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Descent of the Papersquashers

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additional reconversion. The database stayed up and accessible throughout this process, and the new images replaced the old as they were converted.

As the images underwent closer scrutiny the issue of photographs was re-explored. Although the vast majority of the collection is paper in the form of reports, correspondence and newspaper clippings, there are approximately nine hundred photographs. These remarkable photographs include Freedom Rider and other activist mug shots from around the state and South, demonstrations in Mississippi, Alabama and the California-Berkeley campus and public relations photographs of African-American professionals, businesses, church activities and educational facilities. Access to these images has been poor. Pursuant to the court order records were indexed for personal names and thus a researcher would only stumble across a photograph if a name happened to appear and was indexed on that page, which is an uncommon occurrence. The project staff had long been unhappy with the status of photographs in the collection and wanted at the very least to provide an additional photograph index. In addition, ER also saw the need to integrate these images with the emerging MDAH digital image archive to provide seamless access to the agency’s holdings. Such an endeavor would require the photograph scans to conform to the digital image standards laid out by the Archives & Library Division’s Image and Sound Section (IS). Accordingly, ER scanned all the unredacted photographs and individually described each according to the ER/IS metadata element set. As of this writing, ER is in the process of constructing a search mechanism that will index them separately as well as link them back to their original folder in the main electronic collection. We expect this exciting new resource to be available as part of Sovereignty Commission Online in spring 2003.

With the second image conversion concluded, ER was ready to publish the Sovereignty Commission Online (as the new database was named) to the web. Those records, the first of many, many migrations which will hopefully provide increasing access to collections of electronic records accessioned by MDAH, are currently available at this URL: http://www.mdah.state.ms.us/arlib/contents/er/. We welcome any questions and feedback on this exciting project.

Please address any email about the project to elecrecs@mdah.state.ms.us

(Sarah Rowe-Sims has worked as an archivist in the MDAH Electronic Records Section since February 2001. She joined MDAH in 1994 and was one of a team of three archivists who processed and handled the opening of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission records from 1994-2001. Anna Schwind has been the Lead Systems Administrator for the MDAH Electronic Records Section since July 1998. Prior to that she was employed as a Systems Librarian at Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi.)

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 tie, 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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