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Harrison County: a Status Report

by Tim Barnard, Land Records Clerk,
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Everyone has some place to store "stuff." At home, it may start out in a dresser drawer, then move to a closet, then the attic and then the garage. When the garage gets so full you can't even put your bicycle in it, you rent a mini-warehouse.

Now imagine the amount of "stuff" (i.e., records) a county government has to deal with. It runs on records. Crimes are investigated. Criminals are prosecuted. Other lawsuits are tried. Marriage licenses are granted. Deeds and mortgages are recorded. Property is assessed and taxed. Roads and bridges are built and maintained. Office buildings are built, furnished and staffed. All of these activities generate records, mostly on paper. And as the population grows, more services are created to meet their needs. And the paperwork multiplies.

Harrison County, Mississippi has seen two major growth spurts in recent years, one in the 1970's after Hurricane Camille and another in the 1990's with the arrival of the casino industry. Both times this

meant an increase in government services and the resulting records. The need for an organized method of maintaining those records was reaching a critical point.

The Chancery Clerk wears a variety of hats in county government, including clerk of the Board of Supervisors, clerk of the Chancery Court, recorder of deeds & mortgages, county auditor and the county's version of a chief financial officer. This means that the Chancery Clerk's office either generates or inherits many of the county's records.

In 1995 Harrison County's Chancery Clerk announced he would not seek re-election to the post he had held for 24 years. One of the candidates to succeed him, John McAdams, began talking with people who worked with county records, both employees and researchers. He soon realized that something needed to be done with the records storage situation. Some steps had been taken – the county had acquired a building to use for storage of inactive records, while some records that were more critical had been sent to an off-site contract storage facility – but there was minimal oversight or coordination. Mr. McAdams made it a goal to address this situation if elected. He won his party's primary and then the general election, defeating the incumbent's handpicked successor.

Mr. McAdams assembled an advisory committee of employees and researchers (such as attorneys, abstractors and surveyors) and hired Tim Barnard, a former Chancery Clerk's employee, who was then doing title research in several South Mississippi counties, as land records supervisor to oversee the records situation. Meanwhile, the state Chancery Clerks' Association was instrumental in getting the Mississippi Legislature to pass the Local Government Records Act, which created a statewide committee to address the records management problem for both county and municipal governments. Among other provisions, the act allowed counties to collect a \$1 per document records management fee, half of which goes to fund the statewide office and half for the county's own program. Harrison County was the first county to join the program and collect the fee. Mr. McAdams also persuaded the Board of Supervisors to appoint him as the county's official custodian of the records. This would allow him to supervise the entire records storage situation, though the other offices would not lose ownership of their particular records.

A newspaper article about the county's program generated interest from professors in the University of Southern Mississippi's history department. Meetings between Mr. McAdams and history department spokesmen led to an ongoing contract between the county and USM for a graduate student in history and/or library science to work each school term with the Chancery Clerk's office in the records management program. The first graduate student, Wendy Stewart-Clark, did an inspection of all the areas where the county was storing records, then created a long-term plan to deal with them. The records management program is still following most of the basic guidelines she proposed.

There were several sites being used for storage:

- When the county built a new jail facility, the old jail in Biloxi became a storage area for the district attorney's records. In one of the cells, boxes were stacked on top of a toilet!
- A metal building nearby had been a three-stall garage for the power company's trucks; it contained records and equipment from several Biloxi courthouse offices.
- The county had bought a building from one of the fraternal societies in 1990, making part of it into offices and leaving the dance floor for a storage area. Bunk beds from the old Gulfport jail were used for shelving. By 1996, several offices had taken their old records and equipment there and simply dumped them wherever there was room. Boxes collapsed on top of each other, stacks of books fell over and someone had left rolls of insulation and a spool of wire in the middle of it all.
- After a 1975 fire in the old Gulfport courthouse, many records were taken to a storeroom in the back of the Mosquito Control warehouse. For several years afterward, records from several offices were moved in and out of there, but when the Mosquito Control office moved out, the remaining

records were all but abandoned. Ms. Clark viewed these, but they were given a low priority. The chemical smell made work there questionable.

- ❑ The back of the Chancery Clerk's record vault was used for old land rolls, tax receipt books, various court dockets and financial records, but it was difficult to keep them in any order. Poorly labeled boxes were stacked on countertops, on top of shelving units and in the aisles. Closed Chancery Court files had been moved into "compressed shelving" in the late 1980's, and many Circuit and County Court files had been moved to similar shelving in the vault after the second floor had been damaged from their weight.
- ❑ As Chancery files grew, in 1993 the Clerk sent files from the 1960's-70's to an off-site contract storage facility. Other offices' records were also periodically sent to the facility, but there was little continuity in their labeling, making it difficult to know for sure what was being stored and which boxes contained what. The facility's main storage area was not climate-controlled, endangering the condition of the older records stored there.

The district attorney's records in the old Biloxi jail were in pretty good shape, so they were sent to the contract storage facility. The "dance floor" at the Sand Beach Maintenance office was a priority. With the help of county jail trustees weekdays and undergraduate students from USM and the Perkinson campus of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College on several Saturdays, Ms. Clark was able to clean up the mess and organize the books and boxes by department. Boxes were repacked and labeled, books were cleaned and wrapped, and then most of them were sent to the contract storage facility. Meanwhile, many of the records in the back of the Gulfport record vault were sorted and inventoried, while some of the "active" areas of the vault were reorganized as a result of user surveys Ms. Clark conducted.

As the Local Government Records Committee began to function under the direction of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the records clerk and graduate students drafted some retention schedules for the committee's approval. Once MDAH hired Bill Hanna to run the Local Government Records office, he began drafting general statewide schedules for the committee's approval. With the retention schedules and approval from the Board of Supervisors, the records clerk and the graduate students were able to dispose of many of the older records no longer needed. As they found records that were beyond their retention period, they could dispose of them; they studied the inventories from the off-site facility to identify records stored there that they could dispose. They regularly attend the committee meetings to keep informed of its work. Visits to records programs in Lauderdale and Adams Counties gave them ideas to use in their own program.

After Ms. Clark, graduate students Catherine Jannik and Melissa Finley, along with a state inmate assigned to the Chancery Clerk's office, spent much time reorganizing the back area of the record vault, especially the land rolls and tax receipts. A large portion of the tax receipts and duplicate copies of the land rolls were sent to the off-site facility, freeing up space for boxes of other records that had been on counter tops and the floor. Chancery Court files from the 1960's-70's that had been sent to the off-site facility were accessed frequently, while the oldest probate records dating back to 1841 were being stored at the very top of the facility's shelves in the open-air storage, so hundreds of inactive Circuit and County Court files were boxed and sent to the off-site facility to make room for the Chancery Court files.

Several smaller projects were also tackled. A couple of Perkinson students went through some of the boxes of loose Circuit Court records from the late 1800's, flattening them, putting them in acid-free folders and cataloging them. (This is a project that is still incomplete.) Subdivision plats had been placed in vinyl sleeves in the 40 or so plat books; the vinyl was damaging the plats, so student volunteers replaced them with safe plastic sleeves, holding the plats inside the sleeve with Velcro spots. A few blueprint maps were encapsulated in plastic sheets as a demonstration to the students. Most of the map drawers were cataloged, with the lists attached in each drawer. Standardized labels, instructions for storage and procedures for disposal were drawn up and delivered to all the county offices using the off-site facility.

In the summer of 1999 the Local Government Records Committee approved a retention schedule allowing the counties to dispose of the tax collector's copy of the yearly land roll after two years. This allowed Harrison County to dispose of a large number of duplicate land rolls. Graduate students Stephen Payne and Kim Levy worked for several months inventorying all the land roll books to determine which could be discarded and still leave a complete set for each year. Most of the books that had been left in the vault were the tax collector copies, so they were sent for disposal while many of the ones stored at the contract facility were returned to the vault. After the county was split into two districts in 1968, duplicate sets of the Chancery Clerk and Tax Collector's land rolls were printed for each district. Many of the 2nd District land roll sets were stored at the Sand Beach office; these were either moved to contract storage or discarded as appropriate.

In 2000 the National Guard base at the Gulfport airport announced plans to expand into the area where the old Mosquito Control building was located. Mr. Barnard went out to the building in June to see how much effort it would take to remove the records left there. He found the building's roof damaged from Hurricane Georges in 1998, allowing water to leak onto many of the records. When the roof over the middle of the building collapsed, the county hired a contractor to stabilize the building and work with Mr. Barnard and graduate student Amy Love to remove the records. Over 700 boxes of records were recovered, while many more were either beyond retention or too damaged to keep. The county rented three units at a nearby mini-warehouse to store and sort out the records, but fear of contamination by the mold that had grown on many records caused them to make other plans. They rented a refrigerated truck trailer and moved the records in there, stored at -20°F, until they could find a way to treat the records. The clerks consulted with other records managers over the Internet, leading the county to contract with a disaster recovery service for rental of special dehumidifiers to dry the records. They set up a drying room in a spare office at the contract storage facility and dried groups of 50 boxes at a time, then repacked them and took them to the mini-warehouse for sorting. Ms. Love and several undergraduate students resorted the records into appropriate groups and sequences, then sent what needed to be kept to the contract facility. The Department of Archives & History gave authorization to dispose of many of the other records that had no historical value.

Ms. Levy began a computerized inventory of the land roll books in the back part of the vault. Ms. Love expanded the inventory to include all of the books and boxes in that area, including a small "archives area" for some of the oldest records. There are still many boxes to review, but the space is limited at this time. The Genealogical Society of Utah, in conjunction with MDAH, has sent a group to microfilm the county's oldest Chancery Court records, marriage licenses, voter registration books and other related records. They have been working in the back of the vault for over a year, sorting, flattening and repacking court files and using every inch of available space for their work. The county has been buying duplicate copies of the microfilm, while volunteers have been creating comprehensive indexes to the court files, something not available before. This information may be put on the county's website at some future date.

Drew Walters is the current graduate student working with the Chancery Clerk's office. He and Mr. Barnard finished sorting the last of the records from Mosquito Control and set up an inventory of the maps and building plans found there and at Sand Beach. They hope to later include all the maps and plans in the record vault in this inventory. They are also tackling the remainder of the records left at Sand Beach unidentified in the first phase of the project. One pending project involves reviewing the records stored at the off-site facility to properly label and inventory them, disposing of those eligible and moving the permanent records to the climate-controlled area.

In March of 2001, the Mississippi Historical Society presented Harrison County with the second annual James T. Dawson Award, given to a local government with an outstanding records management program. This past October, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History commended Mr. McAdams and Mr. Barnard for their work in the program. Though much has been accomplished in six years, there is still much to do to get the entire records management program running smoothly.