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Primary Sources Via EBAY:
Building a Archival Postcard Collection
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In 1898, Congress authorized the use of Private Mailing Cards, better known today as the postcard¹. At the turn of the twentieth century, a postcard craze swept the nation, and sending, receiving, and collecting postcards became a favorite pastime of Americans. Early manufacturers such as E.C. Kropp, Arthur Livingstone, and the American Souvenir Company produced a wide variety of cards featuring a broad range of people, places, and events. Although designed to serve as a means of communication between parties, many of these cards were based on original photographs, and serve to document the culture and history of locales across the nation. Many libraries, archives, and special collections have postcard collections, but few actively pursue and purchase postcards as historical documents, although the cards are easily found on online auction sites such as EBAY. The purpose of this brief article is to share my experiences as a collector who also happens to be an archivist, in particular in relation to the acquisition of postcards of the city of Hattiesburg and Mississippi in general. A second but less significant purpose of the article is to document how the postcard can be used on the local level to interpret the past, and why archivists should strive to add postcards to their collections.

Prior written works on deltiology, or the study of postcards, have covered in-depth the postcard craze as it swept the nation after 1900.² Although the postcard fad abated somewhat during the First World War, many Americans continued to send, receive, and collect the three-by-five cards. Through travel, postcard clubs, and purchase from antiquities shops, postcards continued to circulate as collector's items even after their postal use. Every corner of the nation was touched by this craze, and local photographers took advantage by publishing photographic cards to hawk to visitors.

The nature of postcard collecting changed in September 1995, when Pierre Omidyar founded EBAY, heralded as "The World's Online Marketplace." Along with collectors of many other documents and artifacts, postcard enthusiasts soon found EBAY as a valuable source by which to build their collections.

Likewise, postcard sellers found an eager audience for their product, the postcard. Although the number of postcards offered for sale on the service varies daily, a sample survey for the period April 8 through May 13, 2004 found an average of 140,665 cards of all varieties and types were posted for sale. The range of topics are broad, and even a specific market such as scenes from Mississippi typically have several hundred cards for sale on any particular date. Narrowing the search to a particular town such as Hattiesburg still usually nets between twelve and thirty-one results.³

Developing a solid collection of postcards via EBAY can be fairly simple. The most common cards from Hattiesburg, for example, are offered at least once a month and within a few months the potential collector or archivist could easily collect a base group of fifty or so cards. The starting bid on a card is often less than \$5.00 per card, including shipping, which makes the cards relatively inexpensive. Rare cards, however, can be quite costly. Bidding on items frequently reaches \$10.00, \$20.00, and sometimes even \$50.00 for nicely illustrated cards, cards from the era 1900-1917, or unique photographic views. Although collectors interested in the locale are usually the main competition in bidding, genre collectors such as those who collect specific views, like train stations or libraries can sometimes also elevate the final price. Bids on postcard groups can sometimes net great bargains, but the bidder usually has to compete with dealers hoping to buy the collection and resell the cards one by one to achieve greater profit.

The physical condition of a majority of the cards offered for sale are excellent, although bidders should look closely at the scanned images for folds, feathering, or blemishes, which diminishes the value and makes preservation more difficult. Most sellers will gladly respond to questions, although it should be kept in mind that some sellers may know little or nothing about grading an image for quality, while others may be experts in the postcard field and be able to not only grade the card, but interpret its printing date and origin as well.

But why should archivists develop a postcard collection? First of all, images contained in picture postcards can divulge information such as the design and scale of buildings, the change of landscapes over time, and the rate at which new technologies were introduced into society. Postcard images can also be used to document regional variations in architecture and style. Since many postcards depict street scenes, a series of postcards from different time periods can literally give the researcher a time-lapse view of the same area, allowing for interpretation of change in the urban environment. Using Hattiesburg as an example, a view of Main Street looking north from Front Street was captured on postcards no fewer than five times between 1900 and 1960, each time from roughly the same camera angle. Specific details, such as change in mode of transportation from streetcar to the automobile, are readily evident.

Messages on postcards also help to link local events with those on the national level. A February 15, 1940 postcard from Mississippi Women's College, now William Carey College, reveals that although news of the 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind* had reached the area, the film had not. The sender states "Have you seen "Gone with the Wind" yet? I haven't but I [am] just crazy to see it. It has not come here yet."⁴ From this remark we can infer that smaller markets such as Hattiesburg must have experienced a lag in premiering new movies, as *Gone With the Wind* had debuted some two months earlier in Atlanta.

Availability and coverage are another reason to collect the postcard as a primary source. Researchers are often surprised at the sheer number of images which have been recorded on postcards. One of the nation's largest postcard collections is located at the Curt Teich Postcard Archives in Wauconda, Illinois. From 1898-1978, the Curt Teich Company served as one of the world's largest postcard distributors, and the archives contain over 362,000 images documenting the output of the company.⁵ Virtually every city in the United States is captured in this collection, and Hattiesburg is no exception, as over one-hundred and fifty of these cards feature images of the "Hub City." Combined with the number of postcards produced by smaller companies, somewhere between two-hundred and fifty and three-hundred postcards are known to exist of Hattiesburg and Camp Shelby, a narrowly focused geographic area. Since a majority of these postcards frequently appear for sale on EBAY, archivists in similar sized cities should find a similar number of postcards exist which document their locale.

Unique stories also emerge as the archivist delves into the usefulness of postcards as primary sources. Perhaps the best known card entrepreneur in the Hattiesburg area was D. B. Henley, whose views

date to at least 1903. Little is known of Henley, but in 1905 he is listed in the Hattiesburg City Directory as a photographer.⁶ For reasons which are unknown, Henley produced a large number of cards in the first decade of the century, and then abruptly left the trade. Many of the early photographs of Hattiesburg in circulation today can be attributed to Henley and have remained for posterity because of the wide distribution which they achieved. Not only were Henley's black and white photographs made into cards, but many of the same images were reprinted using hand coloring techniques during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

In summary, the postcards of the twentieth century can prove to be valuable primary sources, both for the images they often contain and the messages with which they are inscribed. A wide variety of postcards depicting almost every city in the nation are available on online auction sites such as EBAY, often at nominal prices. Archivists, museum curators, collectors, and cultural researchers can use these online services as a place to procure primary source documents about the past. Once considered a token gift sent to a family member, researchers now utilize the postcard as a true primary source, ready to yield information if consulted, but only if they are actively collected by archival institutions.

Table One
Average Number of Hattiesburg Postcards for Sale on EBAY

Date	Number of Cards for Sale
April 8, 2004	26
April 15, 2004	31
April 22, 2004	21
April 29, 2004	12
May 6, 2004	23
May 13, 2004	20

Table Two
Number of Mississippi Postcards for Sale on EBAY

Date	Number of Cards for Sale
April 8, 2004	289
April 15, 2004	352
April 22, 2004	277
April 29, 2004	264
May 6, 2004	329
May 13, 2004	369

Table Three

Average Number of Postcards Offered for Sale on EBAY

Date	Number of Cards for Sale
April 8, 2004	150,005
April 15, 2004	145,774
April 22, 2004	140,101
April 29, 2004	140,346
May 6, 2004	133,634
May 13, 2004	134,127

¹ George Miller and Dorothy Miller, *Picture Postcards in the United States, 1893-1918* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. Publisher, 1976), 2.

² For an overview of this era, see Chapter Two of Miller and Miller, *Postcards in the United States, 1893-1918*. For a brief introduction to postcard collection in general, see Valerie Monahan, *An American Postcard Collector's Guide* (Poole Dorset: United Kingdom: Blandford Press, 1981).

³ Since most sales are multi-day, the author chose to compare the number of entries on a specified day of the week, in this case a Thursday, over a period of six weeks. Entries were compiled for Table One and Two by utilizing the category search on EBAY. Table One reflects the total number of postcards for sale. Table Two reflects postcards with views of Mississippi. Table Three was constructed by entering the search term "Hattiesburg" and narrowing the search to postcards via the category search capability of EBAY. All statistics were compiled using the website <http://www.ebay.com>.

⁴ Postcard dated February 15, 1940, from Lois at Women's College in Hattiesburg Mississippi to Mrs. Harvey McPerson in Nashville, Tennessee. Postcard Collection of Reagan L. Grimsley.

⁵ Norman D. Stevens, Editor, *Postcards in the Library* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 1995), 5.

⁶ Hattiesburg City Directory, n.p, 1905, 107. For a photograph of Henley's place of business, see Kenneth G. McCarty, Jr, *Hattiesburg, A Pictorial History* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 43.

Reagan L. Grimsley a USM graduate, has contributed articles to both the *New Georgia Encyclopedia* and the upcoming *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, and reviews books on a regular basis for *Choice Magazine*. His image based book *Hattiesburg In Vintage Postcards* will be published in the fall of 2004 by Arcadia Publishing.