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## Public Records: The Natchez Experience

by Mimi Miller, Historic Natchez Foundation

The public records story in Natchez is not unlike the public records story in many county seats in Mississippi. The plot revolves around the recurring themes of too little room, too little interest, and too little money.

In 1992, most of the historic Adams County Circuit Court records were stored in the basement of the Adams County Courthouse. Mold and mildew covered the bound volumes, which were stacked in piles or randomly strewn across the floor of vault-like chambers, which had little or no lighting. Rats, mice, and other vermin nibbled away at bookbindings and loose papers, and leaky pipes dripped water on top of it all. Scholars were unable to access the information in the records, but document thieves could plunder among them and randomly retrieve marketable documents that boasted presidential signatures or references to slaves.

The Historic Natchez Foundation had long expressed concern about the condition of the records to the circuit clerk and to members of the various county supervisors with no result. The county had no room, no interest, and no money. The Historic Natchez Foundation had only the interest. Three things happened in 1992 that allowed the Foundation to begin the effort to preserve and make available these important circuit court records.

First, the Historic Natchez Foundation acquired its first permanent home—the Natchez Institute, a large 1901 school building, less than a block from the Adams County Courthouse, with approximately 27,000 feet on three floors. Second, professor Ronald L. F. Davis of California State University, Northridge, arrived in Natchez to undertake a research project on Natchez African-American history under contract to the Natchez National Historical Park. Again and again, Davis expressed his dismay about his inability to access the records in the basement of the courthouse. Third, the county's long-term circuit clerk retired and the newly elected clerk was more willing to make changes. Most importantly, the new circuit clerk faced an overwhelming space crisis.

The Foundation and Davis repeatedly discussed the records dilemma, and Davis came up with an idea. He proposed bringing graduate students from California to Natchez to work with the foundation in rescuing the circuit court records from the basement. Davis not only managed to find willing students, but he also persuaded his university to fund their expenses and to give them graduate credit for the work. This involvement in the Natchez community by California State University-Northridge expanded into a much larger role than either the foundation or the university originally envisioned.

With the support of the circuit clerk and the promise of volunteer labor from California, the Historic Natchez Foundation approached the Adams County Supervisors for permission to relocate the records and a small amount of funding for records preservation. The Foundation received permission to relocate the records and \$5,000 to buy archival supplies. Adams County sheriff Tommy Ferrell offered inmates from the county jail to assist in the records relocation effort. On the state level, Hank Holmes and his staff in the Archives Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History pledged technical help, on-site training, and archival certificates to the participating students from California State University, Northridge.

What is now known locally as the Courthouse Records Project began in the summer of 1992. During a single month in the summer of 1992, all the eighteenth and nineteenth-century circuit court records were moved from the courthouse basement to the Natchez Institute. These records consisted of bound volumes and thousands of case file packets, most unopened since the cases were closed. Sampling the case files from various decades indicated that the most important pieces of history would largely be found in these case files. The circuit court records contained other treasures, like a book representing the mercantile records of the Girardeau family and an account book that belonged to John McMurrin of

Melrose. These and other similar items were originally associated with particular case files but had long ago become separated and scattered among the records.

In 1993, California State University-Northridge and Ron Davis again brought graduate students to Natchez, and the Mississippi Genealogical Society provided \$4,000 to purchase more archival supplies--acid-free paper, folders, and boxes. Tantalized by the contents of the sampled case files, the Foundation and California State University, Northridge, embarked on a project to process and catalogue the contents of the case files. Students opened the packets, flattened the papers, and placed them in acid-free folders within acid-free boxes. As part of the processing, students completed data forms that now form the basis of an Access courthouse records database. Students were also assigned a research paper based on some aspect of Natchez history.

The most important aspect of the courthouse records project is the history contained in the records. Included among the thousands of case files are all sorts of historical documents, including letters, invoices, inventories, depositions, architectural plans, and all manner of interesting things.

Included in a post-bellum law suit, filed by architect Samuel Sloan of Philadelphia against Julia Nutt of Longwood in Natchez, are a number of letters from Mrs. Nutt to Mr. Sloan that provide not only proof that she never paid him for his services but also interesting information about Natchez during the post-Civil War period. In one 1820's case file are the architectural drawing and a building contract for a Natchez house, Woodlands, which burned in the 1920s.

From the case files, we have also documented the dates of several Natchez landmark buildings and learned important details about their construction. Two of the many debt cases of territorial tavern keeper Charles DeFrance provide valuable information not only about the specific services rendered by De France at Assembly Hall in Washington near Natchez, but the general services rendered by a territorial tavern keeper and the costs for those services.

This past summer was the tenth summer that California State University, Northridge, has brought graduate history students to Natchez under the direction of Ronald L. F. Davis. New partnerships have also been formed in the years since the project was initiated in 1992. The Natchez National Historical Park became a major player during the second summer and is now the project's major benefactor. The Park purchases many of our archival supplies and provides cash funding to assist in housing and feeding students. The Park also lends a government van to provide transportation for the students while they are in Natchez. In return for their support, students flag and copy every document that is related to the history of the sites that the National Park Service owns in Natchez--the Fort Rosalie site, the William Johnson House, and Melrose. The Natchez National Historical Park remains committed to the summer program, despite the dents acquired by the National Park Service van in both 1997 and 1998. Another partnership represents the involvement of the University of Southern Mississippi, which has also provided students interns and funding for their student participation.

Graduate students who come to Natchez receive something very special--an important three-dimensional experience in history. They handle real documents and play an important role in their preservation and accessibility. The students also gain an understanding of the value of material culture by interaction with the buildings and objects associated with the people who created the paper trail. They also have an opportunity to interact with the descendants of the people who created the paper trail and develop an appreciation for tradition and the continuum of history.

Early in the history of the Courthouse Records Project, an unexpected benefit of the program began to emerge. Many of the California graduate students who came to work in the summer decided to focus on Natchez history for their master's theses. Moreover, a number of students who received a master's degree from California State University, Northridge, carried their interest in Natchez with them when they pursued PhD's at other universities.

Another outgrowth of the Courthouse Records Program is the biennial Historic Natchez Conference, whose impetus was to provide students an opportunity to share their research in the courthouse records. The purpose of the conference is now to provide a forum for established scholars as well as students to share with each other and the public information about the history of the Natchez region. In addition to the Historic Natchez Foundation and California State University, Northridge, the conference is co-sponsored by the by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; University of Southern Mississippi; Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Louisiana State University; Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, and the Southern Historical and Folklife Collections, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Although the Historic Natchez Foundation is very proud of its Courthouse Records Project, the Foundation would love nothing better than to return the circuit court records to the county, if officials would police their use and properly care for them. Any organization considering taking responsibility for the preservation and management of local records needs to be fully aware of the negatives involved.

First, public records are a tremendous responsibility and most local organizations, including the Historic Natchez Foundation, do not have the resources to care for them. For example, the Foundation has no fire suppression system and no climate controls. However, not long after the Foundation relocated the records, the courthouse basement flooded and many of the records would have been irreparably damaged.

Adams County has made no financial contribution to the storage and preservation of its historic records since supervisors provided \$5,000 for archival supplies in 1992. Although the Foundation committed only to house the eighteenth and nineteenth-century circuit court records, the circuit clerk's office subsequently relocated all bound volumes (except marriage records) and case files dating before 1990. The receptionist at our office assumed that the circuit clerk was relocating records to The Natchez Institute with the full knowledge of professional staff members, who subsequently discovered, after the fact, that the basement and third story of the building had been filled with twentieth-century circuit court records. The Foundation has spent valuable staff time organizing and managing these twentieth-century volumes and case files for the benefit of attorneys, researchers, and personnel in the circuit clerk's office.

Second, servicing the public who want to use the records is difficult. Restricting access in anyway creates enemies, but a responsible organization has to limit access to manage records properly. No one is allowed in the records without supervision, and, quite frankly, no staff member likes to assist the public in using the records. The records reside on all three floors of the Natchez Institute, which has no elevator. The most important documents are in fire-rated vaults in the basement. Twentieth-century case files are in heavy, stacked cardboard boxes resting on pallets in another section of the basement. Twentieth-century bound volumes are on the third floor. The Foundation has no shelving or file cabinets, so staff members often have to lift and move heavy boxes of case files or stacks of heavy books to retrieve a particular file or book at the bottom of the pile. The only copy machine is on the main floor. Researchers often complain about rude treatment at courthouses and public libraries, but they seem to expect and accept it. They expect more help from a historical organization.

The management of public records attracts droves of researchers and genealogists, who make contact in person, by United States mail, and by e-mail. People show up at the door with no appointment and expect the staff to spend hours assisting them with their research. The Historic Natchez Foundation has only three full-time staff members and a few part-time people who alternate office hours. Managing public records is a small part of the Foundation's responsibilities.

Should local history organizations consider preserving and managing public records? Yes. Unfortunately, if organizations do not step forward, much of the history of Mississippi will be lost. Adams County is fortunate, because it has had no courthouse fires and its records extend all the way back into

the Spanish colonial period. However, many of the county records are missing. Thieves have plundered the probate papers for historic documents and have pilfered Spanish record books. The preservation and management of public records is first and foremost a public responsibility and should be funded by the public. However, local history organizations have to take some initiative and responsibility if important records are to be preserved.

### Historic Natchez Conference

Wednesday, February 13-Saturday, February 16

*Mainstreams and Cross Currents:  
Interpreting the History of the Old Natchez*

Headquarters: Natchez Eola Hotel

For Information and/or a program:

Historic Natchez Foundation, P. O. Box 1761, Natchez, Mississippi 39121

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