

National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)

NAR06GRANT-048

“Bringing Alabama’s African American History to Light: A Model Partnership.”

Report 1 (July 1, 2006 - January 31, 2007)

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to organize and make available a number of currently inaccessible African American collections at the W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library at the University of Alabama and at the Tuskegee University Library, to learn and pass on archival skills, and to create a project web site and a finding aid web site.

In the first six months of the grant we expected to:

- hire project archivists at each institution
- conduct a training session with involved staff from both institutions to ensure the use of common standards, practices and finding aid formats
- begin assessment of collections, development of work plans, and processing by project archivists

PROGRESS

Hiring Project Archivists

Upon notification of receipt of the grant, both the University of Alabama Libraries and Tuskegee Library began the process of hiring project archivists for the project. Administrative delays occurred on both campuses, however. The University of Alabama was able to hire a project archivist, Merrily Harris, who started work on October 23, 2006. Changes in administration at Tuskegee University delayed the hiring of their project archivist for a much longer time, but a project archivist, Dana Chander, has been hired and will begin work on February 5, 2007. Because of this delay, the planned training session to be held in Tuscaloosa has had to be postponed, but planning is going forward to hold the training session in the first half of February.

Processing

At the University of Alabama, work has progressed on the Septimus Cabaniss Papers. A report by the project archivist is found in the Appendix. Processing has not yet begun at Tuskegee.

Website

In order to establish exposure for the project and its mission and goals, and to provide a gateway to the project, a public website with a static URL has been created:

<http://www.lib.ua.edu/NAR06GRANT-048>. Currently the website contains the grant narrative, a short introduction to the project, the NHPRC logo and a link to the NHPRC website. This site will be expanded as the project develops.

APPENDIX

Bringing Alabama's African American History to Light: A Model Partnership
The University of Alabama
Progress Report, October 31, 2006 - January 31, 2007
Prepared by Merrily Harris, project archivist

I started by surveying the Septimus Cabaniss Papers in an effort to determine clues to the original order of the collection so that a plan could be formulated regarding future arrangement and description. The Cabaniss/Townsend collection consisted of 47 Hollinger boxes (about 19 linear feet) of a variety of materials, many of them reflecting the legal practice of Septimus Cabaniss. The Townsend portion had been pulled apart from the Cabaniss collection and designated as a separate collection. Part of the project goal is to unite these two collections into one collection, the Septimus Cabaniss Papers. After examining the papers, I made the conclusion that at some point librarians had dismembered the original case files and arranged the entire collection of the Cabaniss portion in chronological order, paying no attention to the subject matter of the document. Case files had been pulled apart in favor of arrangement by date. This filing system makes the papers largely unusable for researchers, whereas an arrangement reflecting the overall legal practice of Cabaniss would be ideal. A decision was made to restore the original order of the collection – i.e. reconstruct the legal cases. The Townsend section of the collection would then become the largest case file of the collection.

The Cabaniss papers consist of the legal, personal, and financial records of this Huntsville attorney. The collection is comprised of materials spanning from the late 1820s until the 1880s. The materials include legal, personal, and political correspondence and include originals, drafts, and copies in letter books. There is also a plethora of material reflecting the activities of Cabaniss' law partner, F.P. Ward. Other materials such as clippings books also reflect Cabaniss' interest in the politics of the day. There are copious legal documents including deeds, bankruptcy writs, inventories of estates, briefs, copies of court summons, receipts for services, vouchers, and other items. Finally, there are materials that encompass both personal and professional realms including journals, newspaper clippings, funeral announcements, day books, sermons, account books, and farms books.

I have begun processing the Cabaniss portion of the collection in a box-by-box method, sorting incoming correspondence alphabetically and outgoing correspondence chronologically. I have also been trying to identify what cases miscellaneous legal documents represent, and have been creating case files accordingly and arranging them alphabetically. This involves examining receipts, deeds, estate inventories, and finding clues as to which party Cabaniss represented in a particular case. As a result, researchers will be able to go back and forth from correspondence to case files with little trouble. Roughly 21 boxes have been sorted into correspondence files, and other materials have been sorted and case file names assigned to documents as appropriate. When the Cabaniss portion of the collection has been processed in this way, I will pull the case files and correspondence together and turn my attention to the Townsend portion of the collection (10 boxes plus miscellaneous ledgers and day books), arranging this portion of the

collection into logical categories. A final phase will involve the description of the collection, which will involve the creation of a finding aid.