

Establishing the Mississippi Department of Archives and History

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Archives are crucial because they hold the source materials for the history books written. What gets selected for inclusion reflects society's values at that moment in time. Discarded pieces of history may, with time, become valuable in the eyes of modern society. Sometimes, materials in archives are intentionally left out or destroyed by those wishing to eliminate evidence and consequently rewrite history for personal, political, or economic reasons. Mississippi's foray into archives began with an effort to shape public memory and evolved into something more extensive.

Dr. Franklin Riley, a history professor at the University of Mississippi and secretary of the Mississippi Historical Society (MHS), was the most prominent proponent of a state archive. (McCain, 1950). Riley was the University of Mississippi's first history professor (Galloway, 2006). Around this time, American universities had just begun to add history professors to their payrolls. In the 1800s, The American Historical Association encouraged its members to build a state collection of documents to support their work (Speer, 2004). In 1890, MHS was incorporated by the Legislature. The MHS president appointed Dr. Riley as the chairman of a commission tasked with making recommendations about the "historical situation" in the State (McCain, 1950). That commission resulted in a 394-page recommendation for a department that would include a museum, art gallery, and library (McCain, 1950).

In 1902, the Mississippi State Senate passed a bill that followed the commission's recommendations, and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) was born (Galloway, 2006). The first board of trustees met in Jackson, MS, on March 14, 1902 (McCain, 1950). Of the nine board members, only Riley was a historian (Galloway, 2006). The others included two Confederate veterans, three sons of veterans, one politician who participated in the 1875 overthrow of Reconstruction, and two members of the 1890 Constitutional Convention.

The board that assembled next had even more Confederate veterans (Galloway, 2006). The first six-year term director was elected that day, Dunbar Rowland, and he held that position until his death over thirty-five years later (McCain, 1950). Dunbar was a lawyer, not a trained historian. However, he was a member of the Mississippi Historical Society and was known to author and submit historical writings to them (Galloway, 2006). Rowland's first task was to assess and organize existing noncurrent files (Speer, 2004). Mississippi became a territory in 1798 and a state in 1817 (Galloway, 2006). By 1902, records had been piling up for 104 years. They were shuffled between buildings before finally ending up in the corridors of the Capitol Building, which resulted in incalculable loss and damage. Then, in 1903, they discovered a pile of Confederate military records that had been hidden for forty years out of fear that they'd be found by the national government (McCain, 1950). The desire to protect records was understandable, given that some records were either damaged or graffitied by marauding Yankees (Galloway, 2006). It took Rowland and his staff ten years to sort through the mess (McCain, 1950).

Researcher Charles Regan Wilson believes that one reason for the decision to create a state archive was to build a "monument to the Lost Cause of the Confederacy" (Galloway, 2006). One of the first things the newly established MDAH board of directors did was to send out a circular to the public requesting recommendations on what should be included in the archives. That request stated, "There is nothing wrong with our history, but in the writing of it" (Galloway, 2006). Rowland began by giving special attention to the collection of Confederate records. This stemmed from a fear among Mississippi elites that their interpretation of the war of Northern aggression would be erased or altered if anyone but them was allowed to write it. The War Department had withheld war records from Southerners since the Civil War (Speer, 2004). In 1903, Rowland went to Washington and successfully campaigned for the War Department to

print rosters of Confederate participants in the Civil War and to request the return of Confederate flags (Galloway, 2006). Rowland used his time in Washington to study the organization of the Library of Congress and the Carnegie Institution (Speer, 2004).

During his tenure as director, Rowland was plagued by insufficient and untrained staff and insufficient funding. He started with help from two young women volunteers and his wife, Eron. By the second year, he was allowed to hire a stenographer (Galloway, 2006). Eventually, he got more workers, who were still untrained due to low pay. (McCain, 1950). Rowland found himself constantly having to campaign for support (Galloway, 2006). Rowland gave speeches, published materials, and built relationships with organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution to secure donations and funding. By 1912, he grew tired of the lack of support from the Legislature. In one instance, Rowland went up against the Legislature only to receive a blow from Senator Frank Burkitt's cane. MDAH did not receive funds that year, and Rowland had to borrow money just to keep the department running (McCain, 1950). From then until he died in 1937, Rowland shifted his focus from collecting to research and publishing. According to modern scholars, much of his writing from then lacked primary resources and an analytical approach (Speer, 2004). In 1948, MDAH was looking to hire "young women of good family background, who were college graduates, who had majored in history or English, and who could type" (McCain, 1950). Around this time, the new MDAH director hired a trained librarian to catalog the library (McCain, 1950).

Space was another issue that arose from a lack of funding and support. At first, Rowland was forced to sort through fifty boxes of noncurrent records in the dirty attic of the Old Capitol Building. By 1903, MDAH was allocated two rooms in of the New Capitol building. Securing

those two rooms took pressure and influence. By the time the original fifty boxes were organized in 1912, it was evident there was no more space to hold records. Rowland partnered with womens' historical groups to campaign for the renovation of the Old Capitol as an archive and museum. This didn't happen (Galloway, 2006). In 1940, MDAH moved to the new War Memorial Building next to the Old Capitol, but adequate space remained elusive (Speer, 2004). MDAH moved to its current home, the Winter Williams building, in November 2003 (MS.gov, n.d.).

Another problem was that MDAH didn't know what they had or how to search it (McCain, 1950). From the beginning, Rowland had rejected a library approach to arranging the records. He followed the Muller, Feith, and Fruin *Manual* for archivists that advised organizing in original order, and an analytic approach in the event original order was not possible (Galloway, 2006). Original order followed the archival theory of provenance, meaning that records would be organized systematically as they had been initially from whatever department they originated from (Speer, 2004). Because no national archival standards or procedures existed up to this point, the result was inconsistencies and gaps for later directors. For example, Rowland organized Confederate pension records into 82 alphabetical files by county instead of one alphabetical file (McCain, 1950). When the Mississippi Historical Commission divided war records into categories by source, Rowland devoted a series entirely to Confederate records. He also placed tax records under the auditor's office. Rowland's approach divided Mississippi's history into three periods: colonial, territorial, and state (Galloway, 2006). He further divided these chronologically by administration or department, or original order. Rowland spoke at conferences advocating for national standards and promoting binding and indexing valuable records (Speer, 2004).

The end of 1937 was the end of an era. Rowland passed, and his wife finished his term as director until a new one was appointed. Several changes followed. The money for publication had been previously diverted to purchase more resources. In 1939, MDAH began to publish the *Journal of Mississippi History*, and it's still in publication (McCain, 1950). Currently, MDAH oversees nine museums, produces four publications, and continues to collect, preserve, and provide access to Mississippi's archives through each of its five divisions (MDAH, 2024). These divisions consist of archives, library, historic sites, museums, and publications (Speer, 2004).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Virgia Brocks-Shedd, a librarian at Tougaloo College, began to build a collection of Civil Rights history. She contacted civil rights leaders like Gladys Bates and Rims Barber and asked them to donate their personal papers and memorabilia to the college. By 2003, the collection was in a state of deterioration. Tougaloo College president Beverly Hogan and MDAH director H.T. Holmes entered into an agreement in which the Tougaloo Civil Rights collection would be placed on a long-term loan at MDAH. This collaboration allowed MDAH to preserve the collection and expand its access to places like the Eudora Welty Branch Library (Phillip, 2006).

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History was the second state archive in the nation, preceding the National Archives of the United States by 32 years. While initially rooted in the desire to “preserv[e] and promot[e] the ‘Southern identity,’” the department ended up making Mississippi a leader among the other states (Speer, 2004). As with all first editions, mistakes were made along the way. Ultimately, relationships and collaborations kept MDAH going and growing.

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