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Sandra Boyd

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Here They Come Again! My Two "Archival Encounters" with records of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission

Sandra Boyd

Little did I realize in the 1960s and 1970s, when reports of the Sovereignty Commission activities were in the news, that I would be involved with the Commission records in two different institutions. The "encounters" have been different, representing two ends of the spectrum in archival work today, but they have been interesting and challenging.

In October 1986, after completing my MLS in the Library School at the University of Southern Mississippi, I joined the staff of McCain Library and Archives in the position of Assistant Archivist in the Special Collections Department. That department of the University library, housed on the third and fourth floors of the William David McCain Library and Archives building, had a staff of ten, and included the Mississippiana, Genealogy, Rare Books, Walen Civil War, and de Grummond Children's Literature collections along with the Manuscripts area. My work in the manuscripts area focused on processing and describing the backlog of unprocessed manuscript collections with later emphasis on creating MARC (Machine Readable Cataloging) records for our holdings.

One of the unprocessed manuscript collections in the library holdings was the Johnson Family Papers which had been donated in December 1981. That original donation consisted of 86 cubic feet with two small groups of papers (under 1 cubic foot each) added later. Dr. Claude E. Fike and Dr. William McCain were responsible for the preliminary contacts and work with the family that brought the collection to the University. Included in the 86 cubic feet were books, correspondence, photographs, newspapers and clippings, office files, family financial

materials, campaign materials, artifacts and memorabilia spanning the years 1917-1970. At the time of the 1981 donation, there was an oral agreement or at least an implicit understanding that the papers were to be closed until the death of Governor Johnson. The papers were stored in the closed stack collection storage room, and only a small portion of the papers, those relating to Paul B. Johnson, Sr., were available for research use before 1989.

By the mid-1980s, Terry Latour, director of McCain Library, was aware of the growing interest in the Johnson papers, especially since the case involving the Sovereignty Commission records at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History was moving so slowly through Federal court. Discovery had been granted in 1984, but the plaintiffs were still repositioning themselves for further appeals in the case. Governor Paul B. Johnson, Jr. had died on October 14, 1985, so that any unwritten agreement to keep the papers closed during his lifetime was no longer applicable. However, Terry did not want to open the papers without having a clear legal basis for access. In March 1989, on the same day that Leesha Cooper, a writer for *The Clarion Ledger*, came to McCain Library to do research in the papers, Terry sent a memo to University Legal Counsel Dr. Michael Clay Smith, asking whether the order to seal the official records of the Sovereignty Commission applied to records in a private collection.

In the fall of 1988, knowing that there were seven boxes that contained Sovereignty Commission records and about twice that number that contained Highway Patrol reports, Terry asked me if we would begin sorting the identified boxes with student help. I agreed and we began the task. One student was hired initially and then a second one was added near the end of the fall semester.

The papers were totally unorganized. Most boxes looked as if someone had simply dumped contents of file drawers and then added whatever loose correspondence lay around. Each box had to be reviewed for the types of documents included and then directions given to the student who was sorting that box. Some boxes included material with similar date spans; other boxes mixed papers of Paul B. Johnson, Sr. with those of Paul B. Johnson, Jr. The work required a box by box sorting and was tedious and demanding. Students worked no more than four to five hours per day, but when they worked they required the use of nearly all of the processing space in our fourth floor office.

Although we began work initially on the boxes containing Sovereignty Commission and Highway Patrol records, I soon realized that reports and correspondence from the two agencies were actually scattered throughout many other boxes. So we moved on to other boxes, sorting, stacking, interfiling and foldering items. I worked with the more fragile documents and newspapers from the 1920s-1940s, which covered the political career of Paul B. Johnson, Sr. Two staff and some student assistants did the conservation work so that items would be preserved, deacidifying and encapsulating many documents and newspapers. By April 17, 1989, when the formal request to see the Johnson Papers was made under the Mississippi Public Records Act, the Sovereignty Commission records and Highway Patrol reports were arranged in chronological order and foldered in about twenty boxes. However, much work remained to be done on the balance of the collection.

The question of access to the Johnson Papers was finally answered in a phone call on July 28, 1989, from a staff member of the Attorney General's office. Staff of the Attorney General's office had represented the University in Hinds County Chancery Court where *The Clarion-Ledger* had sought a court ruling on access to the records. Judge Stuart Robinson

ruled that the papers of Paul B. Johnson were public records and that they should be made available for research. On that afternoon, the staff of McCain Library wheeled a cart of boxes filled with records into the Cleanth Brooks Reading Room where reporters and researchers began searching through and copying from them.

Meanwhile, work on the remaining boxes continued into 1990 before all documents were cleaned, foldered, and identified. When I left McCain Library and Archives to work on a cataloging project at the Department of Archives and History (MDAH) in November 1991, there was a rough finding aid to the Johnson Papers, and I thought I was through with any work relating to the Sovereignty Commission.

But they came back again - this time after I had been at MDAH for three years. At that time the department had an opening for the position of Section Head in Official Records, the section which handles the transfer and preservation of state government records, and the one responsible for the Sovereignty Commission Records. I accepted the position, knowing that there was an excellent staff in the section and that whatever was required of us in the Sovereignty Commission project, it could be done as a team.

Shortly after I became head of the Official Records Section, we held a series of meetings to establish the criteria we needed in the imaging system required for the Sovereignty Commission records. By the date of Judge Barbour's ruling in Federal District Court (May 31, 1991), we had nearly completed details of the RFP (request for proposal) which would be circulated to potential vendors. Details of the project are contained in another article in this issue. My role in the project, from December 1994 through the current time, has included keeping up daily with the progress of scanning and indexing, looking at any means possible to streamline the workflow, and when necessary, joining the project team in "the Chamber" to do indexing and quality control. In all phases of the project, I was a backup if a project staff member got sick, and I was frequently called upon to establish procedures needed to accomplish a particular phase of the court-ordered process. We had to "draft" several other Archives & Library staff members for some phases of the project, and when that was necessary all of them helped willingly, realizing that the deadline was not of our own making.

Each "encounter" has had its own unique set of problems and challenges. In working with the Johnson Papers at USM, there was the archival challenge of bringing order to a collection in complete disarray and preserving the paper documents for future research use. With the Sovereignty Commission papers at MDAH, the challenge was, first, to meet the demands of the court while making the documents available for research use in a format where standards and preservation practices are still being developed. Nevertheless, being able to work with both collections and to contribute to the preservation of the information in them has been gratifying. I'm glad I have had the opportunity to have both of these "archival encounters."

