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Spotlight on Mississippi Archives

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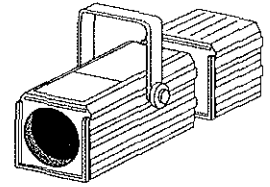
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Spotlight on Mississippi Archives



BILLUPS GARTH ARCHIVES COLUMBUS PUBLIC LIBRARY

An archives in a public library is somewhat unusual in Mississippi. Mrs. Douglas Bateman, long-time Columbus library director, has always had a strong commitment to local history. Under her direction, the library staff has collected Columbus history for many years. In 1981, the Margaret Latimer Buckley Room was established through a memorial gift from Dr. George Buckley in honor of his wife. This room houses the library's printed historical and genealogical materials as well as census microfilm and microfilmed newspapers. In addition to a wealth of published Columbus material, the researcher can also find books and periodicals on most counties in Mississippi and Alabama and varied amounts of information for many others states. Genealogists from throughout the United States visit the library and are most appreciative of the many resources available.

The Billups-Garth Archives was established in 1992 when the library was the recipient of a major gift from the Snowdoun Foundation. This gift allowed for the considerable enlargement of the local history area and the purchase of moveable shelving to house non-current, Lowndes County public records assigned to the library's custody. These records include estate papers from the 1830s to the late 1800s, docket books, minute books, voter registration rolls, land assessments rolls, school records, and the original registers of historic Friendship Cemetery. Two of the most interesting items are the minute book (1835-1853) of Franklin Academy and its accompanying account book. Franklin Academy was established as a public school in 1821, and a school bearing its name is still operational and located on the same piece of land as the original school.

In addition to the county records, the archives also houses approximately 2000 black and white photographs, 300 inventoried manuscript collections, over 200 maps, Columbus family files, and over 100 scrapbooks. A large number of subject files cover many aspects of life in Columbus including businesses, religion, buildings, organizations, government, and education. A particularly popular group of files are the ones on Columbus' historic homes.

The focus of the archives is, quite naturally, to collect and preserve materials which tell the story of Columbus from the earliest days to the present. Columbus residents have a keen interest in their history. We often receive contributions of manuscript materials and are quite busy providing reference service in person and by mail. We also work with students attending the Mississippi School for Math and Science as they conduct research in Columbus history. In the fall of 1999, approximately 100 of these students are using materials from the Archives for their research. Their projects will culminate in two programs, Tales from the Crypt,

performed during Columbus Spring Pilgrimage and the Columbus City Block Project. The students are responding well to this opportunity to use primary sources.

Columbus Pilgrimage has occupied a prominent place in Columbus history for the past sixty years. The first Pilgrimage was in 1940. During World War II and for a few years afterward, the Pilgrimage was suspended. It began again in 1950. The Pilgrimage manuscript collection, published materials, clipping files and ball programs tell the story of the yearly event in which many Columbians take part. The materials include descriptions of houses on tour. Some of these homes no longer exist so the information is particularly important. Other homes remain but are no longer on the Pilgrimage tour.

Another emphasis is a fledgling oral history effort. A grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council allowed us to have an oral history workshop in the fall of 1996. Since that time, the archivist has conducted several interviews with local octogenarians. Most of them are Columbus natives or long-time residents. An interview with a former WAC who served as a telephone operator in France during World War II provides a change of pace. This interviewee became so interested that she interviewed several World War II veterans of her acquaintance. A few of these interviews have been transcribed.

Sometimes we feel like we are neither fish nor fowl in our archives in a public library. Our staff of two must handle all the work in the genealogy, local history, and archives areas. One thing is for certain: We are never bored!

Do you have a person, project, or institution you would like to highlight in a future issue of the journal? Contact the editor at irmgard.wolfe@usm.edu

