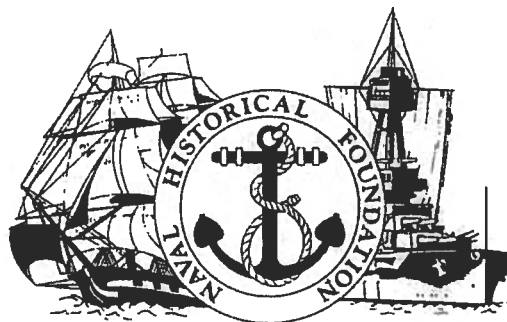


Oral History
Captain John B. Schley
U.S. Navy

Oral History
Conducted with
Dr. Roderick Speer

22 June 1999



Naval Historical Foundation
Oral History Program
2001

Introduction

With the 100th anniversary of destroyers approaching in 2002, the publication of Dr. Speer's interview with Captain John B. Schley is timely. Schley was assigned to five destroyers and served as skipper on three of these. He commanded destroyer Division 82 and had tours ashore related to the support of the sleek surface combatants.

Having served on the *Rhind* and *Stringham*, Schley is a member of a shrinking fraternity of "four-piper" sailors, veterans of destroyers commissioned during the first decades of the 20th century. His other destroyers were of World War II vintage.

Schley's interview focuses on his World War II service. From fighting German U-boats, to covering invasions in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, Schley found himself in the heat of combat, only to be transferred to the Pacific to transport Navy frogmen led by the famed Draper Kaufman. Unfortunately, in war, many casualties are self-inflicted. Schley's narrative details the sinking of the *Punjabi*, the West Locke explosion, a tragic shipboard fire, and a cruise-ending collision.

The Foundation is appreciative Captain Schley for agreeing to participate in the interview. He also took time to review the transcript and make changes where needed to enhance the historical accuracy. We also thank Dr. Roderick Speer for conducting and transcribing the interview and to Frank Arre for performing editing changes.

David F. Winkler, Ph.D.
Naval Historical Foundation
September 2001

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27 January 1966

CAPTAIN JOHN BOONE SCHLEY, U. S. NAVY
TRANSCRIPT OF NAVAL SERVICE

30 AUG 1918 Born in Shepherdstown, West Virginia
29 AUG 1940 Enlisted, U. S. Naval Reserve
15 DEC 1940 Honorably Discharged
16 DEC 1940 Midshipman, U. S. Naval Reserve
14 MAR 1941 Ensign, U. S. Naval Reserve
17 JUN 1942 Lieutenant (junior grade)
1 DEC 1942 Lieutenant
27 JUL 1945 Lieutenant Commander
1 MAR 1946 Released from active duty under honorable
conditions
12 OCT 1946 Recalled to active duty
6 NOV 1946 Lieutenant Commander, U. S. Navy
1 JUL 1951 Commander, U. S. Navy
1 JUL 1960 Captain
Service continuous to date

SHIPS AND STATIONS	FROM	TO
USS RHIND (DD404)	MAR 1941	FEB 1944
COMDT. 3rd Naval District	FEB 1944	MAR 1944
USS STRINGHAM (APD-6) (Nav, Exec, CO)	APR 1944	NOV 1945
USS EUGENE A. GREENE (DD-711) (NAV, Exec)	OCT 1946	MAR 1948
Bureau of Naval Personnel, Wash., D. C.	MAR 1948	JUN 1950
General Line School, Newport, R.I. (Student)	JUN 1950	AUG 1950
Naval Schools, Mine Warfare, Yorktown, Va. (Instr)	AUG 1950	AUG 1950
CO, USS RODMAN (DMS-21)	AUG 1950	MAR 1952
Bureau of Naval Personnel, Wash., D. C. (Head, Discharge Section, Enlisted Performance Branch)	MAR 1952	AUG 1955
Fleet Sonar School, Key West, Fla. (Instr)	AUG 1955	OCT 1955
CO, USS STICKELL (DDR-888)	OCT 1955	JUL 1957
Senior Course, Marine Corps School, Quantico, Va. (Student)	JUL 1957	JUN 1958
Staff, Headquarters, Allied Forces Northern Europe (Head of Joint Planning Team "A" (Future Planning), Plans Divisions in a NATO Command)	JUN 1958	SEP 1960

CAPTAIN JOHN BOONE SCHLEY, U. S. NAVY
TRANSCRIPT OF NAVAL SERVICE

<u>SHIPS AND STATIONS (CONT'D)</u>	<u>FROM</u>	<u>TO</u>
Commander Destroyer Division 82	SEP 1960	DEC 1961
CO, USS MOUNT KATMAI (AE-16)	DEC 1961	MAR 1963
Office of CNO (Head, Material Management Branch, Material and International Logistics Division (OP-412))	MAR 1963	TO DATE

MEDALS AND AWARDS

Navy Unit Commendation Awarded the USS STRINGHAM (APD-6)
American Defense Service Medal with Fleet Clasp
American Campaign Medal
European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal
Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal
World War II Victory Medal
Navy Occupation Service Medal with Europe Clasp
National Defense Service Medal

PERSONAL DATA

Date and Place of Marriage:	20 August 1940, Shepardstown, West Virginia
Wife's Maiden Name & Home Town:	Jean White Snyder, Shepardstown, W. Virginia
Children/Dates of Birth:	Betsy B. Schley 19 June 1943 William B. Schley 1 January 1949
Father:	Harrison Schley (Deceased)
Mother's Maiden Name:	Mollie Boone (Deceased)
Schools and Colleges attended:	Shepard State Teachers College, Shepardstown, West Virginia

Subjects Covered

Growing up in Shepherdstown--Shepherd College
Joining the Navy--Marriage
Assignment to USS *Rhind* (DD 404)

Duty off Martinique with *Mayrant*, *Trippe*, and *Rowan*
Mess treasurer--Neutrality Patrols--Argentia Conference
Support for a British Convoy to the Middle East
U.S. entry into the war

Bermuda--Duty at Scapa Flow--US-UK naval task force
Cold Weather ops--Escorting convoys
The *King George V-Punjabi* collision--The *Tirpitz*

Return to the States--First Lieutenant--Cisco Bay, Maine
North Africa Landings--Combat with *Jean Bart*
Convoy duty --Convoy USG-6

Invasion of Sicily--Ju-88 attacks
Towing the *Mayrant* to Palermo--Supporting Patton
Salerno--loss of *Rowen*--Convoy duty to Naples

Assignment to USS *Stringham* (APD 6) as XO
Assuming command
Missions--Dropping off UDTs
The Pearl Harbor West Locke explosion
Draper Kaufman

Fire at Manus--Loss of crewmembers
Return to Hunter's Point for repairs
Conversion back to DD

Kamikaze attacks--Aid to USS *Comfort* (AH 6)
La Vallette collision
Repairs in San Diego
Assignment to Philadelphia for decommissioning

Transfer to the regular navy--XO USS *Green* (DD 711)
DC duty--Admiral Denfield--Secretary Forrestal suicide

Command of USS *Rodman* (DD 456)- follow on tours--Promotion to captain
Conclusion of career--Retirement

22 June 1999

SPEER: This is Dr. Roderick Speer, volunteering on behalf of the Naval Historical Foundation to conduct an interview with Captain John B. Schley here in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. You are related, I take it to the Schley of Spanish-American War fame?

SCHLEY: Yes. In the Cuban Missile Crisis I almost got into a shooting situation off Santiago. Now wouldn't that have been an interesting story with another Schley in action off Santiago, Cuba.

[Let it be stated at the outset that CAPT Schley explains the pronunciation of his name to be with a long "i" rather than the more commonly heard long "a". It is Schley as in "high."]

SPEER: You were born in Shepherdstown and grew up there? Tell me about your family and your life in Shepherdstown.

SCHLEY: Yes, I was born in Shepherdstown on 30 August 191 and grew up there. I was the youngest of four siblings. My family goes back many generations in the Shepherdstown and Frederick, Maryland Area. It was a great place to grow up. As a boy, I was frequently on horseback, usually with saddle, riding our beautiful countryside, and even swimming horses in the Potomac. The Potomac was a big part of my life then. We swam every day in the river and had a sailboat. My father was CEO of the local bank but died young. I attended local schools including Shepherd College as an economics major. In my senior year I withdrew because I was burning with patriotism and was determined to go fight the war. I attended the V7 Program at Northwestern University (the first class, I think), and was commissioned in March 1941. I chose Navy because of our cousin, Rear Admiral Winfield Scott Schley, of Spanish-American War fame.

In the summer of 1941, I married Jean W. Snyder of Shepherdstown whose family published our county newspaper for many years. We had been sweethearts since Jean was 14 and I was 16. She was a Stephens College graduate. We have two children, a daughter and a son who are both happy and well. Sadly, my wife died a year ago, just short of our 59th anniversary at age 79. Jean was the perfect Navy wife for all circumstances. She could handle social events with great skill and charm, or she could work all day long helping our young enlisted wives cope with the problems of making do alone when our ships were off in the 6th or 7th Fleets for many months. Her dedication was recognized by Commander Destroyer Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet when he made her an Honorary Destroyer Lady. She was very proud of that. After being commissioned in March 1941, I was sent to the USS *Rhind* (DD 404), overhauling at New York NSY. She was one of the fastest class destroyers in her day-in trials they hit 40 kts; a one-stacker. I was the first Reserve officer on her and was assistant engineer. We patrolled off Martinique.

SPEER: This was still before the war for us, what was happening there?

SCHLEY: Vichy France had an old carrier and some destroyers in there. There were four of us: *Rhind*, *Mayrant* (DD 402). *Trippe* (DD 403), and *Rowan* (DD 405). We had to just watch

the French ships. But it was interesting then, I was mess treasurer for my ship and President Roosevelt's son was my fellow treasurer on the *Mayrant*. He would go ashore to buy food for the mess, and the merchants never would cash his checks, endorsed as they were, "FDR Jr." So the Officers' Mess in *Mayrant* ate for little or nothing!

SPEER: Were you often away for long periods?

SCHLEY: As long as I was working out of East coast ports near West Virginia, my wife, Jean, was able to join me for the brief periods we were in port. To give you an idea of the kind of place Shepherdstown was - a small town - there was the local cinema. When I would phone that I was back - you know, you couldn't tell anyone the schedule in advance for security reasons - if my wife was at the movies, they would stop the film and yell, "Jean! John is back." Then Jean would run home and pack her bag for the train to my port.

SPEER: What a wonderful touch. But I suppose this pleasant time didn't last?

SCHLEY: No, by Fall we were running "Neutrality Patrols" in Task Force 1 out of Newport, RI and Casco Bay, ME.

SPEER: What were the rules of engagement here?

SCHLEY: No engagement, really. We would steam in great scouting lines, 4,000 yards apart, sonar searches for subs. Any contacts we would report to the British. Although we did not talk about it, there were rare times when we used depth charges.

SPEER: This was at the time of the Argentinia Conference, wasn't it?

SCHLEY: Yes, we escorted the *Augusta* (CA 31) with the President onboard in August to the meeting with Churchill. We stood outside the harbor but somehow knew the importance of it. Afterwards, we escorted *Prince of Wales* carrying Churchill to Iceland and handed her off to the Brits. With FDR, Jr. in our division, anytime the President met overseas, we were sure to be there.

SPEER: How long did this subordination to the Brits last?

SCHLEY: Well, we always cooperated with them. In fact, in November 1941, before the war officially started for us, the *Rhind* was part of the convoy shipping 20 thousand British troops to the Middle East.

SPEER: You were part of a British convoy?

SCHLEY: No, this was an American operation all the way: there were some six American transports, the carrier *Ranger* (CV 4), two heavy cruisers, and eight destroyers, all American. So we were very much supporting the British war effort before we entered the war. When the war started in December, we were returning from Trinidad. After getting the Pearl Harbor message,

we were itchy as all getout: getting near Norfolk, we saw a strange plane and went to GQ. Turned out to be off a Brit carrier which signals us, "Glad to have you as shooting partners."

SPEER: Did the optempo pick up now?

SCHLEY: Surely did. We went back briefly to Norfolk, but with no liberty or shore leave. Instead we took Treasury Secretary Morgenthal to Bermuda to negotiate the 50-destroyer swap.

SPEER: What was Bermuda like back then?

SCHLEY: Just lovely, no cars. Later we maintained a destroyer tender there. Anyhow, we then got on with providing convoy escort, carrier screening, and ASW warfare. We never raised a sub, but we dropped many depth charges. We did come on a German sub shelling a Norwegian tanker off New York. We attacked with depth charges and gunfire and may have gotten her. Around this time we were sent to Scapa Flow to operate with the British as a token U.S. force for three months. Talk about cooperating with the British! All our mail was sent to "HMS USS *Rhind*."

SPEER: So you were just there for show?

SCHLEY: No, we joined a powerful Task Force commanded by the British and operating out of Scapa Flow. Our force consisted of HMS *King George V*, two or three British cruisers, many British destroyers, USS *Washington*, *Tuscaloosa*, *Witchita*, a U.S. carrier, and our destroyer division. We operated at high speed as a covering force for the very large and slow moving convoys moving up the Norwegian coast to Murmansk. These poor convoys were under constant attack from German bombers, torpedo planes, and submarines, and many ships were lost. The water was so cold, survivors would last only a few minutes. It was terribly cold, and our only foul weather clothing at that time was home-knit items sent by the Red Cross. The seas were so rough we could not sleep in our bunks without wedging kapok life jackets under ourselves. We had to use steam hoses from the engine rooms to de-ice topside. Fog prevented us from seeing most of the German planes as they attacked since we did not yet have radar. Likewise, they could only see the convoy as a black mass through the fog. During one large attack, our ship was sent two miles from the formation and directed to make black smoke. As we had planned, the attacking planes dropped most of their ordnance on our smoke. In another incident, the British Commonwealth destroyer *Punjabi* was accidentally cut in two by King George V. She went down with depth charges exploding, damaging the bottom of the *King George V*. One of our cruisers even shelled *Punjabi's* wreckage, thinking it a sub.

SPEER: Did you ever encounter the *Tirpitz*?

SCHLEY: Yes, she came out on 3 July 1942. We received word by a plain Flash message. We were dumbfounded when our task force commander (British) ordered our formation to break up, scatter, and to seek fuel. The convoy was also told to scatter and ships were to seek Murmansk on their own. Only several merchant ships out of a convoy of about 40 made *it*. We were a powerful force, capable of handling the *Von Tirpitz*, but we did not try to attack. There was

much to do over this and it is my understanding that our British Task Force Commander was sacked. This was kept from the press until after the war.

SPEER: And what were you doing now, professionally?

SCHLEY: I made LTJG in the winter of '41, less than a year from being commissioned. I was the First Lieutenant now. In July, they sent me to sonar school to make me sonar officer as well.

SPEER: You would not have been on Murmansk station at this time.

SCHLEY: No! We had shifted back to the New England area – Cisco Bay, Maine. I remember taking a whaleboat onto some rocks there and dropping my .45 in the water, and I wrote letters about this for months. But this didn't last long, either; I made full lieutenant, and then in later August (24 August 1942) we were off to the North African landings with *Massachusetts* (BB-59), *Witchita* (CA 45), *Tuskaloosa* (CA 37), and our destroyer division. We weren't in the landing force but rather the striking force. We engaged the *Jean Bart* and had to fight running battles with her and the very accurate shore batteries, which used fixed buoys for ranging. They would fire color-splashing rounds so they could identify which gun landed where. We also chased a cruiser and a destroyer down the coast – they both beached. Finally, we went in and fired torpedoes at *Jean Bart*. This was our only time using them. For the winter of '42-'43 we escorted many convoys. One of them, USG-6, out of New York for North Africa in March '43, ran into a big submarine wolf pack. They would come in at about 7 in the evening, as light was failing. We had torpedoes barely missing our ship. Many merchant ships were lost, and they were shooting every which way! There was so much fighting and so many ships lost, that this convoy was awarded a battle star.

SPEER: Did you continue to operate in home waters?

SCHLEY: Oh, no. By July 1943 we were escorting ships but in North Africa again. Bizerte, Libya, Tunis. We were ported at Mers-el-kabir, where the British had destroyed much of the French fleet. We were there to prepare for landings in Gela, Sicily. We were under constant JU-88 attacks. On 10 July 1943 the Sicily landing finally came off, and we provided fire support and ASW coverage. American C-47's loaded with troops, came in late and a lot got shot down by our forces. We were one of the ships firing at them. They came in from seaward right behind a German air attack also from seaward and our planes were mistaken for German. This was a rough campaign for us: one ship started smoking and there was word of poison gas. Didn't amount to anything, but that was the fear we felt. The *Mayrant* was almost sunk – FDR Jr., got a Purple Heart here. We towed *Mayrant* into Palermo. We were among the first ships there. We supported with gunfire Patton's leapfrog landings along the north coast of Sicily. We ran zigzag patrols at high speed through the straits of Messina for several nights, shooting at anything that moved, like barges or e-boats.

SPEER: Did you participate in the advance up Italy?

SCHLEY: Yes, we provided fire support at Salerno – and lost the *Rowan* in September. She was one of our four-ship division, and was torpedoed. We picked up survivors. We

accompanied the first convoy into Naples and made many trips after that. The populace was starving, and Germans were still in process of burning harbor facilities as they withdrew. At this time I was First Lieutenant, Sonar and DC Officer. In early 1944 I was sent to the Pacific as XO of the *Stringham* (APD 6, formerly DD 83), a high-speed destroyer transport. A few months later, at age 26, I became CO of this ship.

SPEER: What sort of missions did these ships have?

SCHLEY: Largely we were used for landing Underwater Demolition Teams and Marine recon/raider groups to reconnoiter and clear beaches before landings. I joined her in Hawaii, and we were preparing for the Marianas operation. At this time, we, along with many other ships, were moored in West Locke, Pearl Harbor. We were all fully combat loaded and ready to sail. I was in my cabin and had stretched out briefly on my bunk, when there was a great explosion in a nest of LSTs close astern of us. I was thrown on deck but not injured. Many ships, mainly LSTs, were on fire, and oil on the water around us was on fire. We lost one man and had several injured. Damage required shipyard repairs. Fire fighting tugs from the shipyard and our shipboard damage control crews, after several hours, finally got things under control. Although I do not recall what the damage amounted to for all ships involved, I think something like five LSTs were lost or put out of action, and there was a great loss of life. It was kept from the press until after the war. By some it was known as the “second Pearl Harbor.” The Marianas Campaign was delayed several weeks because of this. Beginning about 15 June 1944 we supported the landings on Saipan and Tinian by sending in UDTs and gunfire support. Their famous leader, “the father of UDT,” Draper Kaufman was in command of a UDT on my ship. He was a great figure-ambulance driver in France, parolee of the Germans, then a bomb disposal expert with us in the Pacific. He was so dynamic, I would wonder if I was in command or he was! He made flag rank and retired as Superintendent of the Naval Academy. At Tinian, in landing Marines and Kaufman’s group – a squall blew up and scattered us. In the end, we shelled the reefs with armor-piercing rounds to clear coral reefs in the way of landings.

SPEER: You’re really marching through the Pacific now. What rank were you by this time and what came next?

SCHLEY: As skipper of a destroyer, I was “spotted” as a LCDR (rank raised to fit the billet only). And we now escorted the main force to the Palau group, bringing Spruance to Halsey. We landed UDT at Angar and Pelelieu and provided shore fire support. Now a small disaster struck, as we were moored at the island of Manus, moored to the old *Clemson* (DD 186). She was showing a movie to the crew and the film caught fire – dangerous stuff. We were down wind and the fire spread to us and the snaking, the boats, even two depth charges were on fire. We cut mooring lines and drifted free of *Clemson*, on fire, and nearly sank. We lost of number of men. We had to return to CONUS for repairs. This was accomplished at Hunter’s Point NSY, and for good measure, we were converted back to a DD, to return and support the Okinawa campaign.

SPEER: This would have exposed you to the Kamikazes.

SCHLEY: You bet. We escorted landing ships. Then we operated as a radar picket. They didn't get us, but we shot down several kamikazes which were trying to crash on us. We escorted many damaged DDs; and we put out the fire on USS *Comfort* (AH 6), a hospital ship hit by the kamikazes, with many dead and wounded. But our war was over when a DD [*La Vallette*, DD 448] plowed into us, right into the officers' mess, and ruptured several fuel tanks. We were in San Diego for repairs when the war ended. We were sent to Philadelphia for decommissioning. By the way, there was a lot of confusion in my last DD division, because we also had the DD *Schley* (DD 103/APD 14) in the four ship division.

SPEER: Postwar, you must have considered getting out of the Navy?

SCHLEY: Not really. I transferred to the Regular Navy. I loved the Navy and the people. I wasn't Annapolis, but that never seemed to matter. So in 1946-47, I was now properly a LCDR and XO of the USS *Green* (DD 711). This was routine duty in the Atlantic and Sixth Fleet. After two years, the time came for a Washington tour. This involved two years at BUPERS, May '48 to May '50 in the Officers Performance Division. I handled officers who were in trouble and worked with selection boards.

SPEER: Did you encounter any of the giants of the Navy now?

SCHLEY: Yes, I dealt with Arleigh Burke often. And a funny story: ADM Denfield was put in the office next door to me. He was trying to lie low after being relieved as CNO during the so-called Revolt of the Admirals. So he was terribly embarrassed, when he entered the room one day, trying to look inconspicuous, and a young officer called "Attention!" and everyone in the entire wing of the building hopped to their feet. It was also at this time that Secretary Forrestal committed suicide. The pictures came through me for review. Simply terrible.

SPEER: Did your two years of Washington duty have the desired effect?

SCHLEY: Yes, I now became CO of another destroyer, USS *Rodman* (DD 456) for two years. We spent much time with the Sixth Fleet operating with carriers. From April 1952 to August 1955 I was back in BUPERS in the enlisted performance division. Then it was back to the tin cans, almost two years to August 1957 as CO of the *Stickell* (DD-888). We spent a lot of time with the 6th Fleet. Now came the time for higher staff work: I spent a year at the USMC War College. In July 1958 I was ordered to the staff of Commander Allied Forces Northern Europe in Oslo, Norway. This was a great period for me, with skiing, sailing, travelling to SHAPE in Paris and other NATO countries. This was a two-year tour, and my job was Head of the Long Range War Plans Section. My section included a Norwegian LTC, a U.S. Marine LTC, and a Danish airforce LTC. And now I was promoted to CAPT. This was gratifying: I had always been just behind the Annapolis Class of '41, in the hump. When I made CAPT, only 17% of the eligibles did.

SPEER: Can we predict even higher commands and staff jobs in your career?

SCHLEY: Yes. After leaving my staff job in Norway, I was ordered to command a destroyer division of five destroyers operating out of Mayport, Florida. These were radar picket destroyers

(DDRs), so we were always operating with fleet carriers at high speed. We spent a number of months as part of the Sixth Fleet in the Med, and then in operations around Cuba and Honduras. We had only a little time with our families back in Mayport. When my tour as division commander was up, I was sent to the Pacific to command USS Mr. Katmai (AE 16), my deep draft command. This was a one year tour, operating mainly in WestPac replenishing our Seventh Fleet ships off Vietnam. My family lived at Mare Island and I didn't see much of them. When my tour as CO of Mt. Katmai was up, I was ordered to OPNAV as Director of the Material Division (OP-41). This was a large division operating under DCNO for Logistics, and responsible for a vast number of major logistics policy matters. My job was very stressful as many OPNAV jobs were at that time. It involved many late evenings and weekends. So, when this three year tour was up, it was a feeling of great relief. During this time, a retention board considered my record along with the captains for forced retirement at 27 years of service. It was a reduction of force measure and about fifty percent were retired early. I was retained for customary thirty years. That raised my spirits. When my tour of duty in OPNAV was completed, I was ordered for my final tour to the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk as the Base Commander. This was a most pleasant job, catching up on family time and unwinding before retirement. I retired on 1 June 1970 at age 51, to a 150 acre spread in the Shenandoah Valley.

SPEER: How to you judge your destroyer-heavy career?

SCHLEY: I do not know of anyone who had more time in destroyers, or more destroyer commands than I. I am very proud of that. I loved every minute of it. I am now 83 and it's nice to look back on. It was a bit hard for my family, however!

SPEER: And after retiring?

SCHLEY: When I retired in June 1970, we returned to our farm in the Shepherdstown Area. In addition to running the farm, I stay totally occupied in non-paying volunteer public service, which gives me much satisfaction. I served on Board of Managers of our county hospital for ten years, on county Planning and Zoning Board for 15 years, the county Board of Appeals for five years, on Board of Directors of county Historical Society for 20 years, president and member of county Historic Landmarks Commission for 20 years, and presently, on board of directors of Shepherdstown Historic Commission. And, prior to my wife's death we traveled extensively and led a very active social life.