Abstract:

My research as a Hackman Scholar during the summer of 2015 features two diaries, both in the possession of the Franklin & Marshall College Archives and Special Collections. They reveal the lives of two F&M students during World War I. The first diarist is J. Reah Hollinger of the Class of 1917, who enlisted in Ambulance Company 111 just after his graduation. This company consisted mainly of F&M students and Lancaster locals, and was organized by Dr. Charles P. Stahr, F&M Class of 1897, a prominent physician in Lancaster and son of College President John Summers Stahr. The unit served in northeast France. The other diarist, David A. Landis, a 1916 graduate of the F&M Academy who later attended Swarthmore College, enlisted in the 26th Engineers Regiment and served along the Alsace-Lorraine border between France and Germany.

With guidance from Louise Stevenson, professor of history and American studies, I transcribed these diaries and documented their contents in a digital format. The transcription document not only includes the text of the diaries as it appeared in writing, but also some French translation and footnotes to explain slang terms and provide cultural context. With the assistance of Michael Lear, Archives and Special Collections Assistant, and Jessica Gutacker, Research Services Librarian, I traced the pathways of the soldiers' travels on WWI period maps. Using all city names mentioned by the diarists, I began with the soldiers’ arrival in France and tracked their wartime engagement along the border with Germany through their ultimate debarkation in New York City. I continued work on this project in Spring 2016 by drafting an essay to situate the content of the diaries in the larger context of the World War I experience.

The diaries of J. Reah Hollinger and David Landis present an intimate lesson on the day-to-day life of the WWI soldier. Neither man fought in the front lines or experienced combat directly; their diaries instead shed light upon other tasks performed by the military. Hollinger was an ambulance driver and French interpreter, and Landis transported water to soldiers in combat. Both diarists focus almost exclusively on the emotional aspects of their experience, lacking frequent descriptions of the gruesome actions of war. These diaries expose the monotonous routine of army life, the emotional toll of living in a war zone at a great distance from home, and how the soldiers found entertainment and forged friendships to cope with their boredom and loneliness. The diaries also teach about the way in which these recent college graduates approached the experience of military service. Hollinger enrolled in classes at a French University after the armistice, and Landis connected with Swarthmore alumni in other companies.

These transcriptions contribute to the academic life of the College by giving current students access to century-old personal accounts of college graduates in WWI. In making them, we bring to life the rich resources available in our own Archives and Special Collections.