Legislators Tour Commission, Enjoy Ice Cream Social

Several legislators enjoyed an old-fashioned ice cream social, along with an open house at the AHC offices on March 7, 2013. Over a dozen legislators enjoyed impromptu tours of the Research Room where they received instruction on how to conduct general research and viewed exhibits featuring Civil War documents and the state’s constitutions. As a special treat for the legislators, select WWI artifacts were available for hands-on demonstrations.

Commissioners attending the event were Dr. Ray Granade, Mrs. Dorathy Boulden, Dr. Robert Sherer, Bob McCarley and Michael Lindsay. “This event provided a great opportunity for us to showcase the Commission, our holdings and our great staff,” said Dr. Ray Granade, chairman of the Commission. “Anytime we can highlight our resources to interested legislators, we are happy to do so,” stated Jane Wilkerson, interim Director of the Commission. The Commission hopes to make this an annual event during each legislative session.
This issue marks the one-year anniversary of the Arkansas History Commission News. Not only does the newsletter relay current information about events, exhibits, and collections to you, it provides a written record of the History Commission’s progress through the year. Please help us build our subscription base by spreading the word to your friends and colleagues who are interested in Arkansas history. A link to subscribe is found at the bottom of each issue.

The search for a new director for the Commission is ongoing and the Search Committee and Commissioners are hard at work interviewing applicants. Your support and understanding during this transition time are much appreciated.

Spring always means the staff is on the road presenting seminars and manning booths at various conferences and events. Check out the events calendar and look for us at historical and cultural events near you!

BRINGING THE AHC TO YOU

through March 21

“Fought in earnest” Exhibit
Dean B. Ellis Library
Arkansas State University
Jonesboro

March 25-27
Arkansas Museum Association Conference
Bentonville

through March 28

“African-American Legislators Exhibit
Arkansas Supreme Court Library
Justice Building
Little Rock

March 29
Bits and Bites
AHC Conference Room
Little Rock

April 1-22
“Fought in earnest” Exhibit
Various sites
Helena-West Helena

April 4
Presentation
Hot Springs Village DAR
Hot Springs Village

April 9
Presentation
Perry County Historical Society
Perryville

April 11-13
Presentation/Booth
Arkansas Historical Association Conference
Helena-West Helena

April 13
Presentations
Northwest Arkansas Family History Fair
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Springdale

April 16
Presentation
Garland County Historical Society
Hot Springs

April 20
Booth
Greene County Genealogical Fair
Paragould

Commissioner Spotlight

“The love of a good, polished, and interesting story as a result of a grant award” is one of the things James Lawson enjoys the most about serving on the Black History Commission of Arkansas.

A native Arkansan, Lawson works as a Grants Analyst with the Arkansas Department of Finance and Administration, and is an active volunteer in many community organizations. He enjoys working with children and youth when he is not trying to keep up with his own four children, ages 6-14.

Lawson attended Hall High School, then Henderson State University and Philander Smith College, graduating with a B.A. in Business Administration.

“James brings an exuberant spirit and passion for history that helps promote the activities of the Black History Commission of Arkansas,” stated Jane Wilkerson, interim Commission Director. “He is definitely an asset to the Commission and his community,” she continued.

Know Your Commissioners

Arkansas History Commission
Ms. Dorothy Boulden, El Dorado
Dr. Ray Granade, Arkadelphia
Dr. Ruth Hawkins, Jonesboro
Mr. Michael Lindsey, Fayetteville
Mr. Robert McCarley, Little Rock
Ms. Elizabeth Robbins, Hot Springs
Dr. Robert Sherer, Little Rock

Black History Commission of Arkansas
Mr. Marion Butler, Sherwood
Ms. Carla Coleman, Little Rock
Rev. Barry Dobson, El Dorado
Mr. James Lawson, Jacksonville
Ms. Joyce Gibson, Prescott
Dr. John W. Graves, Arkadelphia
Mr. Myron Jackson, Little Rock

From the Interim Director
AHC Staff to Present at AHA Conference

Continuing the Arkansas Historical Association’s look at the Civil War in Arkansas, the community of Helena-West Helena hosts the seventy-second Annual Conference on April 11-13. Five AHC presenters will be participating in the conference.

Anna Pfeifler will discuss the changes in women’s roles brought about by the Civil War, Jane Wilkerson explores the life of Cynthia Ward and her experiences running a plantation in her husband’s absence and Lauren Jarvis uses daily journal entries of Belle Morrison to reveal the story of ordinary Arkansans in extraordinary times. Peggy Lloyd chronicles the Civil War politics of E. W. Gantt in 1863 and Jeff Lewellen investigates the life of Levon Helm, a Delta musical legend.

Registration and full conference program information is available at the AHA’s website.

Springdale Family History Fair Features AHC Staff

Elizabeth Freeman, Brian Irby, and Amanda Paige will be featured presenters at the Northwest Arkansas Family History Conference on April 13 at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Springdale.

Freeman will speak on “Medicine in the Civil War,” Paige on “Indian Removal in Arkansas,” and how to use Arkansas Land Records to research family history will be explained by Irby. Other topics covered in the conference include diverse subjects such as using various technology sources, sites and apps to aid in your research, how to write family histories, courthouse records, and transferring old media to new sources. Over thirty-six presenters are featured in this one day conference. For more information and to register, visit the conference site here.

History Bits and Bites March 29

February’s Bits and Bites focused on the Southeast Arkansas Regional Archives holdings and programs, so the feature program for March spotlights Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives and its holdings.

Lisa Perry, Archival Manager of NEARA, will discuss the records of Lawrence County, the first county formed in Arkansas. These records comprise the bulk of NEARA’s holdings and are a significant resource. Bring your lunch and join us in the AHC Conference Room at 12 noon for this interesting program.

Register for “History Bits and Bites” here.

Registration deadline: March 27

The AHC Team

After traveling the world as a Peace Corps volunteer and working as an oil and gas lease mapmaker in seven states, Peggy Lloyd returned to her native hometown Hope, Arkansas, to immerse herself into the history of the area. Currently the Archival Manager of the Southwest Regional Archives at Washington, Arkansas, Peggy previously served as the curator for the Nevada County Depot and Museum in Prescott.

Peggy earned a B.A. in English from Southern State College, now SAU, and holds three Master’s degrees in English (Southern Illinois University), British Literature (University of London) and History (University of Arkansas). Her favorite thing about working at SARA: the endless variety of topics to research and learn from. The most frustrating issue? “We are understaffed and frequently overwhelmed by the number of our duties,” she said.

“Peggy’s diverse background and world experience brings a fresh perspective to her work and research projects at SARA,” stated interim Director Wilkerson. “She is an excellent presenter and makes history come alive for her audiences,” she continued.

In her spare time, Lloyd enjoys photography, researching the history of old roads, archeology, and travel.
News from NEARA

January 15, 1815, marks a major milestone for residents in northeast Arkansas. On that date, Missouri Territory carved out a large segment of New Madrid County to form Lawrence County, Missouri Territory. The new county covered an area that includes all or part of thirty modern-day counties in Arkansas and another sixteen in Missouri. It was bounded by the St. Francis River on the east, the Osage Line (just east of Fayetteville) on the west, the Little Red River on the south, and the southern boundary of (then) Cape Girardeau County, Missouri Territory, as shown on the accompanying image.

Lawrence County, Arkansas, is often called the Mother of Counties because of the number of counties in two states that were carved from its original area. Many communities in the region are planning commemorative events for the upcoming bicentennial celebration. Davidsonville, called Lawrence until 1817, was the first county seat. That space is now occupied by Davidsonville Historic State Park. Planning is already underway there to commemorate the creation of the county and the town.

A group of loosely organized researchers, referring to themselves as the Territorial Lawrence County Consortium, have met several times with the purpose of identifying and coordinating resources to further research on this early county. The TLCC includes people in several states who are either active researchers in this territorial period or who own or control primary source documents related to early Lawrence County. The intent of the group is to create an organized reference for what records exist and where they are located. They include local historians, scholars, consultants, and employees of various governmental agencies. For the past two years, the participants in this group have met at NEARA to discuss projects and resources available.

As a repository for these early Lawrence County records, the NorthEast Arkansas Regional Archives in Powhatan, Lawrence County’s fifth county seat, holds hundreds of county records that are important to researching early government in the county, both as part of Missouri Territory and, later, Arkansas Territory. Among these records are court cases, probate records, and early land records that, when taken together, paint a picture of life in those early days. The Missouri State Archives has also shared some of their records to help create a more complete set of early Lawrence County records.
News from SARA

The broken gravestone of Dr. S. W. Witherspoon rests quietly in the Presbyterian Cemetery in Washington, Arkansas. Behind that stone is, however, a remarkable story of American history, Arkansas history and Black history.

A physician by training, Samuel Willison Witherspoon was the son of John McBerry Witherspoon (1785-1840) and his wife Sarah Margaret Scott (1786-1831). Born in 1817 in South Carolina, he was a descendant of the Scottish Witherspoons, who left Scotland in the late 1690s and moved to Ireland. In 1734 they sailed for America, eventually settling in the vicinity of Sumter, South Carolina.

S. W. Witherspoon married Sarah E. Wilson in 1843, and had two children by 1850, three-year-old Clarendon, a son, and a two-year-old daughter named Alice. Dr. Witherspoon was also the owner of 37 slaves—males and females ranging in age from 75 to one year.

The Witherspoons and related families in South Carolina found their way to southwest Arkansas. These families embraced the practice of colonial South Carolina and later of the new American republic: the ownership of African slaves.

Sarah Wilson Witherspoon died in 1853, about the time Dr. Witherspoon and many others from South Carolina decided to move west to the booming southwest cotton frontier that included Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. They journeyed to southwest Arkansas, taking their slaves who would provide the labor for growing cotton. Witherspoon purchased land along the south bank of Plum Creek just west of Columbus, Arkansas, in Hempstead County, now it is in eastern Howard County.

Dr. Witherspoon married eighteen-year-old Josephine Cannon on March 20, 1858. Josephine was the daughter of John Sharpe Cannon, a well-to-do Tennessean and his wife Lunica Stuart. Cannon himself was a planter and slaveholder.

About the time of his marriage, Dr. Witherspoon bought two acres at the edge of the Washington town site and built a home. He was there in the 1860 census with his young wife and her younger sister Mary. His son Clarendon, then 12, was also in the household. His daughter Alice had apparently remained behind in South Carolina with her mother’s relatives.

On the eve of the Civil War, Dr. Witherspoon was well-off, owning sixty-four slaves and 880 acres of farm land in addition to two acres and a home near town. According to the tax roll, his home was well and comfortably furnished. He had a fine carriage and four fine horse as well as twelve mules for work and fifteen cattle for dairy and meat. The doctor valued his real estate at $25,000 and his personal property (that included slaves) at $60,000.

Witherspoon’s prosperity was to be short-lived. The Civil War loomed and with it economic devastation. Dr. Witherspoon died shortly after the war on December 5, 1865, at the age of forty-eight. His son Clarendon, who had probably been too young or sickly to serve in the army, followed him to the grave in 1866 at about the age of eighteen.

By 1870 Dr. Witherspoon’s 28-year-old widow was living with her parents again. J.S. Cannon had become a merchant and moved to Washington. Josephine Witherspoon soon met a young Confederate veteran who came to Washington in 1869 from Lewisville in Lafayette County to practice law. Also from a family of slaveholding planters who had moved to Arkansas from Mississippi in the 1840s, B. B. Battle would later move to Little Rock and serve as an Associate Justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court from 1885 to 1910. Battle and Josephine were married in Washington on November 29, 1871.

J.S. Cannon and his wife followed their daughter to Little Rock. John S. Cannon died at his son-in-law’s residence in 1883. Josephine lived until 1899 and was survived by her mother and husband. She had no children from either of her marriages. Her mother died in 1910 and her husband in 1917. All are buried in Mt. Holly Cemetery in Little Rock.

With the emancipation of the Witherspoon and Cannon slaves, they quickly began to appear in the marriage, census and land records. Black Witherspoons and Cannons lived around Columbus in Saline Township in the 1870s and increased in the 1880s. Many would remain in the place that they knew, working as laborers, farmers and carpenters for the time being.

Later, with the coming of the railroads and the timber industry, many would move out into the region and other states in search of better lives. The old slaveholder, however, still lies quietly at Washington. Only his tombstone is a reminder of another era nearly 150 years ago.
Collections Spotlight

With the start of WWII, Camp Joseph T. Robinson moved from its role as the headquarters of the Arkansas National Guard into serving as training centers for soldiers and medics. Camp Robinson also housed a large German prisoner of war population, with a 4,000 prisoner capacity.

Regarded nationally as a model camp, living conditions at the Camp Robinson POW facility were pleasant under the circumstances and included barrack housing, recreational activities, and creative and educational opportunities. Soccer, plays, and musical concerts were common pastimes among the prisoners. But, it was not all fun and games. Working in the camp cafeteria, grounds maintenance, and local construction projects earned each inmate eighty cents a day.

Heinz-Joachim Bartels of the German Luftwaffe was one such prisoner at Camp Robinson. The Heinz-Joachim Bartels letter collection at the AHC contains twenty-three letters written to Bartels uncle, Hans Haase, and his family from January 1944 to May 3, 1946. The letters paint a picture of daily life in the camp, along with Bartels impressions of the area. The finding aid for this collection is available on our website, www.ark-ives.com.

Errata

In the February Commissioner Spotlight, Dr. Sherer’s length of service at Tulane University should have been eighteen years, not eight.