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Descent of the Papersquashers

by Russell D. James, Columbus-Lowndes Public Library

Court records are complex. To understand them, special training is necessary. For archivists the court records we have in our collections are mysteries we crave to unravel, but never have the time to do so. The court records of Mississippi have taken on a new meaning and importance for archivists in the past year.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) under the auspices of the Genealogical Society of Utah, has sent missionary couples into our fair state to preserve and microfilm the records of our circuit and chancery courts. While here, these records are meticulously preserved and prepared for the

microfilming process. One Lowndes County citizen dutifully nicknamed the couples who sort, flatten, humidify, and index these court records "papersquashers."

Mississippi courts are divided by lines of law and equity. Our legal courts are called circuit courts; our equitable courts are called chancery courts. Each deals in different matters. The operations of each contribute so richly to our understanding of county and state history. The circuit courts record our marriages and try our criminals, the chancery courts decide on estate matters.

So much Mississippi history was lost during and after the Civil War when our courthouses were burned (down). Since that time, floods and other natural disasters have destroyed even more records vital to the history of our state. Thankfully, however, much of the court record stands, containing much historical and genealogical information.

The LDS regularly calls upon its faithful, young and old alike, to volunteer to serve a 12 or 18 month mission, traveling to far away lands to evangelize or do service work. Some retired couples have been assigned the task of preparing Mississippi records for microfilming. Many couples have never been to Mississippi and to some the state seems like a foreign country.

Those who prepare the records have a daunting task. Location of the records is sometimes difficult and the organization of them even more so. In Lowndes County, the now defunct county department of archives and history sorted, cleaned, and stored most of the old records.

After the general organization of the records is completed, the papers must be read for names to add to the index, any fasteners must be removed, the documents must be humidified and then pressed. The unique document presses built by LDS volunteers are fascinating machines, so awe-inspiring that they are the basis of the nickname "papersquashers."

The dozen or so couples who have volunteered to preserve and microfilm our records have spent countless hours doing a job that the counties and the state of Mississippi would have to pay thousands or millions of dollars to hire people to perform otherwise. No doubt our court records will last for another two hundred years because of the efforts of these dedicated missionaries.

Visit the collection's website at archives@lowndes.lib.ms.us

(Russell D. James holds an M.A. in history from the University of West Florida. He is the archives and manuscripts librarian at Columbus-Lowndes Public Library and is the associate editor of the *Mexican War Journal*.)

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