

## **Mss. Collection #1**

**Ralph Emerson Whatley Papers, 1908 - 1953, [bulk 1917 - 1918].**

**4 boxes, (22 folders), ca. 257 items**

**Creator:** Whatley, Ralph Emerson

### **Repository**

The Randolph Room  
Randolph County Public Library  
201 Worth Street  
Asheboro, NC 27203

**NOTE:** The numbers cited in parentheses, e.g. 1:5, refer the researcher to the Series#.Folder# in which that name/topic will be found.

### **INTRODUCTION/ABSTRACT**

The Ralph Emerson Whatley Papers primarily document the military career of Ralph Whatley, tracing his service in America's Military Campaign during WWI. Constituting the collection are **correspondence, maps, scrapbooks, and postcards**. During service, Ralph Whatley wrote to his family back home in Randolph County, primarily his mother. These letters detail Ralph's routine military operations, the scenery he witnessed while in France, and his interactions with other servicemen. The letters and other items in the collection compose not only a personal narrative of Ralph's military history, but also offer insight into the larger history of America's support for France in WWI. The collection offers textual and visual context for Ralph's involvement in the 1st Battalion, 1st Air Service Mechanics, the new and unprecedented facet of the military at this time.

\* Also included within this collection is supplementary research gathered by Lowell "Mac" McKay Whatley, grandson of Ralph Whatley. This secondary research encompasses biographical information on Ralph as well as histories of the Air Service Mechanics Companies.

**Language:** Primarily in English.

**Provenance:** The collection was donated by Lowell "Mac" McKay Whatley, current director of the Randolph Room, and Ralph Emerson Whatley III, grandsons of Ralph Emerson Whatley in January 2017 and given the accession number 2017.001 in March of 2017.

**Processing:** The collection was arranged, and the finding aid written, by interns Chase Hanes and Della Owens in March of 2017.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL/HISTORICAL NOTE**

A native of Randolph County, North Carolina, Ralph Emerson Whatley was born on May 7, 1896, the eldest son to Enoch Whatley--a railroad worker and later sawmill operator--and Mary Ellen May. Whatley spent his early years in Ulah, NC being employed by his father in merchandising and farming. At the age of twenty-one, Whatley began service for the United States in WWI, serving as a motor mechanic in the Aviation Section, Signal Corps (ASSC)--later titled Air Service, US Army. Whatley was drafted into the regular military, but by fate, and, likely, because of his knowledge of how to drive an automobile, he was put into the motor mechanics regiment, a new and unprecedented facet of the military.

In November of 1917, Whatley's involvement in the military took him briefly to Camp Jackson, South Carolina (1:4), to Camp Hancock, Georgia, from where he recovered from an illness (1:4), and then to France to serve alongside French Air Service Mechanics of the Allied forces (1:5-12). Throughout his time in the war campaign, Whatley was a part of Company A, First Air Service Mechanics Regiment. The names of this regiment altered during the war, sometimes being referred to as Co. 1, First Motor Mechanics Regiment, or 1st Battalion, 1st Air Service Mechanics.

Whatley's service in WWI contributed to the narrative of American support for France during this contentious time of history. As France suffered increasing casualties and a growing lack of skilled labor, the United States responded by promising to deploy American automobile mechanics for the French Motor Transit Corps (Mauer 1978)<sup>1</sup>. Whatley received an Honorable Discharge from The United States Army on July 1st, 1919 (2:2), dutifully ending his service within the US Campaign alongside the Allies of WWI.

After WWI, Whatley returned to Randolph County and married Cora Allene Trogon. Together, the couple had three children: Ralph Emerson Whatley Jr. (born 1926), Lowell McKay Whatley (born 1930), and Wendell Norris Whatley (born 1945). Professionally, Ralph Whatley was a pioneer in the automobile industry in Asheboro, North Carolina. On April 27, 1964, at the age of 67, Whatley died in Greensboro, NC (2:2).

## **Biographical Sources:**

Biographical information about Ralph Whatley was gathered through items in this collection, but also through conversations with Lowell "Mac" McKay Whatley, the grandson of Ralph. The

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<sup>1</sup> Maurer, M. (Ed.). (1978). *The U.S. Air Service in World War I*. Maxwell Airforce Base, Alaska: Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center.<<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.30000000227649>>

supplementary research that Mac compiled on his grandfather is included within the Ralph Emerson Whatley Papers.

## **SCOPE AND CONTENTS**

This collection primarily follows Ralph Emerson Whatley's military career as a motor mechanic during World War I in France. Types of items include **correspondence**, **maps**, **military insignia**, **postcards**, and **printed materials**, including **military travel passes**, and **scrapbooks**. Ralph documented his military life in his correspondence to his family (1:3 - 1:12) and made two scrapbooks with military photographs and postcards (3:4). Maps of Paris, France (2:1), travel passes (3.5), military insignia (3.1), and a letter opener made from a rifle cartridge (3.2) are examples of items Ralph owned that offer insight into the daily enterprise of a motor mechanic in WWI.

While there are documents regarding Ralph's pre and post-War life, by far the most substantial part of the collection traces his time serving in WWI. The collection does not offer a comprehensive biography of Ralph, but the consistency and quantity of his correspondence contributes to a detailed depiction of his time in war.

## **ARRANGEMENT**

This collection is organized into five series by document type and subject. The series are **Correspondence**, 1908 - 1953; **Maps**, ca. 1918; **Military**; 1917 - 1933; **Miscellaneous**, ca. 1914 - 1930s; **Postcards**, 1908 - 1920.

## **RESTRICTIONS**

Open for research. Some material may be under copyright.

## **Preferred Citation:**

[Collection ID], Ralph Emerson Whatley Papers, Randolph Room, Randolph County Public Library, Asheboro, NC, USA. Series [#], Folder [#].

## **SUBJECTS**

World War (1914-1918) | France | Armed Forces -- Military life

## **SERIES DESCRIPTIONS**

### **1. Correspondence. 12 Folders (ca. 141 items). 1908 - 1953.**

Within this series are paper materials, primarily letters. The majority of the letters are written by Ralph Whatley during his service in WWI. They are often addressed to his mother, father, and sister. Some are addressed to "All Home Folks." The letters depict Whatley's daily life as a motor mechanic in the Aviation Section, Signal Corps and his experiences with other servicemen while in France (1:5-12). Early writings reflect his friendship with military friend Emery Walker (1:4) and later, being surrounded by French workers and culture. The letters cover his brief time spent at Camp Jackson in late-1917 (1:4) through his Honorable Discharge/return home to America in June 1919 (1:12). The correspondence offers a portrayal of the author as a thoughtful young man devoted to his family, even while facing military responsibilities a great distance away from home.

Other correspondence materials include stray envelopes with unknown letters addressed by Whatley (1:1). There are undated letters, post-WWI (1:2). There are also letters to Whatley from Jesse Whatley (his cousin) dated 1908 - 1909, and letters from a writer named Elma (1:2).

### **2. Maps. 1 folder (2 items). ca. 1918.**

There are two damaged maps of Paris, France. One contains information on monuments, museums, and libraries to visit, and the other shows tramways.

### **3. Military. 5 folders (ca. 26 items). 1917 - 1933.**

Printed materials in this series include: *Manual for Noncommissioned Officers and Privates of Infantry of the Army of the United States*, *The Soldier's French Phrase Book*, "Individual Pay Record Book," "The Soldier's Diary and Note Book," *The First World War: A Photographic History*, and others. Found in the pages of the "Individual Pay Record Book" was a newspaper article titled "German Bombers Describe Night Raid on Paris," and some documents on soldiers' insurance.

The two black, bound scrapbooks include photographs, postcards, and postcard clippings. Featured are groups of soldiers of various ranks, soldiers involved in recreational activities, their aviation equipment, various moments of labor, and postcards. The postcards feature French Aviation Camps, trenches, military artillery, towns, and landscapes. Brutal casualties of war are sometimes shown.

Ralph wrote his name in both volumes. The vertical, white bookmarks designate photos of Ralph, as well as group portraits in which Ralph likely features.

Interesting objects include uniform insignia, such as collar tags, and a brass, scimitar shaped, letter opener made from a rifle cartridge.

#### **4. Miscellaneous. 1 folder (5 items). ca. 1914 - 1930s.**

Items include a photo of Ralph Whatley and his wife, Cora Allene Trogdon, at an American Legion convention in the 1930s, a negative of Whatley's children and/or nieces and nephews in the 1930s, and a damaged photo of a tank. Also included are business cards for Ralph and Lowell Whatley's Ulah Motor Company and a deteriorating budget paper.

#### **5. Postcards. 3 folders (ca. 83 items). 1908 - 1920.**

The majority of the postcards are from when Ralph Whatley was stationed in France. Others depict Camp Hancock, which was located in Augusta, Georgia from 1917 - 1919. Many are blank, but some contain Whatley's handwriting.

### **FOLDER LISTING**

<b>Series</b>	<b>Folder</b>	<b>Series Title</b>	<b>Folder Title</b>
1	1	Correspondence	-- Envelopes (1917 - 1919)
"	2	"	-- Miscellaneous (1908 - 1953)
"	3	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (ca. 1917 - 1919)
"	4	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (1917 - Jan. 1918)
"	5	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (Feb. 1918 - Mar. 1918)
"	6	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (Apr. 1918 - May 1918)
"	7	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (Jun. 1918 - Jul. 1918)
"	8	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (Aug. 1918 - Sep. 1918)
"	9	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (Oct. 1918 - Nov. 1918)
"	10	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (Dec. 1918 - Jan. 1919)
"	11	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (Feb. 1919 - Mar. 1919)
"	12	"	-- Whatley, Ralph (Apr. 1919 - Jun. 1919)

2	1	Maps	-- Paris, France (ca. 1918)
3	1	Military	-- Insignia (1917-1919)
	2	“	-- Miscellaneous (ca. 1917 - 1919)
	3	“	-- Printed Material (1917 - 1933)
	4	“	-- Scrapbooks (ca. 1917 - 1919)
	5	“	-- Travel (1918)
4	1	Miscellaneous	-- Various (ca. 1910s - 1930s)
5	1	Postcards	-- Blank (ca. 1910s)
	2	“	-- Camp Hancock (1917-1919)
	3	“	-- Written (1908-1920)