2003

The Elms: Time Capsule of Natchez and Vicksburg Urban Life

Michael Hennen

Mississippi Department of Archives and History

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/theprimarysource

Part of the Archival Science Commons

Recommended Citation

DOI: 10.18785/ps.2501.03
Available at: https://aquila.usm.edu/theprimarysource/vol25/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Primary Source by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.
was not James Lull, as had been thought for over a century, but instead W. H. Oneal. This discovery was due in large part to the discovery of the estate file of the original owner of the house, who still owed money to the builder, bricklayer, and plasterer when he died.

Independent research apart from the homes themselves also yields much information. The owner of Errolton (formerly the Weaver Home) has discovered that a Confederate soldier died in the house sometime in 1863. The Haven, long thought to have been built by free men of color brothers may not have been, but stories about the lives of these men and their families have come to light as the homeowners dig into the historical record of deeds, wills, and minutes of county and city governments.

Some houses still have a story to tell. To assist in this project, the Billups-Garth Archives, along with the Columbus Historic Foundation, is embarking on a multi-year project to employ a history graduate student to come to Columbus and do primary source research on the antebellum homes. The first student, Amanda Herbert from The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, will spend eight weeks researching both antebellum and Victorian homes, with concentration on houses for which little or no factual information is known. The archives and foundation staffs will be working to obtain grant funding for subsequent summers, hopefully to employ more than one graduate student. By the end of the project, the students will have documented most of the 200 antebellum structures and many of those homes built after the Civil War.

Although Columbus residents have lost or destroyed much of the historical documentation of the antebellum structures, movements are underway to discover the history of the city’s buildings through private and student research. Endeavoring to discover the truth or falsehood of legends and dramas set out each April at the annual Columbus Pilgrimage, these researchers are providing a history for the future of Columbus.

Russell D. James is the archives and manuscripts librarian at the Billups-Garth Archives of the Columbus-Lowndes Public Library. He holds a master of arts degree in history from The University of West Florida.

---

The Elms:
Time Capsule of Natchez and Vicksburg Urban Life
by
Michael Hennen,
Manuscript Curator
Mississippi Department of Archives and History

The Elms
The earliest portion of the town residence currently known as the Elms was built in Natchez, Mississippi, on an eleven-acre tract that John Henderson purchased from William Barland in 1804. A native of Scotland, Henderson had settled in the Natchez District in 1787, and he was the author of the first book to be published in Natchez. Henderson later advertised the Elms for sale in the Natchez Chronicle on April 30, 1810. It was purchased by Lewis Evans, first sheriff of the Mississippi Territory. After the death of his wife, Sarah, on May 13, 1815, Evans sold the property to Samuel Postlethwaite in 1818. A small tract of land adjoining the Elms and situated on the corner of Homochitto and Pine streets was later conveyed by Postlethwaite to the Female Charitable Society for use as an orphanage. Before moving
to Clifton, his newly constructed mansion near the Natchez bluffs, Postlethwaite deeded the Elms to his
daughter, Matilda Rose Postlethwaite Potts, and his son-in-law, the Reverend George Potts. The Potts
family lived at the Elms, which they called the Manse, for several years, but after being called to a
Presbyterian church in New York, Dr. Potts sold the Elms to Joseph Sessions in 1835. Cornelia Sessions
Baynton inherited the Elms after the death of her father. In 1849, she sold the Elms to David Stanton, who
was a native of Ireland. David Stanton’s wealthy brother, Frederick, built Belfast (Stanton Hall) in Natchez
in 1857.

Constructed in the Federal style, the Elms was originally a two-and-a-half-story brick house with
two rooms per floor. The first significant renovations at the Elms were completed around 1815. The rear
two-story gallery was enclosed, and two-story galleries now encircled the front and sides of the newly
enlarged house. The grounds of the Elms featured a brick conservatory that was built around 1830.
However, it was destroyed by a severe tornado that ravaged much of Natchez in 1840, and its remaining
three arches were planted with ivy to resemble ruins.

David Stanton completed the last significant renovations at the Elms in the 1850s. He added a
two-story wing in the Greek Revival style, and the former front porch was enclosed to form an entrance
hall with a curved, cast-iron staircase and doorways with colored-glass sidelights. Stanton also built a
Greek Revival-style billiard hall on the grounds. After the renovations were completed, the Elms faced what
was then Pine Street, rather than Washington Street.

Mosley John Posey Drake acquired the Elms in 1869, and his descendants, including members
of the Drake, Cassell, Kellogg, and Carpenter families, have lived there ever since. Alma Cassell Kellogg
Carpenter is the great-granddaughter of Drake. The Elms has often been featured on Pilgrimage Garden
Club tours of historic antebellum homes in Natchez.

Residents of the Elms and Some of Their Papers

Originally from Missouri, Mosley John Posey Drake was married to Caroline Agee Drake of St.
Louis. The Drakes had two daughters, Alma M. and Caroline Love. M. J. P. Drake was a close friend and
business partner of Love S. Cornwell. They were engaged in a variety of business ventures and mercantile
enterprises in Missouri prior to the Civil War and in Louisiana and Mississippi after the war. Drake died on
July 19, 1899, and his wife died on March 17, 1901.

Mosley John Posey Drake’s business correspondence concerns his varied commercial interests in Missouri
before the Civil War and in Louisiana and Mississippi after the war. The personal papers of various male
and female members of the Drake, Agee, Cornwell, and Campbell families also reflect the social life of
Natchez and Vicksburg, Mississippi, and of cities and towns in Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, and
Tennessee.

Caroline Love Drake married Albert Gallatin Cassell on July 17, 1886. Cassell was previously
married to Sallie Sutherland in 1873, but she died without issue on December 13, 1883. Formerly of
Lexington, Kentucky, Albert Gallatin Cassell was a Vicksburg, druggist and merchant. The Cassells had
three daughters, Alma Stratton, Caroline Drake, and Lizzie Etheline. Following the death of their mother
on December 21, 1894, the three Cassell girls were sent to live with their aunt, Alma M. Drake, at the Elms
in Natchez. Lizzie Etheline Cassell died of diphtheria on November 4, 1896, and Caroline Drake Cassell
died of pneumonia on February 28, 1902. Cassell married his third wife, Mammie Chapman, in 1901. She
gave birth to a son, Duncan Gallatin Cassell, after the death of her husband on August 20, 1902. John
Cassell, the brother of Albert Gallatin Cassell, became the legal guardian of Alma Stratton Cassell after her
father’s death in 1902.

Albert Gallatin Cassell’s business correspondence reflects his career as a druggist and merchant
in Vicksburg. The extensive correspondence of Alma M. Drake documents her important role as a
caregiver for members of the Cassell and Drake families. This is especially true of her nieces, Alma
Stratton, Caroline Drake, and Lizzie Etheline, whom she helped raise and educate after their mother died.
In addition to managing the Elms, Alma Drake also found time to teach in the Natchez public schools.
Among the myriad advertising materials in the collection are many types of late-nineteenth-century promotional items that were apparently displayed or distributed in the drug and mercantile businesses that were owned by Albert Gallatin Cassell. They are representative of patent medicine and popular culture, especially in the South. Of particular interest are the almanacs and calendars advertising various Natchez and Vicksburg firms. The residents of the Elms also saved many types of advertising materials. They provide examples of the array of goods, products, and services available to persons living in Natchez during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As one might expect, many of the advertising items are visually appealing artifacts. For example, there is a rare set of Duke’s tobacco trading cards of Civil War generals and a set of three miniature shadowboxes, containing a cow, peacock, and rooster, respectively, which advertise Bailey’s dry-goods store.

Alma Stratton Cassell, who attended Campbell-Hagerman College in Lexington, Kentucky, married Joseph Bentley Kellogg of Natchez in 1917. Kellogg served in the medical detachment of the Forty-seventh Engineers, United States Army, during World War I. He was later vice-president of the City Bank and Trust Company of Natchez. The Kelloggs lived at the Elms and had one daughter, Alma Cassell. Alma Stratton Cassell Kellogg was a longtime member of the Pilgrimage Garden Club, and her home was often on tour during the annual Natchez Pilgrimage. The personal correspondence of Alma Stratton Cassell Kellogg and Joseph B. Kellogg regards their college days, courtship, marriage, and social life in Natchez during the early twentieth century.

Alma Cassell Kellogg was born in Natchez on June 13, 1927. She attended Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, and the University of Mississippi in Oxford, where she was a member of Chi Omega sorority. Kellogg was queen of the Natchez Pilgrimage in 1946. She married James M. Cain in Pontotoc County, Mississippi, on January 10, 1947, and they had a daughter, Cassell. After divorcing Cain, she married Nathaniel Leslie Carpenter of Natchez on February 10, 1951. The Carpenters lived at Dunieth in Natchez, and they had three children, Alma, Esther, and Leslie. The Carpenters divorced in the 1970s, and Alma Kellogg Carpenter returned to the Elms. She has been active in the Pilgrimage Garden Club and the Pilgrimage Historical Association, and she has been a supporter of the Historic Natchez Foundation. Carpenter has also been an advocate for historic preservation in Natchez and Adams County. The correspondence of Alma Cassell Kellogg Carpenter concerns her academic and social life at Hollins College or the University of Mississippi during and immediately after World War II.

Members of the Agee, Cassell, Cornwell, Drake, and Kellogg families, their classmates and friends, and historical figures are depicted in ambrotypes, daguerreotypes, tintypes, cabinet cards, cartes-de-visite, stereograph cards, and other photographic images. There are nineteenth-century photographs of lawn tennis and other outdoor activities at the Elms or of other homes and buildings in Natchez. There are also numerous postcards, some depicting early twentieth-century views of Jackson, Natchez, Vicksburg, and other Mississippi cities, as well as out-of-state and foreign locations.

Residents of the Elms also accumulated an extensive assortment of ephemera, memorabilia, and printed works. Examples include issues of Agee’s Bee, a magazine of Agee family genealogy, news, and religious matters; a catalog from Stanton College in Natchez; newspapers from Jefferson Military College and Natchez High School; and clippings and programs from the premiere of the 1939 motion picture, Gone with the Wind. There are also issues of the Master Detective (1933), a magazine that contains articles on Glenwood (Goat Castle) residents Richard Dana and Octavia Dockery, who were initially implicated in and later cleared of the murder of Jennie Surget Merrill, who lived nearby at Glenburnie in Natchez.

We will probably never know what motivated those living at the Elms to preserve such an extraordinarily diverse collection of archival and ephemeral materials in their attic. Perhaps it was an aversion to throwing away anything of sentimental value, coupled with the availability of a finished attic room with ample storage space. Whatever the reason, the treasure-trove continued to accumulate for more than a century until the attic was completely filled. Although the residents of the Elms were probably not aware of it, their attic became a virtual time capsule of materials documenting nineteenth- and twentieth-century life in Natchez and Vicksburg.
The Elms Papers

The Elms Papers were donated to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History by the current owner of the Elms, Alma Cassell Kellogg Carpenter, between 1986 and 1989. The diverse array of archival materials, ephemera, and memorabilia reflect the business interests and personal activities of successive members of the Stanton, Drake, Cassell, Kellogg, and Carpenter families who have lived at the Elms since the 1850s. The fifty-cubic-foot collection includes business and personal correspondence; photographs and postcards; advertising materials; publications; and numerous other items. The Elms Papers (Z/1879.000/S) are now fully processed and available for research in the Department library. An extensive finding aid to the collection is also available in HTML through the Department web site.

Lessons Learned in the Ashes:
The Recovery of Arlington’s Library
by Dr. Betty Uzman
Manuscript Curator
Mississippi Department of Archives and History

On Sunday, September 15, 2002, fire broke out at the Natchez mansion of Arlington. By the time the flames were extinguished, the roof of the early nineteenth-century structure had been destroyed, and the second floor gutted. While the columned facade remained, there was considerable damage to the first floor as well. The one room whose contents were largely left intact was the library. On Tuesday, H. T. Holmes, director of the Archives and Library Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, dispatched Special Projects Officer Michael Hennen and myself to assist in the efforts to salvage the books. Spared by the flames, many still were damaged by heat, smoke, and the water from the firehoses. Over the next three days, under the direction of Ron and Mimi Miller of the Historic Natchez Foundation, we worked with Kathleen Jenkins, curator at the National Park Service property of Melrose, and Cheryl Munyer Branyan, curator of the mansion, Rosalie, to guide teams in preparing an estimated 3,000 volumes for freezing or storage. Numerous volunteers took part in this effort, as did the MDAH Head of Reference Services Anne Webster; Archival Reformatting Unit Supervisor Julie Dees; and Archivist John Gomez.

I had participated in disaster workshops, and served on the committee responsible for drafting a disaster plan for the MDAH Archives and Library. But the salvage work at Arlington provided important training in disaster recovery for me, revealing practical problems that theory and procedures do not always take into account. The first lesson I learned at Arlington was this: however fundamental the principle, it may be necessary to live with a compromise of it. Disaster recovery manuals point out that water-soaked paper materials and books must be frozen or air-dried within forty-eight hours to prevent the outbreak of mold. At Arlington, the fire took place Sunday morning. It was Monday afternoon before the library could be entered safely, and Tuesday morning, therefore, before salvage efforts could begin. So one had to accept from the start of the recovery efforts that there would be some mold to be cleaned from the books.