent research and involves John Brown experts, scholars, college faculty, students, and members of the community. Visit www.johnbrownraid.org. Our John Brown illustration, from a mural in the Kansas State Capitol, is by John Steuart Curry.





Story time at the 2008 Book Festival.

West Virginia Book Festival

The 2009 West Virginia Book Festival is scheduled for October 10 and 11 at the Charleston Civic Center. The free festival is sponsored by the West Virginia Humanities Council, Kanawha County Public Library, the Library Foundation of Kanawha County, the *Charleston Gazette* and *Charleston Daily Mail*.

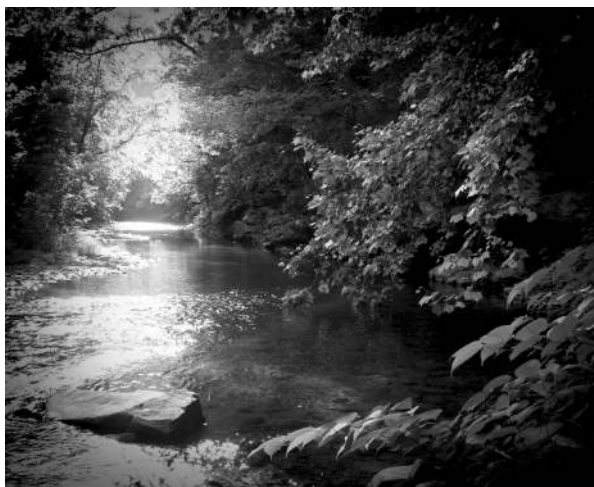
The event highlights home state and nationally known authors. William Bernhardt, renowned for his legal thrillers, visits the festival for the first time. Also new to the Book Festival are Andy Schmidt, who has worked on nearly every major character in the Marvel Comics canon from Spider-Man to the Fantastic Four; Frank X Walker, the author of four poetry collections; and graphic novelist Mark Crilley, the creator of the popular character Akiko. Crilley's latest creation, the four-volume manga series "Miki Falls," has been optioned by Paramount Pictures and Brad Pitt's Plan B production company.

The festival also features programs by state and regional authors; the Festival Marketplace, with book vendors, publishers and authors; Word Play, an area with hands-on activities for children; and a huge used book sale. Visit www.wvbookfestival.org.

Coal River Website

A Coal River website was recently launched with the support of a Humanities Council media grant. Developed by the West Virginia nonprofit Aurora Lights, the website focuses on the heritage, culture, and environmental history of the Coal River Valley in Boone and Raleigh counties. It provides a forum for residents to share stories, and offers students an opportunity to research and understand the importance of the Coal River Valley. Interactive maps guide users to text, photos, and audiovisual interviews depicting the history of the region and its people.

Later this fall, the website's interactive curriculum will be introduced to West Virginia's colleges and universities, including WVU, Salem International University, and Fairmont State University. Visit www.auroralights.org.



Clay Center Explores the Nile

"Lost Kingdoms of the Nile: Nubian Treasures from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston," opened in September at the Clay Center. The exhibit continues through April 11, 2010. More than 200 objects are showcased, ranging in date from 3000 B.C. to 350 A.D. A lecture series, supported by a Humanities Council major grant, accompanies the exhibition.

Nubia, the African civilization that ruled Egypt in the 7th and 8th centuries B.C., represents a vast region in the area of today's northern Sudan and southern Egypt. Nubia was an important force in the ancient Nile Valley, and its history paralleled Egypt's.

Following a September 15 opening lecture, the series continues on Thursday, October 29, with Dr. Dennis Van Gerven. For the past 30 years he has examined Nubian mummified remains, piecing together clues about life and death in ancient Nubia. On Tuesday, November 17, Dr. Stuart Tyson Smith presents "Lions and Crocodiles and Nubians – Oh My!" For details on all seven lectures in the series, contact (304)561-3570 or visit www.theclaycenter.org.



Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

King Akhratan

The Humanities Council exhibit *John Henry: The Steel Drivin' Man* will travel to the Princeton Railroad Museum for a month-long stay October 1–31.





The homepage design for 'e-WV The West Virginia Encyclopedia' features a star logo and navigation links: Home, e-WV A-Z, Exhibit Hall, See WV, Features, Events. A main banner titled 'Bringing West Virginia to your fingertips!' describes the encyclopedia as a comprehensive reference resource for the Mountain State. It includes a search bar with the prompt 'What are you looking for?' and a 'Browse by category' dropdown. A featured article 'Flying high in the Mountain State' shows a DC-3 aircraft at Kanawha (now Yeager) Airport. Other sections include 'Today in WV History' with a snippet about Governor William Alexander MacCorkle, 'Support e-WV' with links for 'Test Your WV IQ' and 'Free Membership', and an 'Opinion Poll' about wind turbines on Mountain State ridge tops. The footer contains contact information for West Virginia Humanities Council and The West Virginia Encyclopedia.

The West Virginia Encyclopedia will soon go online! This preliminary design shows the “e-WV” homepage. Users may build their own timelines and maps, interact with the editors and each other, or browse more than 2,200 topics in the e-encyclopedia. The Humanities Council will launch e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia on West Virginia Day, June 20, 2010.

Historical Characters Sought

The Humanities Council is requesting proposals for new characters for its popular History Alive! program, first-person portrayals of historically significant figures.

As the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War and West Virginia statehood approaches, character proposals relating to these events are encouraged. Examples include “Stonewall” Jackson, John Brown, Francis Pierpont, and Arthur Boreman. Proposed characters should have broad name recognition.

Characters must be researched thoroughly by the presenters who portray them. First-person sources such as letters and journals, as well as speeches, documents, film and other archival materials are often used in developing History Alive! presentations. Each year, approximately 200 History Alive! programs take place at schools, libraries and other venues across West Virginia. Presenters, paid by the Humanities Council, should be able to travel the state.

The application deadline is January 1, 2010. Those who submit successful proposals will receive a stipend to develop the proposed character. Proposals are limited to two per applicant and must include a research plan, bibliography, and a statement that articulates the historical significance of the character. Auditions will be conducted, and selected presenters will join the History Alive! roster November 1, 2010.

Contact program officer Mark Payne at payne@wvhumanities.org or (304)346-8500.



Briefs

Shepherd University honors novelist Silas House with its Appalachian Heritage Writer's Award and a literary residency from September 28 through October 3, supported by a Humanities Council major grant. House is known for his trilogy *Clay's Quilt*, *A Parchment of Leaves*, and *The Coal Tattoo*. The week at Shepherd is built around public readings, discussions, book signings, and the West Virginia Fiction Competition Awards. Contact (304)876-5207 or visit www.shepherd.edu for a complete schedule.

The American Antiquarian Society offers fellowships to support research by creative and performing artists “on virtually any subject within the general area of American history and culture before 1877.” The deadline for applications is October 5. The Society houses the world's preeminent and most accessible collection of American printed materials before 1877. Visit www.americanantiquarian.org for instructions.

The 2009 Southeastern Museums Conference annual meeting will take place in Charleston for the first time since 1990 on October 13-16. The conference organization began in 1951 and is a nonprofit membership body serving 12 southern states including West Virginia. Visit www.semcdirect.net to register or contact Richard Waterhouse at (404)378-3153.

The West Virginia Public Radio program, “Kettle Bottom: Mingo County in 1920,” recently received the Gabriel Award for excellence in broadcasting. Produced by Kate Long and funded by a Humanities Council media grant, the program was based on the work of poet Diane Gilliam Fisher. The Catholic Academy for Communication Arts Professionals sponsors the Gabriel. Long received the award previously for her radio series “In Their Own Country,” also funded by a Council grant, which highlighted 14 of West Virginia's best authors.

Grant Categories & Guidelines

Major Grants support humanities events: symposiums, conferences, exhibits, lectures.

Maximum award: \$20,000.

Due: Feb. 1, Sept. 1

Minigrants have a budget of \$1,500 or less and support small projects, single events, or planning/consultation.

Due: Feb. 1, April 1, June 1, Aug. 1, *Oct. 1, Dec. 1

Fellowships of \$2,500 support research and writing projects for humanities faculty and independent scholars. Due: Feb. 1

Media Grants support the production of electronic or film materials, or a newspaper series. Maximum award: \$20,000. Due: Sept. 1

Publication Grants are available to nonprofit presses and recognized academic presses, and support *only* the production phase of a completed manuscript. Maximum award: \$20,000. Due: Sept. 1

Teacher Institute Grants are available to colleges and universities and support summer seminars for secondary teachers. Maximum award: \$25,000. Due: Sept. 1

* Approaching Deadline!

Apply Online: Grant applicants may now complete the necessary forms online thanks to recently installed software. Visit www.wvhumanities.org for applications and guidelines. Of course, application forms are also available by mail. Call (304)346-8500 or email Amy Saunders at saunders@wvhumanities.org.

October is National Arts and Humanities Month

The Combined Federal Campaign: The West Virginia Humanities Council has been approved to participate in the federal government's Combined Federal Campaign, the world's largest annual workplace charity. If you are a federal employee who gives to the CFC, you may now donate to the Humanities Council. Look for the Council's charity code, and be sure to include it on your pledge card.




A Public Place. The MacFarland-Hubbard House regularly welcomes visitors. This spring and summer our Little Lecture series saw overflow crowds both in the house and under the pergola, and the Kanawha County Public Library held evening programs and an afternoon tea honoring the Woman's Kanawha Literary Society. Our house tours included two for Charleston's FestivalALL. An outside wedding reception took place Labor Day weekend, in late September National Endowment for the Humanities visitors will spend two days with us, and in October our board comes home for its fall meeting. The 1836 MacFarland-Hubbard House, placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, has been home to the Humanities Council since 2000.

Donations and Pledges


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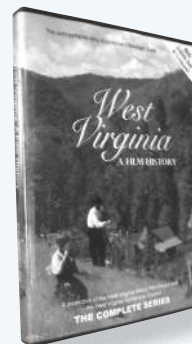
Jim Surkamp speaks to Council travelers at Shepherd University's McMurrin Hall.

In July, Humanities Council supporters joined Executive Director Ken Sullivan and Development Director Michelle Walker for a two-day bus trip to the Eastern Panhandle. Following a lunch stop at Oliverio's in Morgantown, the group traveled to Shepherdstown for dinner, an evening at the Contemporary American Theater Festival, and accommodations at the Bavarian Inn. Travelers enjoyed a walking tour of Shepherdstown with local historian Jim Surkamp before traveling on to Seneca Rocks and an evening meal at historic Graceland in Elkins. "Humanities Council bus trips are a great way to see West Virginia. We look forward to the next one," Sullivan said.

West Virginia: A Film History became a statewide best seller after its reissue as a DVD set on West Virginia Day.

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A production of the West Virginia History Film
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Where There's a Will . . . The West Virginia Humanities Council invites its friends to take part in National Wills Week, October 18-24. Council Development Director Michelle Walker is taking the lead in organizing our regional program, sponsored by Leave a Legacy of Central Appalachia. Wills Week is meant to raise awareness about planned giving and encourage people to prepare an appropriate will and other end-of-life documents. A daylong educational seminar will take place on October 12 at Christ Church United Methodist in Charleston. For information contact Michelle Walker at (304)346-8500 or walker@wvhumanities.org.

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Newsweek Editor to Deliver McCreight Lecture on FDR

The 2009 McCreight Lecture in the Humanities will be presented at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, October 22, at the Culture Center in Charleston. *Newsweek* senior editor and author Jonathan Alter will deliver the lecture titled "The Defining Moment," concerning the early presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Alter's 2006 book, *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*, was a national best seller. The book received fresh attention when the White House announced it had been read by President Barack Obama and much of his team.

Alter will examine how, since FDR, the first one hundred days in office have come to be viewed as an important measure of the effectiveness of a president. When FDR first took office at the depth of the Great Depression in 1933, immediate and vigorous action was called for to avoid a national economic meltdown. The similar challenges faced by Roosevelt and Obama and how they dealt with them will be discussed, along with the first hundred days of other presidents.

Alter also wrote *Between the Lines: A View inside American Politics, People, and Culture*, published in 2008. He has covered seven presidential elections and authored more than fifty *Newsweek* cover stories. He has written for such other publications as *The New Republic*, *Esquire*, and *The New York Times*. Prior to joining *Newsweek* in 1983 he was an editor at *The Washington Monthly*, founded by West Virginian Charlie Peters. Alter's columns have earned more than a dozen national awards.

Alter is also a correspondent for NBC News and perhaps best known by some for his weekly appearances on MSNBC's *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*. He has been named one of America's ten most influential media critics by Columbia University and has been a visiting professor at Princeton University and Arizona State.

As always, the McCreight Lecture is free and open to the public. A book signing and public reception will follow.



President Roosevelt reassured an anxious nation with his "Fireside Chat" radio broadcasts.

The Humanities Council Holiday Open House is Friday, December 4, from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. The historic MacFarland-Hubbard House will be decorated to reflect its history, and refreshments will be served. Join us for some holiday cheer in Charleston.

