

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John Franklin McCleary Jr., Lafayette College Class of 1952, was born in West Grove, Pennsylvania on October 31, 1927. After his graduation from high school, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to the Virginia Military Institute for officer training. After the war, he was honorably discharged from Fort Lee with the rank of Staff Sergeant. At Lafayette College he was affiliated with Phi Alpha Theta (national honorary history fraternity) and the Orwig Society (pre-ministerial organization). He graduated cum laude with high honors in English. He was awarded the Youngman Greek Prize and the Class of 1883 Prize in English Literature. Following his graduation from Lafayette, he married Lila May Pittenger on August 23, 1952, and they settled in Trenton, New Jersey. He then entered the Princeton Theological Seminary, where he earned his Divinity Degree in June 1955 and his Masters of Theology Degree in 1969. After his graduation from seminary, he was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA). He served at numerous churches before settling at the Presbyterian Church of Llanerch, Havertown, Pennsylvania. He served there for thirty years and retired as Pastor Emeritus in 1994. After his retirement, he kept busy serving the Philadelphia Presbytery and serving as the Teacher-in-Residence at Newtown Square Presbyterian Church. Outside of the church, John assisted the Scotch-Irish Society of the USA for forty years and volunteered in the Union League Library once a week for ten years. He also made a point to return to Lafayette at least once a year for the annual dinner for the Friends of Skillman Library. He died on August 1, 2015, at the age of 87. At the time of his death, he and Lila were nearing their 63rd wedding anniversary.

Lila May Pittenger met John while they were both serving in Nettleton, Mississippi with the Presbyterian Board of National Missions over the summer. She attended the Oklahoma College for Women, where she was affiliated with the "Q" social club and Zeta Phi Eta (national professional speech arts fraternity). She received her BA degree in speech from the College of Wooster, Ohio. At Wooster, she was active in Phi Alpha Theta and Kappa Theta Gamma (speech honorary society). Following her graduation, she married John and taught English literature at Ewing High School in New Jersey. She and John enjoyed a life of reading, lifelong learning, and traveling.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The McCleary Letters (2 record center boxes; 2 cubic feet) include over a thousand typed and handwritten letters organized in chronological order, dating from September 1, 1950 to August 26, 1970. The bulk of the letters were written in 1950-1952 while John was studying at Lafayette and Lila at Wooster. During this time, they wrote to each other every day. Their daily communication reveals what a long-distance courtship looked like in the early 1950s. In these letters, they describe their classes, coursework, and other daily activities. They would often

include newspaper clippings in their letters to share events in their hometowns or at their schools. John's letters reveal his strong faith, his loyalty to Lila, and his dedication to his studies. His letters also include information on the intense Lafayette-Lehigh rivalry, the food on campus, and his rigorous classes. Lila's letters also reveal her devotion to John and her family, her faith, and her studies, as well as her easygoing and pleasant personality.

In addition to their courtship correspondence, there are also a handful of later letters, as well as several letters from Lila to her family. Additional materials include photographs (both of Lila and John and of Lafayette College), John's seminary diplomas, wedding photographs and clippings, wedding books, anniversary cards, John's obituary, and materials from John's Lafayette Commencement and Reunions.

PROVENANCE NOTE

These letters and materials were given to Lafayette College's Special Collections by Lila McCleary in 2017.

INVENTORY

Box 1 - Folders 1-43: Letters of John and Lila, Lila's letters to family (June 1950 – December 1951)

Box 2 - Folders 1 - 35: Letters of John and Lila, Lila's letters to family, Photographs, Misc. Materials (January 1952 – 2015)