

History and Program of the Mississippi State Department of Archives and History¹

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*Mississippi State Department of
Archives and History*

THE Mississippi State Department of Archives and History was established largely as a result of the efforts of Dr. Franklin L. Riley, professor of history at the University of Mississippi and secretary of the Mississippi Historical Society. Riley received his doctor's degree at Johns Hopkins University in 1896 and went to the University of Mississippi in 1897. In the following year, he was asked to become secretary of the inactive Mississippi Historical Society, which had been incorporated by the Legislature in 1890.

Immediately and energetically undertaking the task of reorganizing the Society, Riley issued a call for annual meetings and made plans to begin publishing historical papers. Two years later, the Society prevailed upon the Legislature to create a Historical Commission to investigate the historical situation in the State and to make such recommendations to the next session as might be desirable. General Stephen D. Lee, president of the Society, appointed Riley chairman of the Commission.

In 1902 the Commission submitted a printed report of 394 pages recommending the establishment of a state-supported Department of Archives and History, which should contain a museum, an art gallery, and a library. The result was that on January 14 Governor A. H. Longino sent a special message to the Legislature requesting consideration of a bill to establish such a department. The bill, together with a companion appropriation measure for \$7,400.00, passed both houses and was signed by the governor on February 26. The act provided that the Department of Archives and History should be under the control of a board of nine trustees chosen, with the consent of the Senate, for six-year terms from

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the membership of the Mississippi Historical Society. The executive head of the Department was a director elected by the Board of Trustees for a six-year term. The act set forth the objects and purposes of the Department as follows:

. . . the care and custody of official archives, the collecting of materials bearing upon the history of the State and of the Territory included therein, from the earliest times, the editing of official records and other historical materials, the diffusion of knowledge in reference to the history and resources of this State, the encouragement of historical work and research and the performance of such other acts and requirements as may be enjoined by law.

The Board of Trustees met in Jackson on March 14, 1902. The leading candidates for director were Charles H. Brough and Dunbar Rowland. The latter was elected by a vote of five to four. Brough was reputed to have been so disappointed at his defeat that he moved to Arkansas, and he later became governor of that State.

The Department was given quarters in the Capitol, and Rowland immediately began taking over the noncurrent records of the State government, most of which were piled in the corridors of the building. He soon found that the records had suffered great loss and damage by the usual carelessness and indifference, by war and reconstruction, by a sojourn in the State penitentiary, and by having been moved at various times when the State government migrated from Natchez to Washington, Columbia, Jackson, Meridian, Enterprise, Columbus, Macon, and back to Jackson. He also recovered from the Masons a great mass of Confederate military records which had been given them in 1863 for safekeeping. The Masons had feared to disclose the location of these records during the Reconstruction period, for the Republican-controlled national government would have used them in its efforts to disfranchise native white men of the State, and eventually they were forgotten. They were turned over to the Department in 1903 after having been hidden for forty years.

The Department was moved into the New Capitol on its completion in 1903, and Rowland worked with great energy and persistence for almost ten years in sorting, cleaning, and arranging the records in a practical classification scheme. Upon the completion of this process, he issued a guide to the collections.

The Board of Trustees early instructed the director to establish a museum, which soon overflowed into the corridors and open spaces of the first floor of the Capitol, and to establish a hall of fame for the portraits of distinguished Mississippians. The collec-

tions of the Mississippi Historical Society, largely accumulated through the efforts of J. F. H. Claiborne, were transferred to him. These provided an excellent basis for a private manuscripts collection, a newspaper collection, and a library of Mississippi books and pamphlets.

Rowland seems to have planned to accumulate a large collection of printed material concerning the State. He reported in 1903, as follows:

In collecting materials bearing upon the history of Mississippi, printed sources should be carefully gathered and preserved. There has been no systematic effort heretofore made in that direction, and I regret to report that, outside the official publications of the State . . . there are not over twenty books devoted to Mississippi matters in the State Library.

With the exception of Supreme Court reports, Codes and Digests, there is not a complete set of the official publications of Mississippi in the Capitol. . . .

This Department should be provided with full sets of official publications from 1799 to date — all books, pamphlets and broadsides relating to Mississippi and all writings of the authors of the State.

In addition to the duties and work enumerated, Rowland found time during his first ten years as director to have fifty-three large volumes of transcripts of British, French, and Spanish records made for the Department. He compiled a four volume set generally known as the *Encyclopedia of Mississippi History*, which was published privately in 1907. Officially he compiled, edited, and published three volumes of the *Official and Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi*, two volumes of provincial and territorial archives, and twelve excellent annual reports, altogether some 8,077 pages. He also had time for several local, State, and national movements and controversies, one of which possibly resulted in the suspension from duty of the Adjutant General of the United States.

After 1912 Rowland seemed to lose interest in acquiring State archives, private manuscripts, or printed materials, and in placing in order anything which drifted into the Department. No departmental reports were issued after 1913. Apparently the Board of Trustees and the Mississippi Historical Society, which he took over, held no meetings after 1914. He appears to have devoted the remainder of his life to writing, editing, and publishing.

There were probably many reasons for Rowland's change of attitude. He became engaged in a controversy with the Legislature in 1912, which grew so heated that Senator Frank Burkitt struck him with a cane. No appropriation for the Department was made at that session, and the governor had to borrow money to keep it

open. There was no more space for acquisitions, and Rowland failed in every effort to get larger quarters. His salary was inadequate, and he could augment his income from the sale of publications. The influence of Franklin L. Riley was removed when he left the State in 1914.

Whatever the reasons for emphasis on publication after 1912, Rowland was prolific and successful in that field. During the next twenty-three years, he and Mrs. Rowland wrote, compiled, and edited thirty-five volumes containing some 20,525 pages, and issued numerous pamphlets. The most important of these publications, thirty-one volumes of which were published at State expense, were the letter books of W. C. C. Claiborne and the letters and papers of Jefferson Davis.

Dunbar Rowland died on November 1, 1937, after more than thirty-five years as director of the Department. The editor of the Jackson *Daily News* expressed the view of most informed citizens of the state when he wrote of him: "Dunbar Rowland was . . . often austere and dignified. . . . Dunbar Rowland was an old-fashioned Southern gentleman. . . . Dunbar Rowland was . . . an excellent writer of history. . . . He wore his life out on his job." The Board of Trustees, meeting apparently for the first time in twenty-three years, chose Mrs. Rowland to serve as director until December 31.

The author was elected to begin a six-year term as director of the Department on January 1, 1938. He slipped into Jackson at 5:00 o'clock that morning; before he could get to sleep the telephone started ringing; he had to begin his duties on that holiday. The telephone has been ringing ever since. There have been no holidays, except for a period of military service during which Miss Charlotte Capers very capably administered the Department. There are times when he has a faint nostalgia for the simplicity, security, and obscurity of the Army.

After a careful investigation of the Department, the director concluded in 1938 that it should continue to operate on a much wider scope than simply as a State archive. No matter what program was adopted, the fact remained that there was no available space for storing extensive collections of any nature. Even after the removal of the Department to the new War Memorial Building early in 1941, space was still inadequate.

In regard to records of the State government, we decided that small and valuable groups would be accepted, pending a solution of the space problem. So far we have acquired the inactive Con-

federate pension records and a large number of bound volumes from the Auditor of Public Accounts, collections of bound volumes from the Attorney General and the Supreme Court, the files of various defunct agencies, and numerous miscellaneous records. There are other State records which should be in the Department, but they will have to await the acquisition of adequate quarters. The fact should be mentioned that, in no circumstances and at no time in the future, do we intend to become a filing agency for the various departments of the State government.

Immediate steps were taken to increase the private manuscript collections of the Department and to arrange and inventory those which had accumulated. We have added some 350 collections, as well as thousands of miscellaneous items. Almost all collections have been sorted, arranged chronologically, and inventoried. We are still working, however, on the papers of the Bank of the State of Mississippi, a large and valuable group which was acquired in 1912.

Despite the stated intentions of the first director, little effort was ever made to collect books, pamphlets, and broadsides pertaining to Mississippi. Only a few dozen books and a few hundred pamphlets of that nature were found in the Department in 1938. We decided that the library should contain (1) such necessary tools as bibliographies, guides, and encyclopedias; (2) publications of various historical societies and departments; (3) genealogical publications of interest to Mississippians; and (4) every book and pamphlet which in any way related to Mississippi. During the past ten years, we have added more than 10,000 books and pamphlets pertaining to the State, and we have merely scratched the surface in regard to pamphlets. For instance, last December we bought 800 religious pamphlets at ten cents each, and some of them were Confederate imprints. This month we picked up one collection of 200 Masonic pamphlets. There are thousands of items for which we still search and which we will find. We also employed a trained librarian to catalog the library.

The museum has been permitted to remain in a dormant state on the first floor of the New Capitol. We hope eventually to take over the Old Capitol and turn it into a real State museum under the direction of a trained person. The Hall of Fame was moved into the War Memorial Building, but it is now completely under the direct jurisdiction of the Board of Trustees. The director does not even make recommendations concerning it.

The publication policy of the Department was changed radically

in 1938. No official and statistical register had been issued for ten years, and this year that duty was legally transferred to the Secretary of State. The money which had been going to publication was diverted to the purchase of equipment, books, and manuscripts. The Department, in compliance with law, started issuing a biennial report on its work. Within a year we started the publication of the quarterly *Journal of Mississippi History*, which is now in its tenth volume. Although we may eventually publish documents, any other publications in the near future will be guides and bibliographies. The director no longer derives any income from the sale of publications.

A great deal of attention has been given to methods, other than those already suggested, of increasing the efficiency of the Department. Our large accumulation of newspapers presented a great problem. We neither knew what we had nor how to find it. With the help of the Historical Records Survey, we compiled and published a checklist of every newspaper in the Department. The demand for information from Confederate military records was so great that we were forced to index them, producing an index of some 150,000 cards. Great masses of typewritten accounts of Mississippi events and persons, mimeographed information, newspaper clippings, broadsides, dodgers, pictures, illustrations, notes, advertising folders and leaflets, and other ephemeral material were stacked in boxes, drawers, and corners of the Department. We finally decided to file such material by subject in legal-size steel file cases. This file has grown to 10,000 folders containing some 75,000 items. Because of the continual demand for information about people, two years ago we started an index to various printed volumes containing biographical material and to manuscript volumes of registers of commissions, censuses, and tax rolls. That file now contains about 100,000 cards. We also acquired indexes to the laws passed from 1817 to 1904 and to the records of the Supreme Court.

We found that the correspondence of the Department from 1902 to 1937 had been filed by three-month periods in manuscript boxes. This system made searches for previous correspondence impossible. We refiled this entire group in one simple alphabetical file, at the same time removing from it some 5,000 newspaper clippings, broadsides, biographical and historical sketches, pamphlets, and originals and copies of private manuscripts. The previously mentioned Confederate pension records were received in 82 alphabetical county files. In violation of standard archival practice, we re-

filed these records in one alphabetical file. These and other efforts at efficiency are conservatively estimated to be equal to the services of three competent employees.

Our personnel problems have been relatively simple. In the beginning, low salary scales prevented the employment of trained workers. We decided to adopt a policy of employing young women of good family background, who were college graduates, who had majored in history or English, and who could type. Each of these is given careful training and supervision. Despite the fact that our annual salary scale now ranges from \$2,100 to \$6,500, that policy has been so successful that we contemplate no change.

We have tried to do everything possible to give the public prompt, efficient, and courteous service. Our records show that during the past 129 months we have written 33,118 letters and have had 35,951 registrations of researchers. There are times when we wonder if we have overemphasized this feature of the work, for it forces us to neglect our efforts to increase the collections and the efficiency of the Department.

We have always given special attention to public relations, also to the neglect of other vital duties. There are times when the director finds himself attending so many meetings, serving so many organizations, and trying to make so many speeches that he does little else. During 1941 he accepted 100 speaking engagements throughout the State. Fortunately the war curtailed that schedule, but during the first six months of 1948 the same rate was again reached. The speeches have now been reduced to three or four a month. Special attention is devoted to good relations with various organizations in the state and with the newspapers. These activities have resulted in many donations to the Department and undoubtedly much support in its efforts to grow and increase its efficiency. For instance, good relations with the Daughters of the American Revolution brought us microfilms of the Federal censuses of the State for the period from 1830 through 1880. The interest of a large corporation resulted in our getting without cost 78 rolls of microfilm of the records of the State Land Office. Friendly relations with the owners of the largest and oldest daily newspaper in the State recently acquired us the entire office file of that paper. During the past ten years, the appropriation of the Department has been increased by 471 per cent. So far careful attention to public relations has paid dividends in Mississippi.

Time does not permit references to many other things, such as the encouragement of local historical work and societies; plans in

regard to microphotography, particularly for newspapers; the erecting of historical markers, for which we now have an appropriation of \$9,000; plans for archival and historical progress which will grow out of the erection of a new State Office Building and the vacating of the Old Capitol by State agencies; and numerous other matters and experiences. We have had some small successes in a State which is not wealthy enough to do everything that should be done in regard to its records and history. We have made mistakes and have had our share of failures and disappointments. The days are never long enough for all the things which need to be done. The weeks of the year are far too few for the tasks which face us.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that we are ever mindful of the fact that State agencies in Mississippi are created to serve the people and that the salaries of public servants come from the pockets of the taxpayers of the State.