The Black History Commission of Arkansas and the Arkansas State Archives hosted a symposium on Saturday, February 4, at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center. The symposium’s theme, “Black Political Engagement in Arkansas,” featured speakers Dr. John Graves, Dr. Cherisse Jones-Branch, Elmer Beard, and Rev. R.J. Hampton.

BHCA Vice Chair Graves, of Henderson State University, discussed the career of John Gray Lucas. Lucas was an African American member of the Arkansas legislature from Jefferson County who fought against many of the Jim Crow laws that were being passed through the legislature in the 1890s.


Jones-Branch, a member of the BHCA and Associate Professor of History at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, presented on African American women’s involvement with the Republican Party in Arkansas during the 1960s and 1970s, in particular during Winthrop Rockefeller’s governorship. Rockefeller’s personal belief in racial equality was well known, and during his administration large numbers of African Americans were elevated to high positions in state government.

Hampton concluded the symposium, discussing his career and giving dramatic reading from a play he has written. Rev. Hampton ran for the Republican Party’s nomination for governor in 1970, becoming the first African American to seek the nomination of a major political party since 1920. Although he did not win the nomination, Hampton’s candidacy brought the African American community into the political conversation for the first time in many years.

“The seminars coordinated by the Black History Commission and State Archives play such an important role in fostering greater understanding of the important role that African Americans have played in all aspects of Arkansas history,” remarked ASA Director Dr. Lisa Speer. “In this post-election year as we reflect on the accomplishments of America’s first biracial President, it seems particularly fitting to take a closer look at the struggles and triumphs of African Americans in the political arena in Arkansas,” said Speer. Carla Coleman, member of the BHCA, says of the event, “It is important that we not forget, and that we continue to share and teach the young and old of Arkansas about the struggles and the bloodshed it took for people of color to be able to be involved in our political process.”

Since 1991, the BHCA has been presenting programs such as this one and gathering material about the history of African Americans in Arkansas. Thanks to their tireless work, much of Arkansas’s African American heritage has been preserved for future generations. On June 10, the BHCA and ASA will present “Jim Crow Goes to War: Race Relations in World War I in Arkansas.” Stay tuned for details on the June symposium in future issues of the Arkansas Archivist!
Amy Minger joins the ASA

Amy Minger joined the ASA staff in early January as the agency's new conservator. Amy grew up in Heber Springs. She graduated from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock with a degree in art history. She worked at an art gallery in North Little Rock where she learned many of the techniques of art restoration and conservation.

She is excited about some of the projects that she will be tackling at the ASA, among them the conservation of the Eckler Studio negatives, from a 19th century Hot Springs photographer.

As the agency's only conservator, Amy's daily work will involve providing conservation services for the State Archives collections and the collections housed at the regional archives, NEARA and SARA. Amy will be responsible for identifying and implementing treatments for new and existing collection materials that require treatments to extend their lifespan. Additionally, Amy will collaborate with ASA staff to ensure that basic preservation measures are followed as a routine part of working with collections during processing and research.

In her role as conservator, Amy will also be involved in the ASA's State Agency Records Preservation initiative, working with state agencies, offices and departments, to promote good records storage practices to ensure that the official records of Arkansas are preserved for future generations.

Black History Commission News

The members of the BHCA not only work to preserve the history of African Americans in Arkansas, but several of them are actively engaged in creating scholarship to advance knowledge on the subject, as well. This month, the BHCA news features two of our scholar-commissioners: Dr. John W. Graves and Dr. Cherisse Jones-Branch.

Dr. John W. Graves is researching the life of John Gray Lucas, the topic of his presentation at this month’s BHCA seminar. Lucas was appointed Commissioner for the U.S. District Court for Arkansas’s Eastern District. In 1891, while serving in the Arkansas House of Representatives as a lawmaker from Pine Bluff and Jefferson County, Lucas delivered the principal address against enactment of one of Arkansas’s first Jim Crow laws, the Separate Coach Law of 1891, which mandated racial segregation on the state’s railway passenger trains and in its railway passenger stations. Lucas left Arkansas and moved to Chicago, Illinois, in 1893, where he continued for the rest of his life to battle against discrimination and for racial justice. Dr. Graves has published his research on Lucas on the Encyclopedia of Arkansas.


We are proud of these members of the BHCA for advancing knowledge of the important role that African Americans have played in Arkansas history!
While many people may be aware that February is set aside for celebrating Black History Month, they may not be aware of why this is so. The first annual observance of black history in the United States was established in 1926 by historian Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The second week in February was chosen by Woodson and the Association to be “Negro History Week,” because it coincided with the birthdays of former President Abraham Lincoln (Feb. 12) and noted 19th century African American social reformer, orator and abolitionist Frederick Douglass (Feb. 14). From inception, the primary emphasis of the observance was the coordinated teaching of the history of American blacks in the nation’s public schools. Churches and state departments of education were responsible for leading the promotion of the event until its metamorphosis into Black History Month. The bicentennial year in the United States marked a growing recognition and interest in saving and promoting many facets of our local, state and national history. U. S. President Gerald Ford officially recognized Black History Month in 1976, which was first celebrated on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio by Black United Students in 1970. Critics of Black History Month argue that the observance should not be limited to one month out of the year; and without question, the experiences of blacks in America should be a part of the overall historical narrative of this country. Yet, for many decades, the scholarship generated on the history of the United States was not inclusive. Absent from the annals of history were the voices and experiences of blacks, women, the poorer classes, ethnic minorities, and others. Historical scholarship through the 1950s approached the black experience in America as that of objects acted upon by forces outside their control, and not as actors asserting control over their lives despite oftentimes very adverse situations. While the historical narrative, in general, since the 1960s has moved towards telling the stories of ordinary people and examining topics like race, class, gender and sexuality, we might remember that this new social consciousness is but a blip in time in the historical consciousness of our nation. For that reason, and others, celebrations like Black History Month and Women’s History Month in March are important reminders that we are one country, but with many voices. — Dr. Lisa K. Speer, State Historian

From the Director

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News from NEARA

Any archivist can tell you: historic records can end up in strange places. A recent donation to NEARA is the perfect example of this phenomenon. During the renovation of their home, a couple found some old ledgers in the attic, which they passed along to a family member who then donated the items to NEARA. The home was formerly a real estate office for a large firm in Northeast Arkansas and so it was suspected that these ledgers were related to the previous business.

However, during processing it was revealed that these ledgers belonged to a doctor who operated in Vilonia, Faulkner County, around the beginning of the 20th century! Dr. J.B. Munn was a busy doctor who treated many patients in the surrounding area. In addition, he ran a general store with his business partner, Mr. Kirby. Like many other wealthier citizens at that time, Dr. Munn also managed a farm and rented out properties.

It’s a mystery how these ledger books ended up in Lawrence County, far from their original home in Faulkner County. Most likely, it was the result of one of Dr. Munn’s descendants moving and taking the ledgers with them. So the next time you’re cleaning or renovating an older space, keep an eye out for treasures like these ledgers that may be far from home – but they can acquire a new home with the Arkansas State Archives and its branches! To view the Dr. J.B. Munn records, visit NEARA at 11 7th St, Powhatan, AR 72458.

News from SARA

Tucked away in Washington, Arkansas, is a gem of resources for Arkansas history. The Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives, more popularly known by the acronym “SARA,” has a history of almost forty years in this region. What started as a local project of the Hempstead County Historical Society has grown into a place where patrons have come from all over the United States to engage in genealogical and historical research. Dr. John L. Ferguson, former State Historian and Director of the Arkansas History Commission (now the Arkansas State Archives), had long considered the possibility of establishing regional archives in each corner of the state. With the cooperation of the Hempstead County Historical Society, Historic Washington State Park, and the Pioneer Washington Restoration Foundation, the launching of that dream became a reality when SARA was established in 1978. A branch of the Arkansas State Archives since 2005, SARA’s documents focus primarily on the twelve counties in Southwest Arkansas that were once part of the vast territory covered by the original Hempstead County created in December 1818. The oldest item at SARA is a simple bill for lodging from 1816 that ended up in the estate settlement of Andrew Snody of Pecan Point. The back of the receipt is signed by “C Wright J.P.H.C.” [Claiborne Wright, Justice of the Peace, Hempstead County], and an interesting fact to note is that Pecan Point was disputed with the areas of Northeast Texas and Southeast Oklahoma. Wright was serving as a Justice of the Peace during a time when the western boundary of Arkansas was disputed with the areas of Northeast Texas and Southeast Oklahoma. This historical gem and many more may be viewed and utilized by patrons who travel to Southwest Arkansas. We welcome you to plan a visit soon!
This month we received an interesting collection of photographs and genealogical information from Frances Carner. The collection documents the life of Anthony Harpin Davies and his descendants. Davies was an influential planter and politician from Chicot County. He served as a delegate to Arkansas’s first constitutional convention in 1836 and served in the state legislature from 1836 to 1838. After his term in the legislature ended, he became president of the Arkansas State Bank and the Real Estate Bank of Arkansas. He married Mildred Pollard Gaines in 1841 following the death of his first wife, Emily Virginia Aldridge in 1838. He died in 1862 of “flux,” probably dysentery, on Hot Springs Mountain, where he and his family were hiding from Union soldiers. After the war, his family continued to live throughout southern Arkansas and spread throughout the United States.

Many of the photographs in the collection are tintypes taken before the Civil War. A tintype is an early photographic process where an image is created on a thin piece of metal treated with an enamel that is later developed. Tintypes were incredibly popular not only for studio portraits, but also for outdoor photography. Since the process was a relatively easy one, photographs could be finished developing within minutes of being taken, adding to the type’s popularity. As a result, the photographs in this collection vary from studio portraits to outdoor family photographs. This collection is a welcome addition to our growing number of photographs that document Arkansas and we are thankful to Ms. Carner for donating them. We’ve printed several more of these fascinating photographs below.

We always receive more material than we are able to list in our newsletter. For a full listing, see our blog


We appreciate the generous support of our donors!