

A Guide to the Newton D. Baker, Jr. Collection, 1902-1938

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1902-1938

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History

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Descriptive Summary

Accession number

020

Language

English

Creator

Newton D. Baker Jr.

Extent

6 cubic feet.

Storage Location

Powell Archives stacks

Repository

Lewis F. Powell, Jr. Archives, School of Law, Washington and Lee University

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Collection is open to research.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

BakerHostetler Law Company.

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Biographical Information

Newton Deihl Baker, Jr. was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia on December 3, 1871. Baker attended the village schools in Martinsburg through his second year in high school and finished his preparatory training at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia. He entered Johns Hopkins University in 1889 and graduated with the Class of 1892. During his time at Johns Hopkins, he met Professor Woodrow Wilson, a visiting lecturer from Princeton.

He finished the normal two year course in the School of Law at Washington and Lee University in nine months, receiving his B.L. in 1894. He practiced law in Martinsburg before moving to Washington as secretary to William L. Wilson, Postmaster General in President Cleveland's second administration. This first political appointment came to an end in 1897 with the inauguration of President McKinley. Baker returned to the practice of law in his hometown, moving later to Cleveland, where he served two terms (1912-16) as mayor. In 1902 he married Elizabeth Leopold of Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Baker, who had played an important role in Woodrow Wilson's nomination in the Democratic National Convention of 1912, was appointed secretary of war by President Wilson and remained in the Cabinet to the end of Wilson's term of office. Although he was, as he himself said, so much of a pacifist that "he would fight for peace," he soon submitted to Congress a plan for universal military conscription, and he efficiently presided over the mobilization of more than four million men during World War I.

A Wilsonian idealist, he fought American isolationism following World War I. He was a steadfast advocate of the low tariff, and an eloquent champion of American participation in the League of Nations and the World Court. In 1928 he was appointed by President Calvin Coolidge to the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, and in 1929 President Herbert Hoover named him to the Law Enforcement Commission. Often mentioned as a Democratic nominee for the Presidency, he had strong support as a dark horse candidate in 1932. His book, *Why We Went to War*, appeared in 1936. As a humanitarian he gave unstintingly of his time and energy in active support of dozens of reform and charitable societies. He was a trustee of several colleges and a supporter of adult education.

Baker's political views were difficult to categorized and changed over time. He was described as on the left wing in local affairs, and right of center on national issues. In Cleveland, Baker was a gradualist who achieved a reputation as a "reliable radical and prudent progressive." Later he was to question the limits of national authority under the New Deal, and in his last years was to be characterized as a genial conservative with an open mind. He died on Christmas Day in 1937.

Adapted from the forward and first chapter of Newton D. Baker, a Biography by C. H. Cramer, World Publishing, 1961.

Scope and Content

The Newton D. Baker, Jr. Collection consists of scrapbooks documenting his life in newspaper clippings; typescript minutes from meetings of the Council on National Defense, 1916-1918; and a variety of printed materials ranging from annual reports of the Secretary of War, 1918-1920, to a 1976 magazine reproducing a speech of Baker's. The scrapbooks were digitized in 2016 and are available online at the Washington and Lee School of Law Digital Commons.

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