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The Vicksburg National Military Park Archives

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My love affair with the city of Vicksburg in general and the Vicksburg National Military Park in particular goes back to my childhood when my parents loaded my brother and me into the family car and took us to these places that to me, even at a young age, had a mystical quality about them. I have always treasured hill and mountain country, and the mighty bluffs and ravines that make up the terrain of the town and the Park have a beauty that I have trouble finding words to describe.

Beyond the physical majesty of the area, I appreciated, and still do, the ghostly, spiritual presence of the past that permeates so much in and around Vicksburg. The old chair encased on the main floor of the Old Courthouse Museum is a favorite example. Even in my young years, I could almost sense General U. S. Grant sitting there, chewing and puffing on his ever-present cigar, as he discussed strategy with his staff. The sign in the exhibit says he used the chair, and I hope that he did, because I still feel like speaking to him every time I see it. The old court room up on the second floor of the museum also has a special feel, as does the wonderful exhibit at the Park visitors center which depicts glimpses of the horrors and tragedies of siege warfare. I still recall being in the visitors center one day and noticing a young woman rushing out of the exhibit area. She nervously smiled at one of the park personnel working in the area and mumbled, "It's spooky in there." She was right, but for people like me who enjoy occasionally letting my mind and senses drift back through the ages, it is also a special place where I can in a small way experience the siege. I am glad I was not there then, but I am equally glad that I can briefly immerse myself in the atmosphere, artificial though it may be, of those hot summer days in 1863.

As my spiritual ties to Vicksburg evolved over the years, I had no idea that someday I would be a Civil War historian and an archivist, and that the two together would provide a unique opportunity for me in 1997. I knew Civil War historians wrote books about the war, many of which I had read, but I had no thought of doing anything like that myself. Until the early 1970s, I doubt I had ever heard the term "archivist", though I had a vague notion that an "archives" was a dusty, dark, dank place where old stuff was kept. I surely never thought of a profession being associated with such things.

Thanks to a cousin who got me interested in relic hunting on Civil War battlefields, I drifted into the history profession. While in graduate school at Mississippi State University, I learned that teaching jobs for historians at the collegiate level were rare (still are unfortunately), so I might ought to think about another career that was in some way related. That fact of life led me into the archival field. Fortunately, I found as much satisfaction, probably a lot more, in organizing and preserving historic documents and artifacts and making them available to researchers than in trying to explain American history to students, most of whom emerge from high schools knowing very little about the subject. I do not mean to imply that I do not enjoy teaching; on those rare occasions when I get to teach a class, I usually find it rewarding. I just am not at all sure I would want to give up my archival career to do it full time.

Speaking of that archival career, I have been an archivist in the University Archives, Special Collections Department of the MSU Library since 1983. I also coordinate the Congressional Collection which has become a division known as the Congressional and Political Research Center, to be in full swing by January, 2000. The point is that in my work I rarely have an opportunity to work with Civil War-era documents. I have run into such materials with much frequency in doing historical research through the years, but it is not quite the same as working with them on a daily, or at least a frequent basis.

That changed when Terry Winchel, a long time friend and historian at the Vicksburg National Military Park, approached me in 1997 about taking charge of an archival project at the Park. Funds had been allocated for the purpose of processing the archival materials on hand, and since I had done so much research at the Park, and had an archival background, Terry thought I would be perfect for the job. Emotionally, it was like a dream come true. I could come to Vicksburg more often and actually have the chance to plow through all the Park records. The whole idea had a ring of nirvana about it. But, alas, the reality was that I had a job, a full-time job that physically was a good three hour drive from the Park. As great as it all sounded, I regretfully told Terry I did not see any way that I could do it. I began to try and think of others who could.

Weeks drifted by, and I forgot about the project. I had made some suggestions to Terry about archivists who possibly could do the job. Then, during another research trip to the Park, Terry brought up the subject again. And, again, patiently, I explained why my participation was impossible. I have no doubt that Terry had been pondering this matter, trying to think of a way he could convince me. He had indeed thought of a compelling argument. Why not hire graduate students, train them, and let them come down and do the nitty gritty work? I did not say yes right away, but the thought appealed to me. Having been there myself, I know most graduate students are always short of funds, and I knew several graduate students, one of whom had at one time been my student assistant, who had the ability to get the job done.

So we proceeded. The National Park Service regional office in Atlanta sent me a book on processing guidelines, and I hired four MSU graduate students in history. I had to explain to them that the Park Service had structured the work in four phases, and that I would receive payments as each phase was completed. I quickly realized that this kind of structure could mean that I might run out of money to pay them from time to time, depending on how long each phase took, a factor which was a definite unknown. They agreed, though none of us knew then how big a problem this would turn out to be. The breaking up of the project into four parts looked fair enough on paper, but the plan turned out to be very unrealistic, mainly because the amount of work in each phase varied greatly.

Before my crew could start working, I had to survey the Park's holdings. I quickly concluded that no one really knew how much archival material they had. Archives of various types and formats were stored hither and yon; this was no one's fault, it merely underscored the problem of preserving a national park's history without having an archival program in place. The curator of the U. S. S. Cairo museum, Elizabeth Joyner, had accomplished much in documenting and cataloging artifacts (which was not part of the archival project), and she had also made significant progress in cataloging photographs. Otherwise, archives were partly here, there and everywhere, and even after surveying the material and arbitrarily assigning series titles, I still did not have an adequate appreciation of the volume we had to deal with.

After completing the survey, I worked with Elizabeth to order enough supplies to get us

rolling, held training sessions with my crew, and they finally began the first of their many, many round trips to the Park. We were given a house in the midst of the Park which had one time had been the superintendent's home and is now office space for various Park personnel. It sits about a hundred yards from where U. S. Grant and John C. Pemberton met to discuss the surrender of Vicksburg. However great its ambiance, the house was not an ideal place to be working with archives. Climate control was a major problem, and we understood that rats had been seen occasionally (probably descendants of rats that had been breakfast, lunch, and/or dinner during the siege). A computer for folder listing and a photocopier were brought in and the supplies finally arrived. At last we could begin transferring all the archives from their various previous homes to a central location. We could not, of course, do that all at once due to space limitations, so the crew had to work series by series as much as that was possible.

At times, the work area resembled a war zone, which given the location of the place, seemed appropriate. The varying series, and the even more varying formats and sizes of materials, forced my crew to be very creative in assembling and maintaining piles of material that belonged in the various series. The cramped quarters tested the patience of my workers, who began to get on each other's nerves and to be frayed in general. Illustrative of the transformation of their demeanors from enjoying the work to enduring it was a written note I got from one of them attached to a progress report. It began, "Greetings from Nam." Fortunately, they all have good senses of humor which helped greatly along the way.

Perhaps the biggest problem we encountered was that we were not provided with complete guideline information up front. The most exasperating example came upon us like a very ill wind. We found out that the Park Service wanted folder labeling done a certain way. That would have been no problem if we had been told that up front. As it was, that lack of knowledge on our part extended the project several months, because we had to go back and redo hundreds of labels. We could not simply retype them, since the Park Service also insists that label information be penciled in. We had similar experiences in other areas of the project, and nothing damaged the morale of my crew, and me, more than having to go back and correct something that we had unknowingly done wrong. Fortunately, none were of the magnitude of the folder snafu.

I would caution anyone doing such a project to be very, very, very sure of all guidelines before you begin. If you wonder about something that is not addressed in the guidelines, do not assume anything. Ask questions, and continue to do so until you are sure that the person you are reporting to is on the same wavelength you are. And if that contact person is hesitant about giving you a straight answer, shut down the project until you get one. I ran into that problem in trying to get instructions on putting our compiled information into the Park Service database. The Service had adopted a new system, and no one seemed sure how to run it. So we simply stopped work until we got our questions answered. Far better to do that than to have to go back and redo it.

The final result of our work was a 688 page guide (all data is also in the Park Service database). We established several series of records: General History and Military; Photographs, composed of the following sub-series-Rigby Family, V.N.M.P. General Scenes, Monuments, Miscellaneous Oversized; Park Bridges, Park Buildings, Aerial Photographs, Civilian Conservation Corps, U. S. S. Cairo, U. S. S. Vicksburg, Living History, Cannons, Grounds/Maintenance, Repairs and Renovations, Erosion Control/Artifacts/Visitors (Groups), Vicksburg National Military Park Early Years, Removed from Other Series, Individuals/Their

Monuments/Miscellaneous, Photographs Removed from Superintendent's Narrative Reports and Miscellaneous Projects, Monuments/Plaques/Busts, Negatives, Glass Lantern Slides, Prints [From Negatives], Sleeved Negatives, Oversized [Portraits, Albums], and Photos Removed from "Vicksburg Campaign Series"; Maps and Blueprints; Monumentation; Newspaper; National Cemetery; William T. Rigby; Vicksburg Campaign Series, which includes the Regimental Files and Journals/Diaries/Letters Files sub-series; Administrative; Land Records; Scrapbooks; Edwin Cole Bearss; U. S. S. Cairo; Audio-Visual and Computer.

The paperwork for each series consists of a title page, consisting of the park address and pertinent phone numbers and contact persons, title of series, accession and catalog numbers and inclusive dates; an "Instructions for Using Finding Aids" sheet; "Archival and Museum Collection Access Policy, Vicksburg National Military Park" statement; a "Copyright and Privacy Restrictions" statement; a series-level survey description sheet; folder list; and index. Folder titles consist of the actual title plus pertinent bracketed information which amplifies information and provides additional data for inclusion in the indices. For example, a folder title from the General History and Military Series reads "Confederate Soldiers interred in the Magnolia City Cemetery and Columbia County, Arkansas-booklet, 1992" [lists of soldiers from several wars, includes a biography on Major General John Porter McCown]. This is a tedious method of processing, but the massive amount of information the process provides makes for extensive indices that will be of great value to researchers. For example, the index to the Photograph Series is 33 pages and the combined indices of the Vicksburg Campaign Series are 43 pages.

The archives at the Vicksburg National Park still need much work. There are various preservation concerns that need to be addressed, and the Photographs Series needs to be evaluated for possible weeding and restructuring. I included these and other suggestions in recommendations made to pertinent park staff during the course of the project.

Even though the project became tedious, boring, and at times very frustrating, I am very proud of what we accomplished. My team of workers did a great job. James Stennet, Craig Piper, and David Eldridge did the bulk of the work. I also received able assistance from Grace Piper and Clay Williams, and special thanks goes to Peggy Bonner who overcame the mysteries of the Park Service database and did a terrific job entering all the data. Very special thanks also goes to Elizabeth Joyner, who was our liaison and did a masterful job of facilitating the entire project. Jenean Couch, our contact at the regional Park Service office in Atlanta, helped us get through a variety of red-tape mine fields. I also appreciate park historian Terry Winchel's help along the way. As mentioned, he talked me into doing the project, and I must say at times I was not sure if my long-time friendship with Terry was a blessing or a curse. (Just kidding Terry, well, at least partly.)

Nevertheless, we not only endured; we prevailed. Already we have received much positive feedback from the park staff about how delighted they are to finally have a handle on their archives. A new park archival facility is almost ready for occupation, and hopefully my crew and I established the groundwork for what will be an ongoing, properly funded archival program. The world may little note nor long remember what we did there, but, if the archival work we began continues as we hope it will, it will never forget what happened there. Despite any trials we may have gone through, that knowledge is sufficient to provide enormous satisfaction to us all.