

The Natchez Court Records Project

In 1991, the Natchez National Historical Park contracted with me to write a historical study of the African-American experience in Natchez, Mississippi, from 1720 to 1880. I was awarded this contract because of previous experience researching Natchez social and economic history. That contractual agreement resulted in *The Black Experience in Natchez, Mississippi, 1720 -1880* published by Eastman publishers in 1992, and it also changed my life as a scholar and teacher of southern history.

Briefly told, the Park contract coincided with an educational venture based upon the idea of taking my graduate seminar at California State University at Northridge to research the history of the Old Natchez District in the National Archives in Washington, DC. With the contract in mind, I redesigned my seminar to focus on materials at southern archives in Louisiana and Mississippi, with hands-on research in the historical records located in the county records office in Natchez, Mississippi. In the spring of 1992, I led a group of 12 graduate students to work in the Natchez records, stopping first at Louisiana State University, followed by three days of work in Natchez, and ending with research at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi.

While working in Natchez, I noticed that many of the court records that I had used in my previous research were no longer shelved in the public records room of the county courthouse. Mary Miller, the educational director and historical preservationist of the Historic Natchez Foundation, suggested that the missing records were probably locked away somewhere in the basement of the courthouse. Upon investigating, we found four damp and foul-smelling rooms filled with an incredible treasure trove of legal documents. Three rooms contained several thousand bound ledger volumes, and a third room, much to my astonishment, held massive steel cabinets filled with nearly 100,000 manuscript legal cases (civil and criminal litigation) dating from the Spanish period through the 1940s. Most of the land records involving sales, inheritance, and probate were still housed in the reading rooms accessible to lawyers and the general public.

Understanding the historical value of these basement materials, it was clear that something

had to be done not only to rescue these records but also to preserve and use them for historical research. Natchez, Mississippi had functioned as the very center of the slave-plantation economy of the lower Mississippi River Valley on the eve of the Civil War. Its slave market was the second largest in the lower South, and the town's immediate environs was home to some of the wealthiest planters in the nation. Occupied shortly after the fall of Vicksburg by Union forces in the summer of 1863, the town survived the war as a federal garrison. Nearly 3,000 African-American troops (mostly ex-slaves in the area) had patrolled its streets, staffed its Union-built fort, and dominated much of the surrounding countryside. Thousands of other slaves, mostly women and children, had flocked to the town only to be relocated to Union controlled plantations as wage hands or to refugee holding depots. Many thousands of these slave refugees had died in Natchez area contraband camps from infectious diseases and sickness during the war years.

After the Civil War, the town functioned as a stronghold of Republican politics, sending Hiram Revels to Washington, DC, as one of the nation's first black senators. He occupied the U. S. Senate position last held by Jefferson Davis. The community's population of antebellum free blacks, some of whom had owned slaves, survived the war to become the basis for a successful black political machine that persevered until the late 1890s. Republican carpetbaggers, defeated Confederate veterans, war widows, thousands of freed men and women, and a new class of merchants and lawyers struggled to gain political and economic ascendancy in the turbulent years from 1870 to 1900. By 1900, a new caste system of race relations defined by sharecropping, Jim Crowism, and debt peonage had settled itself firmly upon the District. Much of the social and economic history that accompanied the changes described above lay within the aged manuscripts then rotting away in the basement of the Adams County courthouse.

Most immediately, the materials would have to be relocated, sorted, organized, and cleaned. The first task was accomplished with grants from the Adams County Board of Supervisors, California State University at Northridge, and the Natchez National Historical Park. These three support groups helped to underwrite some of the expenses for bringing to Natchez in the summer of 1992 a

team of California graduate student interns to physically relocate and do an initial cleaning of the records. Ronald Miller, the director of the Historic Natchez Foundation, which is housed in a turn-of-the-century school building, agreed to make available several classrooms in the Foundation building for temporary storage and use as workrooms for handling the documents. The Natchez National Historical Park supported the project by offering internship certification to the students, assistance with acid-free archival supplies, staff support, and the use of Park vehicles for transportation. Additionally, the staff of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History helped in the supervision of the students' work by means of seminars and other on-site assistance in the preservation and handling of aged historical documents. Mary Miller, of the Historic Natchez Foundation, served as the project's co-director and invaluable resource person.

By the end of the summer of 1992, all of the records had been relocated to the Historic Natchez Foundation, partly with the help of a team of prison trustees assigned to us by the Adams County Sheriff. For three intensive weeks, the students cleaned, sorted, cataloged, filed, and indexed 1,100 bound volumes, wrapping them in acid-free paper for temporary storage. These oversized volumes are diverse in character, ranging from minute books for the various county and municipal courts, records of judgments, court execution and sheriff dockets, chattel mortgage record books, land rolls, marriage records, naturalization ledgers, appraisal ledgers, poll registration books, tax ledgers, index books, and other materials related to civil and criminal litigation. The monumental task of opening the aged cartons containing the actual court cases was postponed for the following summer.

Beginning in the summer of 1993, and running through each consecutive summer thereafter, teams of graduate students have returned to Natchez to work in the historical court records—including six interns from the the University of Southern Mississippi in the summer of 1997. In 1996 and 1997, the Department of the Interior awarded substantial grants, authored by the Superintendent of the Natchez National Historical Park, Robert Dodson and myself, to the Historic Natchez Foundation for the continuation of our work. These funds, which were supplemented by monies allocated to the project from California State University at Northridge, enabled the records project to proceed in a timely fashion.

Working in the Historic Natchez Foundation building, each member of the student team assumed the responsibility of removing the case documents from dirty acidic, high-pulp wrappers,

cleaning and flattening the handwritten manuscripts, assessing their historical significance, documenting contents, interpreting the information with key questions and references in mind, and placing the papers in acid-free file folders for storage in acid-free boxes. Most of the old packages had not been touched since their insertion in sets of metal file drawers in the 1890s. Almost none of them had been opened since their original court dates, ranging from 1798 to the 1940s.

The bulk of the cases were debt related, but most packages (typically holding a dozen cases with several hundred manuscripts therein) contained litigation dealing with the vast complexity of life in the old South. Students processed cases involving Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, slave traders, kidnapped slaves petitioning for their freedom, manumissions, prostitution, murder, rape, orphans, divorces, riots, arson, fraud, larceny, and much more. (Among our most interesting finds was Jefferson Davis' marriage certificate.)

Crucial to the assessment process was the use of a data sheet on which students comment on the particulars of each case. Once the materials were accurately interpreted and preserved, information contained on the forms was then entered into a computer program designed by Ronald Miller for the retrieval and integration of the information. By summer's end 1997, the students had logged in most of the cases for the Territorial period, 1803-1817, as well as numerous sample cases for each of the following decades. The completed case documents are now archived in several large, dry record vaults in the lower level of the building, rooms once used for school records that are well suited for holding the documents on a temporary basis.

In addition to processing and archiving the documents, the student interns research the legal records as part of their formal seminar assignment. The typical week's schedule allows time for individual research in the evening and on select research days. Nearly 60 student interns have participated in the program, producing essays on subjects that cover a range of social, political, cultural, economic, and military history.

Many of the students conduct oral history interviews with local people, ranging from the descendants of District slaves to the offspring of the most prominent families in the area. In the summer of 1997, for example, one student (Ben Brenner) worked with a local African-American doctor, the son of sharecroppers, who now operates a medical clinic in town. The doctor drives a white pick-up truck that sports a signature license plate which reads "ex-slave." Some of his ancestors were three prominent free black women, whom popular history has relegated to having

been prostitutes with no clear evidence in support of the allegation. My student explored the history of that legend in the legal records, concluding that much of the allegation possibly stemmed from the professional jealousy of a racist, white doctor who felt threatened by the successful midwifery practice of the Kyle women.

Another student uncovered a set of public school records in the court materials, detailing the history of segregation in 19th-century Natchez. She (Caren Sebok) developed a project researching black teachers at the turn-of-the-century, interviewing in the process elderly members of the community who were related to some of the teachers or had been their students. Other students worked on subjects ranging from the genteel women of a prominent Victorian-era banking family to descendants of free black property owners, Jewish merchants, crime in the 1820s compared to the 1890s, law enforcement in Civil War Natchez, the Natchez economy of the 1830s, vernacular architecture, sharecropping debts, slave trials, the elite Catholic families of Old Natchez, early newspaper editors, and more.

One of our most successful students, Joyce Broussard, presently the Archivist and Director of Special Collections at Dickinson College (and who also assisted me as coordinator of the conferences and the summer internships), developed her work in the records into a Ph.D dissertation at the University of Southern California, entitled "Female Solitaires: Women Alone in the Lifeworld of Mid-Century Natchez, 1850 - 1880." Another student, Leslie Smithers, is completing her Ph.D. studies at Purdue University, working on a dissertation dealing with the public and private gardens of the Old Natchez District. Thomas Scarborough, to give just one last example of many, is doing a dissertation at the University of California at Santa Barbara on the federal control of abandoned and leased lands in the Old Natchez District during the the Civil War.

The Biennial Historic Natchez Conference

A key component of the Natchez Project is the Biennial Historic Natchez Conference, which grew out of our preservation work in the courthouse records. In 1993, the Natchez National Historical Park, in cooperation with the Historic Natchez Foundation, endorsed the idea of a special conference featuring presentations by scholars who have worked in those southern archives holding significant collections of Natchez related materials. The response was immediate and positive. We held the initial conference in 1994, involving 20 scholars of national acclaim and several dozen graduate students from around the nation, including 15 student interns. The conference attracted nearly 300 registered participants. We held the

second conference in 1996, with similar success; and the third conference was scheduled for February of 1998.

The Gandy Exhibit

A second offshoot of the courthouse records project was a wonderfully successful exhibit sponsored by the National Park Service, the Historic Natchez Foundation, and California State University at Northridge in Los Angeles, California 1995. The exhibit grew out of our association with Joan and Thomas H. Gandy, who opened their collection of 19th-century photographs to our students for research. Typically, the Gandys invite the student interns to informal workshops in their antebellum home, Myrtle Banks, and the students are always astounded by what they observe: filing boxes full of old glass plate negatives and dozens of beautifully restored and interpreted 19th-century photographs.

Future Plans

As of this writing, we have an established archives in Natchez in which all of the 19th-century over-sized ledgers (1,100 volumes) have been cleaned, wrapped, and cataloged. The territorial-era volumes, moreover, have been indexed for every entry and are now being entered into a computer data bank. Approximately 20% of the 100,000 court cases have also been cleaned, processed, and safely placed in acid-free storage materials. These cases have been indexed and interpreted with the information entered into a computer data bank. Both sets of information will be published in a usable guide to the records in the coming months. We have three large vaults suitable for records storage that have been cleaned and properly arranged with cabinets and archival accessories by our students over the last three summers.

What remains, of course, is to process the remaining 80% of the court cases and to index the remaining volumes for the 19th century, some 950 volumes. In addition, we still have to clean, preserve, catalog, and wrap another 500 volumes of ledger books for the first 30 years of the 20th century. These large volumes have been stored in the upstairs rooms of the historic school building in which we are working. And the same is true for a vast number of early-20th-century court cases that run from 1900 to the 1960s, including the invaluable materials dealing with the Civil Rights era of Mississippi history.

An Interpretive Lens

My approach to working with the student interns draws upon our use of the legal records to illuminate the so-called lifeworld experiences commonly shared by Natchez individuals in the daily routines of life. Our research challenges and inves-

tigates the notion that individuals within the Natchez lifeworld were guided in their everyday experiences by social recipes for getting around in a social milieu totally and completely dependent upon slavery. It is a conceptual framework that sees the Civil War as disruptive of a particular lifeworld that privileged slave-owning white males over all other individuals, especially blacks, women, and marginalized white men.

Most importantly, our work in the preservation and interpretation of the legal records of the Natchez environs has provided the National Park Service at Natchez with a wealth of documentation for its interpretive work in the community. We have uncovered tremendous amounts of information about the law of slavery as it was played out in the courthouse and on the streets; about the character of the free-black community of Natchez; about the manifestations and institutionalization of white male dominance over women and children in the family and about the extension of that dominance over women in Natchez society in general; about the everyday workings of Natchez life; about the meaning of mastery as a paternalistic ideology that often softened the more brutal aspects of the Natchez patriarchy; about the material character of Natchez society—from buildings, pathways, and burial grounds to the corner life of its courthouse scene over time; about the impact of the Civil War on the physical and cultural character of the place; about the transition from slavery to sharecropping; about the political culture of post-reconstruction Natchez as reflected in civil and criminal litigation; about the legalistic connections between the private and public worlds of Natchez residents over time; and about the linkage of long-dead Natchezians of all races and both genders with the present as reflected in the institutionalization of their history in the public domain.

What remains to be accomplished, along with the continuation of our work in the preservation and interpretation of the legal records, is the infusion of our interpretive work into the public messages presented by the National Park Service in Natchez. The basis for this infusion has already been set in place due to the attentiveness of the Park Service in Natchez, under the direction of Superintendent Bob Dodson, to the interpretive promise offered by the court records project. But much of the Park's work up to the present has been consumed by the time-demanding task of doing site restoration and by the type of historical analysis that emphasizes material culture over lifeworld analysis and site interpretation over the larger contextual realm of social and economic history.

With much of the material and site interpretive analysis of Natchez Park properties now in hand, the time is ripe for the Park Service to turn its attention to the meaningful integration of our work in the legal records, the conferences, and the various publications into the ongoing interpretive messages presented to the public. What is needed is a broadening of the Park's interpretive agenda to include within its emphasis on material culture and site interpretation the larger social context of slavery and the Natchez world that it created.

This goal can best be achieved by a series of tutorial workshops aimed at informing Park staff about the insights revealed in the documents. Additionally, by integrating the staff more closely into the records project in hands-on experiences with the documents, Park personnel will come to have a personal stake in the ongoing presentation of the interpretive essays that flow from the project in study guides, interpretive publications, and resource pieces for use by the Park staff and the public at large. Finally, perhaps now is the time to include within the Park's agenda projects that bring the public more into contact with the Natchez court records and Park sites in joint educational ventures such as Natchez exposure seminars, a summer institute in southern legal history, and genealogical workshops in African-American history and the Natchez historical scene.

Thanks to the tremendous support offered by the Natchez National Historical Park, the Historic Natchez Foundation, and the California State University at Northridge, we have in the Court Records Project the unique fusion of federal, state, and local agencies in the preservation and interpretation of a significant historical place. The next step is to more directly integrate the historical social context that is so dramatically revealed in the court records, seminar papers, and conference presentations into the interpretive messages carried by the Natchez National Historical Park and the Historic Natchez Foundation. Although Natchez was not just a lifeworld driven and defined by slavery and the social upheaval that accompanied its final demise, it was that above all else. This is the message clearly revealed in the court records, and this should be the interpretive thrust of the stories being told to the public at large. To do anything less is to distort the history of a significant southern place that was once known as the Old Natchez District.

Ronald L. F. Davis is a professor at California State University at Northridge.