History is filled with interesting coincidences. Regular readers may recall that History Center Project Associate Lauren Uhl contributed some World War II-era photos of her dad, Alan Poese, to this magazine’s “Pittsburgh A to Z” issue in Fall 2001.

While looking over recently donated papers from another World War II vet, Lauren was surprised to see the commanding officer on this discharge paper — Charles H. Uhl, her father-in-law.

Mr. Uhl, now 87, was studying botany at Cornell University when war called; he served in the Pacific on an LCI: Landing Craft Infantry, the smallest Navy ships to cross oceans under their own power. On leave in 1945, he hastily arranged to marry classmate Natalie Whitford, who had received her Ph.D. in botany while he was away. They wed on August 15, 1945 — VJ Day — and so couldn’t get a wedding cake, as businesses everywhere were closed in celebration. The couple just celebrated their 60th anniversary.

One of the men returning from the Pacific theater, Thomas McKenna, had entered the Navy at age 29 in 1943. After two years’ service, he was discharged in October 1945. His son David donated his Navy uniform last year to the History Center, and this year supplemented that with dog tags, patches, photos, and papers like this one.

The James and Dorothy Wells Family Collection of papers, photographs, and artifacts contains materials related to six generations of the Wells-Hutchison-Wilkins family. One of the most significant individuals in this family was James Wells’ great-grandfather, William Wilkins (1779-1865). A prominent Pittsburgher, Wilkins served his country and local community in some capacity for most of his life. This collection provides a window into both a community and the national political arena of the 19th century.

Along with his career as a lawyer, Wilkins served as president of local banks, manufactories, and organizations such as the Select Council of the Borough of Pittsburgh. He was later appointed judge of the United States District Court for Western Pennsylvania, a title that he used forever after. In 1830, he hit the national political
stage when he was elected to the U.S. Senate. Four years later, President Andrew Jackson appointed Wilkins the U.S. Minister to Russia, a position previously held by his brother-in-law George Mifflin Dallas of Philadelphia. (See note, right). The collection contains numerous correspondence from seven U.S. Presidents and a host of other political figures both national and local. Wilkins also served a year as Secretary of War under President John Tyler followed by a return to the Pennsylvania legislature.

The Wilkins family name was adopted by a local township and borough. Judge Wilkins’ mansion and estate, Homewood, became the namesake for a nearby Pittsburgh neighborhood and later the land for Homewood Cemetery. Andrew Carnegie, in