

Submitted by: Ned Irwin, Washington County Archivist and Records Manager

## **HISTORY OF THE WASHINGTON COUNTY ARCHIVES, PART II**

“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end.  
But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

—Winston Churchill<sup>1</sup>

### A New Beginning

Part I of this history (published in volume 41, no. 2, 2012) described a long struggle to establish a county archive for Washington County, which ended in failure in the middle of the previous decade. After lying dormant for a few years, the effort was revived in 2010 and ultimately was successful. The second part of this history will describe that period of revival. It proves, if anything, that with a determined effort success can be born out of failure.

Supporters of an archive never really gave up on the idea of its' creation. In the period of 2009-2010, several important events developed in proximity that would revive the county archive movement and eventually bring about its' creation. One of these events was the election in August 2010 of a new county mayor, Dan Eldridge. His predecessor, long-time County Mayor George Jaynes had supported the idea of a county archive and had established the first committee to study the issue. He left office, however, with the dream still unrealized. Eldridge immediately on coming into office made it a priority of his administration and a personal pet project. He had examined the state of public records storage in the county, appreciated the historic value of these records, and understood the urgent need to do something to insure their long-term preservation. He also saw in the interest found in them from people from all over the country who could trace their roots back to Washington County that beyond their intrinsic value, the records had value as a tool for promoting heritage tourism in Tennessee's oldest county and town.

September 24, 2010 was an important day in the development of an archive for the county. On that day, Mayor Eldridge called a meeting of interested parties who had been promoting the archives idea for several years, including the author. Many of us left that meeting feeling that we finally had a public official who had both the enthusiasm and the clout to get the archives idea back on track from where it had derailed four or five years earlier. He broke the logjam by offering the county office building, which housed his office, for the future home of the county archives. This addressed one of the two principal obstacles that had stymied the project in the past—1) where an archive would be housed, and 2) how it would be funded. Eldridge had now provided a solution to the first problem.

As it turns out, during the hiatus in our efforts, the Tennessee General Assembly had provided the solution to the second problem, a possible funding mechanism. How to pay for the operations of an archive had always been one of the thorny questions in previous attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, Address to The Lord Mayor's Day Luncheon, Mansion House, London, England, November 10, 1942.

establish it. Often, it was this lack of a sustainable funding model that killed the effort. In 2009, the state legislature passed a law that permitted a county to establish a filing fee on public documents created in that county, which could be dedicated to funding a county archive.<sup>2</sup> The law allowed a county to establish and collect through all entities creating public records an archives and records management fee not to exceed \$5 per public record, with the exception of the county register of deeds, which already had a dedicated filing fee. One of the most important features of the law was that the archive fee could only be used for a county archive and records management program not general county government operations. Thus, the fee's effectiveness couldn't be diluted later by avaricious county officials.

The third significant event in reviving the archive effort was a tragic one, the unexpected flooding of records storage space at the Downtown Center in Johnson City where a considerable volume of the county's records was being housed. Sometime on the weekend of August 7-8, 2010, a two-inch water line ruptured in the building, leaving water at least three inches deep throughout. The problem was discovered when passersby saw water leaking from the center's front door on Sunday morning, August 8<sup>th</sup>. The faulty valve was located in a records storage room housing both active files and older records dating into the 1920s.<sup>3</sup>

It was a case where a tragedy would be turned to a public good.

#### The Public Records Commission

Mayor Eldridge also made the decision to use the existing Public Records Commission as the principal vehicle for establishing an archive. In the fall of 2010, with approval from the full county commission, he filled appointments and reenergized the records commission.<sup>4</sup> The following members were appointed according to statute law or approved by county commissioners on recommendation of the mayor: County Commissioners Dr. Sam Humphreys and Alpha Bridger, Mayor Eldridge, County Historian Judge John Kiener, Register of Deeds Ginger Jilton, County Clerk Kathy Storey, Judge Thomas Seeley, Gene Hurdt, Ned Irwin, and Dr. William Kennedy.

At its' first meeting on November 16, 2010,<sup>5</sup> Dr. Humphreys was voted by fellow records commission members to serve as chairman, and Bridger was approved as vice-chair. Humphreys appointed three committees to handle what were considered the three major aspects of archive development planning: a Facilities Committee (chaired by Dr. Kennedy), Funding Committee (chaired by Ned Irwin), and Records Committee (chaired by Judge Kiener). Between the fall of 2010 and the spring of 2012, the Public Records Commissioner met monthly as a body with

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<sup>2</sup> *Tennessee Code Annotated* 10-7-408, from Public Acts 2009, chapter 520, section 1-2 and Public Acts 2010, chapter 1101, section 1.

<sup>3</sup> "Downtown Centre sustains 'catastrophic' water leak," *Johnson City Press*, Monday, August 9, 2010, p. 1A. Eventually, the water damaged records were shipped to a records-recovery firm in Nashville, stabilized, then sent to Fort Worth, Texas, freeze-dried, and, ultimately preserved, were returned to the county ("Freezing success for county records," *Johnson City Press*, August 17, 2010, p. 1A).

<sup>4</sup> Resolution 10-10-08, Minutes, Washington County Board of Commissioners, October 25, 2010, volume 69, p. 316.

<sup>5</sup> Minutes, Washington County Public Records Commission, November 16, 2010, recorded in Minutes, Washington County Board of Commissioners, volume 70, p. 214.

committees sometimes meeting more often than that, working diligently on the myriad issues involved with starting an archive. Consulting help was also received from Dr. Wayne Moore and Jami Awalt of the Tennessee State Library & Archives, County Attorney John Rambo, various county officials, and others.

Since the County Office Building at 103 West Main Street in Jonesborough had been offered by the mayor as a site to house the future archives, the Facilities Committee focused on building needs, storage capacity, and layout issues in that building. It soon became apparent that due to the voluminous amount of county records that would someday come to the archive, more storage space would be needed than the roughly 5,000 square feet of gross space the office building provided. Several potential sites were examined, but eventually interest settled on using the old jail space at the back of the courthouse in Jonesborough housing to store overflow records for the archive. Ironically, this space had some years earlier been considered for housing the whole county archive. The committee took members of the County Commission's County-owned Property Committee on a tour of the space and won their approval (April 6, 2011) for the old jail space to be included in facility space to be dedicated for archive use. This space was renamed the Archive Annex by the records commission to reflect the role it was to play in housing overflow records.

The Funding Committee examined possible sources for funding the development and operations of an archive program. This included looking into grants and talking with grant consultants. However, it was soon understood that funds for capital project renovation/construction as well as for the on-going operations of the archive once it was up and running would of necessity require largely public funding sources. The committee wanted to avoid wherever possible seeking monies from the county's general fund for operations. It was felt the archive was more likely to receive approval from county commissioners if it were seen as being a self-funded, largely self-sufficient operation. Thus, the idea of using the archive filing fee authorized by the Tennessee General Assembly was finally adopted by the records commission as the primary means of funding an archive. In conjunction with various county office holders, the Funding Committee determined an estimate of \$244,000 might be derived on an annual basis using a \$5 fee attachment to public records created in the offices of county clerk, circuit court clerk, clerk and master, the highway department, and the zoning department. State law prohibited applying the archive fee to records created in the register of deeds office. This proposal was presented to and approved by (April 14, 2011) the County Commission's Budget Committee for eventual consideration by the full county commission.

The Records Committee worked at determining through a rough and ready survey the amount of county records that might eventually transfer to the county archive. A rough estimate of county record holdings was eventually determined by using earlier surveys I had made, along with an updating of these lists by Jeff Keeling of the mayor's office assisted by various county officeholders. The following was the estimate:

Assessor of Property: 500 square feet

Circuit Court Clerk: 3,500 square feet

Clerk & Master: 2,700 square feet

County Court Clerk: 3,000 square feet (includes 2,000 sq. ft. of probate records)

County Trustee: 3,000 square feet  
Election Commission: 300 square feet  
Register of Deeds: 2,000 square feet  
ETSU (county records transferred there for safe keeping in 1958): 750 square feet  
Total: 15,750 square feet

Of that total, it was estimated that approximately 5,000-6,000 square feet of older records having permanent historical value might eventually be housed in the county archive. It was understood that a more in-depth records inventory would have to await the appointment of a professional county archivist and records manager. It should be noted that since these figures were compiled in 2010, additional records have been discovered and created, which would likely increase the potential archival records

### Success

In the end, the Public Records Commission formalized a plan consisting of three interlocking component parts, each of which would ultimately require passage of a resolution by the County Commission. The first was a resolution to legally authorize the creation of a new county department, the Department of Records Management and Archives. The second was a resolution to adopt an archive filing fee to fund the archives. A fee of \$5 per document (the maximum allowed by state law) was proposed. It was felt that it would be easier to go for the full amount initially rather than start at a smaller amount and seek an increase at a later time. This fee would be applied to documents filed in the following offices and record types: County Clerk (marriage licenses, beer permits, notary public applications, vehicle titles, business licenses); Courts of General Sessions, Circuit, Probate, and Chancery (all public records filed for the purpose of initiating a legal proceeding), Highway Department (driveway permits), and Zoning Department (building permits, rezoning requests, variance applications, storm water permits).

To avoid a potential political backlash, it was decided not to have the filing fee applied to car tag renewals. (This was a significant sacrifice on the part of the archive, as it left potentially \$500,000 per year in revenue on the table.) The third and final resolution approved turning the county office building over to be the home of the county archives. It was, as Chairman Humphreys noted in presenting the recommendation to the full county commission, a plan like a three-legged stool. It would take all three resolutions to make the archive happen. Before that vote was taken, a considerable effort was made over a considerable period of time by a considerable number of people—both records commission members and interested Washington County citizens—to convince individual county commissioners of the need for and the importance of a county archive.

As previously noted, it was an all or nothing deal. All three resolutions would need to be approved for the county archive concept to work. The fee request was first passed by the Budget Committee of the county commission (April 14, 2011). Then in a most momentous day for Washington County, the full county commission at its April 25, 2011 quarterly meeting unanimously approved the first two resolutions: establishing the Records Management and Archive Department (Resolution No. 11-04-12) and authorizing the implementation of an

archive filing fee (Resolution No. 11-04-13).<sup>6</sup> We were getting pretty buoyant as the meeting progressed and our success progressed with it. Then we hit a snag not of our own making.

Resolution No. 11-04-14, which was to give the county archive the County Office Building at 103 W. Main Street and the old jail space (Archive Annex) was temporarily rejected. The resolution as initially written, in addition to giving the archive the designated space, also gave the old courtroom then being used as the county commission meeting chamber to the county mayor for use when county offices migrated from the county office building to the courthouse. Several county commissioners opposed the idea of moving their meetings to space in the Justice Center. The following month, with the resolution rewritten for the commission to continue to use the courthouse chamber for meetings and providing other courthouse space for the county mayor, the third portion of the archive plan was approved. Resolution No. 11-05-04 gave the county archive the 103 West Main Street building and the old jail space on the second and third floors at the rear of the courthouse proper.<sup>7</sup> The month-long glitch was overcome. Success was achieved in the long struggle to establish a county archive.

Washington County, Tennessee, the state's first county, finally had a county archive after 234 years. Or, to echo Mr. Churchill, the county was finally at the point where it could begin to have one.

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<sup>6</sup> Minutes, Washington County Board of Commissioners, April 25, 2011, volume 71, Resolution 11-04-12 (pages 118-119), Resolution 11-04-13 (page 120), Resolution 11-04-14 (pages 121-122).

<sup>7</sup> Minutes, Washington County Board of Commissioners, May 31, 2011, Resolution No. 11-05-04. These minutes are as yet (December 2012) unbound and lack pagination. They may be found chronologically in a folder in a filing cabinet in the County Clerk's office.