

SPECIAL EDITION

WE WANTED TO DO SOMETHING  
DIFFERENT THIS MONTH.

The Broad Side has been around for nearly three years now, mailed every other month to a subset of Council supporters and available to everyone on our website.

Regular readers will quickly recognize that this issue is formatted differently. This is a one-time change to facilitate its mailing to everyone who receives our regular quarterly publication, *People & Mountains*.

Continuing a discussion about technology introduced in the August issue, moreover, we feel that October’s topics reach well beyond *The Broad Side*’s usual nooks and crannies. West Virginians are impacted by new developments just as much as anyone else, but we are not always considered first as to how large-scale change will affect us. (Ed: You don’t need the August issue to read this month’s article, but we encourage you to check it out!)

The 2023 McCreight Lecture, coming to the University of Charleston on October 19, will in turn address recent revolutions in the tech sphere—usually regarded as the domain of Silicon Valley and more urbanized parts of the country, but which impact us here in West Virginia no less. This year’s speaker, influential author and tech humanist Cory Doctorow will speak about how we can better plot our own course in the ever-shifting relationship between society and tech.

As one component of that conversation, the inside of this issue examines a new arrival on the scene: chatbots, a form of “generative” artificial intelligence that can write vast amounts of human-sounding text from a simple instructional “prompt.” There’s no doubt it can be a useful tool—but what happens when we outsource our analytical and critical thinking to a machine whose sources and methods are, at best, opaque?

THE BROAD SIDE

SO WHAT’S IN THIS ISSUE?

Inside you’ll find the results of an experiment we conducted with Google Bard, one of several chatbots to debut earlier this year. Bard is Google’s answer to ChatGPT, the most notorious AI-powered chatbot that has made waves in education, journalism, and other fields since it became more publicly available in early 2023.

Many of these tools are accessible for free (for now), which is prompting working professionals and young students alike to lean on chatbots to generate the writing they need for assignments. Tech corporations like Microsoft are also integrating similar AI tools into their email platforms to compose entire messages if the user supplies a simple set of instructions.

Significant ethical questions about AI tools remain unanswered, such as from whence the data used to “train” the AI was obtained. Only rarely do chatbots reveal the sources of their statements and, as readers will see inside, basic errors are not uncommon. What does it mean for a place like West Virginia, whose history and culture are frequently underrepresented or misrepresented already, if the general public begins to rely more on these imprecise tools for answers?

(turn the page for more!)

FROM THE WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL  
STATE AFFILIATE OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES



Painted portrait of Col. Ruby Bryant in the Army Medical Department Museum. Courtesy of the Army Nurse Corps Association

WILL THE REAL RUBY B PLEASE STAND UP?

by Kyle Warmack,  
Program Officer  
Special thanks to Becky Park

Across the wide, wild world of the internet, searches for Colonel Ruby Bradley will almost inevitably direct you to a stately painted portrait of a decorated officer in uniform. Her short hair is neatly curled. Her steady gaze and half-smile convey both sternness and warmth. She resolutely grips a pair of gloves and a hat in her folded hands.

The inspiring woman in the painting above can be found paired with celebratory articles about Col. Ruby Grace Bradley on websites ranging from *Working Nurse* to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The trouble is, it’s not Ruby Bradley.

The soldier pictured is Col. Ruby Ficklin Bryant, not that you could reliably figure this out from the internet. Most articles crop the accompanying portrait down to its canvas, excluding the ornate frame with identifying placard at the bottom. We have the Army Nurse Corps Association (e-anca.org) to thank for including not only the entire painting and frame, but a close-up of Bryant’s placard which also credits the painter, Thomas E. Stephens.

(continued on back page)

FINDING THE REAL RUBY BRADLEY (continued from front page)

Problematically, however, Bryant’s portrait dominates search results for Ruby Bradley, popping up just as often as genuine photos of Bradley herself. The internet’s frenzy for content makes it easy for this innocent misidentification to proliferate. I need a quick, inspiring article for my job’s weekly post. This lady seems cool! Neat portrait to go with it. Copy. Paste. Publish. The issue is so prevalent that even West Virginia organizations hosting the Council’s Ruby Bradley *History Alive!* character often mistakenly use the Bryant image to promote their events in newspapers and online.

In the case of Bradley and Bryant, it’s easy to tell how the wires got crossed. Bryant—older by a mere 20 months—was born in Emmerton, Virginia, in 1906. Ruby Bradley was born in Spencer, West Virginia, in 1907. Both worked as public school teachers for a few short years before pursuing their dreams of nursing, and both joined the Army Nurse Corps in 1933.

They even both served in the Philippines prior to World War II, but there the two womens’ careers began to diverge. Bryant arrived in 1937, and was just finishing her rotation there in 1940 when Bradley reported for duty. Bryant returned stateside that summer, fateful timing that shielded her from the experiences Ruby Bradley underwent after the Japanese invaded in December 1941.

Captured and interned along with 76 Army and Navy nurses and several thousand American servicemen during the rapid Japanese conquest of the Philippines, Bradley spent three years as a prisoner of war. She and several other nurses established a clinic

in their Manila camp to care for sick and wounded prisoners, who were dying at the rate of several a day from illness, malnutrition, and overcrowding. When American troops liberated the camp in February 1945, Bradley weighed less than 90 pounds, having donated portions of her rations to starving children.

Bryant’s war, in the meantime, was waged from Maryland and Georgia as chief nurse in a series of posts. After another stint in the Pacific from 1946-48, she was promoted to the auspicious position of chief of the Army Nurse Corps in October 1951, a year into the Korean War.

By that time, Ruby Bradley had been in constant combat for a year already, serving in evacuation hospitals at the front. At one point in November 1950, with her airfield surrounded by Chinese troops, Bradley refused to leave until the last of her patients were loaded onto waiting aircraft. Bradley’s ambulance exploded just as she climbed aboard her plane. Her hometown of Spencer threw a parade in her honor when Bradley returned home in 1953, having spent most of the Korean War as chief nurse of the 8th Army in command of 500 frontline nurses.

Ruby F. Bryant retired from the military with the rank of colonel in 1961, as did Ruby G. Bradley in 1963. Both women are widely commemorated for their contributions to the military nursing profession—and we certainly owe their legacies more than hasty internet inspo pieces that treat their portraits as interchangeable.

The trend of misidentifying Bryant’s portrait as Bradley is a disservice to both soldiers, one we can gradually remedy with a little attention to detail. Despite parallels and overlaps, each woman has a unique story to tell from their combined five decades of military service. In the selfish interest of West Virginia—the author says with a wink—this article’s audience gains little from promoting the portrait of a nurse from *Virginia* (just kidding, we’re all Americans here).

In a broader sense, by exerting some academic discipline on this issue we chip away at the hegemony of disinformation (even the accidental kind) that so easily dominates the always-online world we live in now. Training ourselves out of the copy-paste-publish mindset is a more dignified way to honor the legacies of great Americans like Ruby Bradley and Ruby Bryant—and a better way to respect each other’s time. The Ruby B’s of the Army Nurse Corps deserve better than likes, subscribes, and reposts... and so do you.

Col. Ruby Bradley of Spencer, WV. U.S. Army Medical Department, Office of Medical History



Find more details about the 2023 McCreight Lecture at wvhumanities.org!

EVENTS OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2023

We had to slim down our usual Events section for this special issue. As always, please check the Council’s events calendar at wvhumanities.org for a full list of what’s happening!

- Oct 6 Born of Rebellion - Council exhibit premiere on statehood and the Civil War, Annie Pfeiffer Library, WV Wesleyan College. 6:30pm (exhibit open 8am-6pm weekdays through October)
- Oct 19 Cory Doctorow, 2023 McCreight Lecture in the Humanities - Council’s headline lecture event, refreshments and book signing to follow, Geary Auditorium, University of Charleston. 7:30pm
- Oct 19 Diminished Trust: How Do We Restore Faith In Science? - Live discussion with Us & Them podcast creator Trey Kay, Marshall University Drinko Library Atrium, Huntington. 4pm
- Oct 21 West Virginia Book Festival - Authors, events, and vendors, Charleston Coliseum and Convention Center. 8am-6pm
- Nov 5 Appalachian Storytelling - West Virginia Folklife apprenticeship showcase, Robinson Grand Performing Arts Center, Clarksburg. 3pm
- Nov 7 A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination - Amicus Curiae lecture by author Philip Shenon. Brad D. Smith Foundation Hall, Marshall University. 7pm



PROMPTS TO AND RESPONSES FROM GOOGLE BARD CHATBOT ON MAY 11, 2023  
COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED. SUBMITTED BY PROGRAM OFFICER KYLE WARMACK

Describe the legal questions surrounding West Virginia statehood in 1863.

**A** West Virginia was admitted to the Union as the 35th state on December 31, 1863, during the American Civil War. The state's admission was controversial, as it was formed from the western counties of Virginia, which had seceded from the Union and joined the Confederate States of America.

**B** The legal questions surrounding West Virginia statehood centered on the issue of whether the state had a legitimate claim to exist. The Virginia Constitution of 1851 prohibited the division of the state, and the Confederate government refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new state.

The United States Congress, however, was sympathetic to the cause of West Virginia, and it passed a bill admitting the state to the Union on December 31, 1862. The bill was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on the same day.

**C** The admission of West Virginia was a major victory for the Union, as it gave the North a majority in the United States Senate. The state also played a significant role in the war, as it provided troops and supplies to the Union army.

**D** The legal questions surrounding West Virginia statehood were eventually resolved in the Supreme Court case of *Virginia v. West Virginia* (1870). In a unanimous decision, the Court held that West Virginia was a legitimate state, and that it had the right to secede from Virginia.

The admission of West Virginia was a landmark event in American history. It was the first time that a state had been admitted to the Union during a time of war, and it set a precedent for the admission of other states that had been formed from parts of existing states.

Your earlier statement about the passage of West Virginia statehood in Congress is incorrect. December 31, 1862 is not the date the bill passed Congress. The Senate version of the bill passed earlier in the year, and the House version passed three weeks before Lincoln signed it into law.

**E** You are correct. I apologize for the error. The Senate version of the bill passed on July 14, 1862, and the House version passed on December 10, 1862. President Lincoln signed the bill into law on December 31, 1862. I will try to be more careful in the future.

IDENTICAL PROMPT RESUBMITTED ON AUGUST 18, 2023 TO ASSESS BARD'S RETENTION AND IMPROVEMENT. BARD'S REPLY:

The legal questions surrounding West Virginia statehood in 1863 centered on the following:

- F**
- Whether the Virginia General Assembly had the authority to consent to the formation of a new state from within its borders.
  - Whether the United States Congress had the authority to admit a new state to the Union without the consent of the parent state.
  - Whether the people of the northwestern counties of Virginia had the right to secede from Virginia and form a new state.

The Virginia Constitution of 1851 prohibited the division of the state without the consent of the General Assembly. However, the General Assembly of Virginia had seceded from the Union in 1861, and the northwestern counties of Virginia were loyal to the Union. These counties argued that the General Assembly of Virginia was no longer a legitimate governing body and that they had the right to secede from Virginia and form a new state.

**G** The United States Congress passed a bill admitting West Virginia to the Union on December 31, 1862. The bill was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on January 26, 1863. However, the Virginia General Assembly continued to claim that West Virginia was an illegal state.

The legal questions surrounding West Virginia statehood were never definitively resolved. In 1870, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Virginia v. West Virginia* that the people of the northwestern counties of Virginia had the right to secede from Virginia and form a new state. However, the Court did not directly address the question of whether the Virginia General Assembly had the authority to consent to the formation of a new state.

**H**

**I** The legal questions surrounding West Virginia statehood remain a matter of historical debate. However, the state of West Virginia has been recognized as a legitimate member of the United States since 1863.

WHAT'S ALL THIS? We wanted to question a leading chatbot with Google's reputation and unmatched information access about a fundamental piece of state knowledge. Few West Virginia topics have been written about more exhaustively than its unprecedented journey to statehood. While there are complicated legal issues involved, many histories of West Virginia statehood are public domain and widely available to the average user (some are even accessible online via Google Books). It was a level playing field—a slam dunk for “artificial intelligence.” Or so we thought. Below are some of our findings about Bard's responses (left page), though our analysis had to be quite brief.

MATCH THE LETTERS ACROSS BOTH PAGES TO COMPARE GOOGLE BARD'S ANALYSIS OF WEST VIRGINIA STATEHOOD TO THE COUNCIL'S COMMENTARY.

**A** December 31, 1863. A fundamental error any West Virginian could correct with ease. As is nearly always the case with chatbots, it's unclear where Bard came up with this. Perhaps by conflating the date Lincoln signed the statehood bill (Dec. 31, 1862) and the year statehood took effect (1863).

**B** It sounds right, but it isn't quite. Virginia's 1851 state constitution may have prevented *further* division of the state, but the U.S. Constitution prohibited it long before that, unless the original state consented to the separation. Kentucky had been formed from Virginia, after all—with Virginia's consent—decades earlier. Lastly, loyal Unionists hardly cared about whether the illegal *Confederate* government recognized West Virginia's legitimacy.

**C** Bard seems to be equating “Republican” with “North” here. To paint with a broad brush, the North was the *only* possible majority in the U.S. Senate, since Southern states had seceded and were no longer represented. Even assuming the Northern=Republican interpretation, this statement is still wrong. West Virginia's two new senators increased the existing Republican majority, they did not create it. Lastly, thousands of western Virginians served in both the Union and Confederate armies before and after West Virginia's formation—statehood was not a prerequisite.

**D** Not really. The U.S. Supreme Court simply didn't acknowledge the legality of the new state's existence in *Virginia v. West Virginia* (1871, not 1870). Since the court allowed West Virginia to keep Jefferson and Berkeley counties (which Virginia was suing to get back), legal scholars interpret this as a de facto judgment in favor of West Virginia's constitutionality.

**E** Things get very interesting here. When we prompted Bard with a correction, it acknowledged the mistake and spat out accurate dates. But if Bard had access to the correct information to begin with, why did it answer inaccurately the first time? With what sources did it produce the follow-up? What if we had fed it misinformation instead of a correction?

**F** This is misleading. Of course the Assembly had the authority—granted by the Constitution of 1851 referenced later in Bard's reply—but the real question was whether the delegates in Wheeling were *the* legitimate assembly. Unprecedented ground was being broken, and West Virginia statehood as we know it could only proceed from the assumption that the Restored Government of Virginia in Wheeling legally replaced the now-seceded government in Richmond.

**G** Wrong dates *again*. This time, Bard seems to mistake the date of Lincoln's signing the bill with its date of passage in Congress—blatantly incorrect. To make matters worse, Bard invents a completely new date for Lincoln's signature. We have no idea where this came from. Almost comically, Bard also asserts that the Virginia General Assembly protested West Virginia's formation. Of course it did: the Assembly in Richmond was in rebellion against the United States.

**H** Bard improves upon its May 11 answer here by stating that the legal questions were “never definitively resolved.” But then trips over itself by returning to an inaccurate focus on the Virginia General Assembly.

**I** Technically true, but confusing. Yes, the United States government has formally acknowledged West Virginia as the 35th state since 1863. But didn't Bard just finish discussing Virginia's 1871 Supreme Court challenge to West Virginia's legitimacy? The chatbot's conclusion is poorly worded and leaves room for inaccurate impressions.

CLOSING THOUGHTS. “Artificial intelligence” fails on many basic levels here, not least of which is the lack of citations. Without this basic scholarly tool, we have no way of discovering from whence the chatbot's mistakes originate. Its process is completely opaque to the user, which is the fundamental opposite of established academic methodology. Scientists, mathematicians, historians, and others agree—you have to “show the work” or you fail the test.

How can the world's largest search engine disappoint so thoroughly when it comes to basic West Virginia history? Proponents of AI reference its ability to “learn” and adapt, but four months after it was corrected by our first round of prompts, Bard answered with significant inaccuracies a second time. Many West Virginians are equipped to spot these mistakes, but the majority of those asking Bard for answers will be people who don't have much prior knowledge. For anyone seeking to start learning about West Virginia statehood, this “tool” is a demonstrable step backward that does more harm than good. Its accuracy on other subjects must likewise be regarded with skepticism. Critical and complex analysis of this kind is what makes the humanities an essential discipline, and AI's authoritative style of writing—with no acknowledgement of uncertainty or fallibility—makes it more liable to mislead than to educate in its present form.