

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

## **FROM 2011-2017**

### **ACQUIRING AN ARCHIVIST**

During the process to create a county archives for Washington County, Public Records Commission Chairman Dr. Sam Humphreys repeatedly noted that the process was akin to building a three-legged chair. The archives would need a funding source, a building location, and be established as a new county department. In April 2011, all these things were accomplished by the County Commission. That July, monies began to be collected from the various county offices from the archive filing fee. These funds began to accumulate in a reserve fund.

The Department of Records Management and Archives though was then just a name on a piece of paper. While these funds were allowed to build for the next year, the next step in the process was to find someone to lead the department. County Mayor Dan Eldridge insisted that a national search be conducted. He asked the Public Records Commission to act as a search committee to make a recommendation to him for appointment.

This search was conducted over the fall and early winter of 2011-2012. More than 50 applications were received. The records commission narrowed the candidates down to three finalists, whom they brought in for lengthy interviews. One was an archivist at Tusculum College, one an archivist at the George W. Bush Presidential Library in Texas, and one was the university archivist at East Tennessee State University (the author). The commission recommended the author to Mayor Eldridge. After an in-depth interview, the mayor recommended my appointment as the first county archivist and records manager for the approval of the County Commission. At its' February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012 meeting, the commission approved the appointment. Washington County had its founding county archivist.

I came to the position with over 25 years professional experience in the archival field. I had worked for the previous 18 years as archivist at ETSU. Prior to that, I had been special collections librarian and archivist at the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Library. I worked my last day at the Archives of Appalachia on Thursday, March 29<sup>th</sup>. I began my new job in Jonesborough on Friday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012.



County Archivist Ned Irwin with shelving set to go into the Archive Annex for records storage, 2012.

## BUILDING AN ARCHIVAL PROGRAM

In 2012, 103 West Main Street in Jonesborough was the County Office Building. It housed such offices as the county mayor, bookkeeping, and purchasing. Before it had been an office building, it had been a bank. The building was old (built in 1915) but firmly constructed. I was given the office in the front corner, to the left as you came in the front door. In another era, a barbershop had operated in the space.

Besides setting up my office, I focused on three major things that first year: 1) building relationships, 2) records management, and 3) building enhancement.

I also had to learn the intricacies of county government, which I soon found operated very differently than the academic environment in which I had been working. Some things were simpler than others. How do you order supplies and equipment? How were budgets made? How were finances handled? How do you absorb so many new names and faces? More complex was learning many new personalities and managing a variety of new egos. I soon learned the county archivist needed many skills— manager, planner, designer, and even a politician because in entering county government, I had entered a political environment that really did not exist at the level I had worked in higher education.

Building relationships with county commissioners, county officials and department heads, fellow employees, local organizations, and the general public allowed me to secure necessary support and assistance for what needed to be done. It might be working with an architect on design plans or working with inmate work crews moving county records. It might be

answering questions at a commission or committee meeting or speaking to a civic club. It also helped with networking. I found people who could help and who had an interest in what the archives could do for the county. In every area, something was learned that proved useful.

The development of an archive volunteer program was one significant relationship that started in April 2012. An orientation meeting was held at the Jonesborough library. Volunteers became important for the archive and remain so today. These individuals provide valuable skills and free labor for a department that had only one employee, me. Connected with the volunteer program, and often intertwined with it, was the support of the Friends of the Archives (FOA) organization that developed simultaneously with the archive program. In many cases, members of the Friends group became volunteers in the archive. The FOA assisted with fund-raising, provided supplemental financial support, promoted the archive program in the community, and provided volunteers to work in the department.

In the early years, I spoke to many community organizations and gained support for the archive program. Often, people, in turn, would express their support to their county commissioners and state legislators. This proved useful whenever I went to commissioners about the department. I also wrote a monthly column about the archive published in the Jonesborough *Herald & Tribune*, which documented the on-going development of the archive; wrote articles on the history of the county archive creation published in the *Bulletin* of the Watauga Association of Genealogists; and distributed press releases. These public relations efforts promoted public awareness of the department and increased support.



Volunteers Betty Jane Hylton and Donna Briggs work in County Clerk's basement.

Of necessity, it was important to learn what types of records were to be found in various county offices, the extent of such records, where records were housed, and which of these records had the historical significance and permanent value for eventual transfer to the county

archive facilities when these became available. To answer these questions, a records inventory was completed in the following offices: Circuit Court Clerk, Clerk and Master, County Clerk, County Mayor, County Trustee, Juvenile Services, and Register of Deeds. These inventories could not have been successfully completed without the cooperation and advice of the office holders having custody of the records, their employees, and several archive volunteers who assisted the county archivist in the process. My earliest volunteer helpers were Betty Jane Hylton and Donna Cox Briggs. Betty Jane continues to volunteer. Donna eventually became a valued archive employee. We surveyed records from the basement to the attic rafters of the Jonesborough courthouse, as well as throughout the various county offices there and at the Justice Center.

When I began the job, four large tractor trailers stood in a parking lot below the jail beside Jackson Boulevard. These were filled with county records that had until January 2011 been housed in the Downtown Center in Johnson City, where satellite county offices and records storage space had been. My first priority was getting the old jail space at the rear of the courthouse in Jonesborough renovated to house the records stored in these trailers as quickly as possible. A closed steel trailer is not the best environment for records.



Trailer housing county records, 2012.

That first year Elkin-Rowe removed over 50,000 pounds of metal from the old jail space. This included the steel of jail cells and beds from two floors. At a meeting of the Public Records Commission, we decided to call the former jail the “Archive Annex.” This was to distinguish it from the eventual archive building we would get later.

Old jail space renovation work was completed in the following stages: 1) demolition work by Elkin-Rowe Company; 2) design layout and structural engineering studies done by the architectural firm of Beeson, Lusk & Street; 3) cleaning and painting of record vaults; 4) purchase and installation of archival storage shelving from Tricor (a \$5,000 Tennessee State Library & Archive grant funded part of this cost); and 5) reinforcement of the main floor support beam and joists by Hoilman Construction Company and Berry Construction Company to increase load-bearing capacity for housing records.

When the demolition work (phase 1) was completed, I spent the summer and fall of 2012 painting (phase 3) the walls and ceilings of the space where all the jail cells had been. There was no air conditioning, so I kept a fan going to circulate the hot summer air. I estimated I painted about 6,000 square feet of metal and concrete surfaces. My first two volunteers were my parents, Ned C. and Mary Alice Irwin. They helped me lay out chalk lines for setting the shelving before it was delivered.

The renovated archive space had nearly 300 units of metal archival storage shelving installed by Tricor of Nashville in August and September 2012. Over 4,000 linear feet of county records taken from those tractor trailers were placed on these shelves. County inmate work crews assisted the county archivist and Circuit Court Clerk Karen Guinn and her staff in the shifting of records. Ironically, the shelving used in the old jail space was built by state prisoners and installed in a former jail that housed prisoners. Several archive volunteers also helped in the shelving and arrangement of records.

Throughout all of this renovation work, I continued to provide reference service via telephone, mail, email, and in-person. A rudimentary website was developed, which helped as well, though this was later totally redone and enhanced.

### CREATING AN ARCHIVE HOME

It had been hoped in my second year in the job that the county office building at 103 West Main Street in Jonesborough would be renovated for the county archive in 2013-2014. For a variety of reasons beyond the control of the department, this did not happen. Part of this involved an on-going conflict between Mayor Eldridge and a small group of county commissioners opposing his efforts on nearly every front, including where various county offices would relocate in the courthouse. The archives department was sometimes caught in the middle of this conflict. Progress towards that renovation, however, was made.

At its August 5, 2013 meeting, the County Commission approved a county bond issue, which included \$530,000 in bond monies for renovating the county office building to house the county archive. Funds were for both construction and post-construction costs. The department would pay off these bonds over the next 12 years with money from the archive filing fee, not tax dollars. In July 2013, J. E. Green Construction Company of Johnson City was the low bidder on the project but was over budget by about \$80,000. Working with architect Tony Street of Besson, Lusk & Street, the cost was reduced to a workable \$400,796. It was a figure I would have stamped in my brain for the next three years. The construction contract was signed on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013. The architectural design for the building layout was based on drawings I did, and which were then adapted by the architect.

Though the contract was signed in November 2013, actual construction work was delayed for about a year-and-a half. Primarily this was due to the fact that before work could begin on renovating the archive building, all the county offices then housed there had to be moved into renovated space on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the courthouse two doors away. There were a lot of delays on this happening. Again, part of the problem was disputes between the mayor and the gang of opposing county commissioners that had previously delayed progress. For a time, there

was a movement to have the courthouse's 2<sup>nd</sup> floor vacated main courtroom renovated for use as a monthly meeting space for the County Commission. This would have prevented any move of offices from 103 West Main into the courthouse as Mayor Eldridge envisioned. There was even one proposal to have the archive housed in the old Circuit Court Clerk's space on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor along with the Archive Annex space. Fortunately, this idea was soon dropped.

When Judge Thomas Seeley solved the issue by kindly offering his Courtroom Number 7 at the Justice Center for commission meetings, plans could proceed to renovate the courthouse 2<sup>nd</sup> floor for county offices for the mayor, bookkeeping, purchasing, and human resources. However, other things sprang up in the following months to delay the final renovation of the space. An attempt to save costs and use a prisoner work crew to do much of the construction ended up not working. So, there was a further delay in bidding for a professional contractor to do the work. Finally, though work was completed in stages. This allowed offices to begin moving from 103 West Main in December 2014. Office moves were staggered as work was completed until all had moved out by the spring of 2015.

One ultimate benefit of the moving of the County Commission meetings to the Justice Center was that they no longer needed the old second floor courtroom space. This also meant that a long conference table and a chandelier that had already been purchased for that space was not going to be used. I asked Mayor Eldridge if we could use the table and hang the chandelier in the archives building. He agreed. Both features do a lot to enhance the look of the Reading Room space today.

On April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, I became the last to move to the courthouse. I moved into a temporary office on the courthouse's 2<sup>nd</sup> floor across from Mayor Eldridge's office. Here I would work for almost exactly one year. I moved back into the building on Wednesday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016. When I left, it was the county office building. When I returned, it was the county archive building.

Quite a bit changed about the building between those two dates. Demolition work opened up a building previously housing county offices and made it capable of housing the county's historic records. Asbestos was safely removed; a new electrical system was run; a new heat and air system was installed; new dropped ceilings were hung and new lighting installed; an air handling unit was placed on the roof to cycle fresh air into the building; a natural gas meter and gas line was connected to provide heat for warming that fresh air during the cold winter months; a chandelier was hung; a new storefront style front entrance replaced the old double doors; a smoke and fire alarm system was put in place; a security system with monitoring cameras was installed; a new handicapped-accessible public restroom was constructed; an emergency fire exit from the building into the alleyway was built; new carpet flooring was laid down; new paint was applied; a new communication system was connected; and a wireless system was installed to permit public internet access.



Washington County Archives building

How long did the project take? Mike Smith, J. E. Green Construction Company's job superintendent, came on the job site on May 13, 2015. He left for the last time on January 15, 2016. A certificate of substantial completion of the construction phase was issued on February 24, 2016. So, by late winter, excepting some items on the punch list, the work was done. Additional adjustments with the HVAC system, as well as the pre-existing chilling system for the building were completed about the end of the fiscal year just prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

From March 31-April 2, 2016, a five-man crew from Flood Brothers, Inc., of La Vergne, Tenn., installed 100 double-faced units and 43 single-faced units of archival standard metal shelving to house the historic records of Washington County in the building. The shelving was manufactured by Tensco Corp./Estey, a Tennessee company based in Dickson. The total cost of the shelving and installation was \$75,996.22. While this may seem expensive, this shelving was a one-time purchase that provided for all building storage needs in the future. The first records went on these shelves in early July 2016.

The following costs were involved in the renovation project: Beeson, Lusk & Street of Johnson City, Tenn., architect, \$37,000; J. E. Green Construction Company of Johnson City, Tenn., general contractor, \$477,037; Fleenor Security Systems of Johnson City, Tenn., \$6,296.57; BCTI of Gray, Tenn., \$11,052.70; Tensco Corp./Estey of Dickson, Tenn., \$75,996.22; PBI Commercial Interiors of Asheville, N. C., \$5,521.13. The original estimate of the project was \$437,000 for the construction phase and approximately another \$100,000 to

cover furnishings, security systems, etc. A bond issue of \$530,000 was let to cover this cost. There was approximately a three-year delay from the time of the original estimates until actual construction work began causing an increase in the overall cost of the project of \$84,622.62. The total cost for construction and furnishings was **\$612,903.62**. The final construction phase cost of \$477,037 was \$6,995 under the final amended budget.

Sub-contractors and vendors not mentioned above that were involved in the project included the following: AMP Electric; Barnard Roofing Company, Inc. of Gray, Tenn.; Albert F. G. Bedinger Consulting Engineers, P. C., of Knoxville, Tenn.; Creative Masonry of Greeneville, Tenn.; E. S. Dockery, Inc. of Gray, Tenn.; Gardner Paint Service, Inc. of Johnson City, Tenn.; E. Luke Green Company, Inc. of Johnson City, Tenn.; General Shale of Johnson City, Tenn.; HST Interior Elements of Nashville, Tenn.; Pierce Metals of Bristol, Tenn.; Precision Electrical Company, Inc. of Kingsport, Tenn.; Simplex-Grinnell of Gray, Tenn.; Trimble Company, Inc. of Johnson City, Tenn.; S. B. White Company, Inc. of Johnson City, Tenn.; Vreeland Engineers, Inc. of Knoxville, Tenn.; and Whitt Company, Inc. of Johnson City, Tenn.

With the major building renovations completed by late spring of 2016, other improvements could proceed. Furniture and equipment were purchased for the Reading Room and offices. Equipment and furniture for the Reading Room (\$4,224.69 total cost) included a reference desk, a desk for the Register of Deeds computer, a computer for public use, and Penco security lockers. Also, a large screen television monitor for displaying digital images of historic photographs, news and information, and conducting PowerPoint presentation was purchased with funds from the private donation of Elaine Cantrell. Office equipment and furniture (\$4,177.20 total cost) included a desk, bookcases, archive assistant computer, and a multifunction photocopier for office use. Other equipment and supplies purchased (\$8,419.35 total cost) included a 5-drawer map cabinet, book cart, and archival supplies.

S. B. White Company did repair work on the existing HVAC chilling system (not part of the original renovation project) in both the spring-summer of 2016 (\$6,107) and spring-summer 2017 (\$3,700). Adjustments on the new air system were done at various times during the year, but this work was done at no cost to the archive.

## MOVING IN

With the completion of the archive building renovation in the spring of 2016, county records could finally be moved into the building. On the morning of Tuesday, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the first records moved in from the County Clerk's office. The first volume moved was the copy of the Watauga Purchase book of 1775 (later to be known as Deed Book A). The original of the volume was then still being held at the Tennessee State Library and Archives in Nashville. It would come home in 2021. Over the course of the next several months, more than 2,500 linear feet of records were put on shelves. If stretched out, the records would equal the length of over eight football fields!

Many important early records that had left the courthouse in Jonesborough over the years came home. In early August 2016, a large collection of county records that had been moved to



East Tennessee State University for safe-keeping in 1958 were returned. This consisted of over 800 linear feet of records, including 468 boxes and 1,042 volumes, covering a time span from 1779 to 1955. And most significantly, some of the county's oldest records dating from the county's founding in the 1770s were returned from Nashville by the Tennessee State Library and Archives just in time for the dedication of the Washington County Archives building. Those records, which included the earliest original minutes of the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, had been removed to Nashville for safe-keeping in 1886.



County Archivist Ned Irwin and Kelly Wilkerson of the Tennessee State Library and Archives carry early county records into the archive building, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

Once we had records in the building, we had to get them organized, so that researchers could use them. Help, in the form of volunteers and staffing, was needed for shelving and organizing the county documents. An early effort in 2012 to encourage volunteer help for the archives had led to a few people contributing time on a regular basis, including Betty Jane Hylton, Donna Cox Briggs, Margaret Houglund, and Shirley Hinds. Much of that early work had involved helping with inventorying county records in various offices in 2012-2013. Chad Bailey had worked to develop a basic website for the department. Now in 2016, with a building to use, there was a need for even more help. On July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Donna became the department's second staff member as Archive Assistant, working part-time. A year later, she became a full-time employee. Other individuals who began volunteering in 2016-2017 included Georgia Greer (who had worked with me at the Archives of Appalachia at ETSU), Janette Guinn, Kyle Johnson, Lisa Shockley, Jewell Susong, and Nancy Trivett.

Much time during the year was spent by archive staff and volunteers arranging the records by office on some of the 1,701 shelves in the building. Record collections organized included those of the following offices:

Circuit Court Clerk [Record Group 3], 1808-2009 = 882 linear feet (390 boxes and 458 volumes)  
Clerk and Master (Chancery Court) (Record Group 4), 1777-2006 = 818 linear feet (440 boxes  
and 434 volumes)  
County Clerk [Record Group 5], 1771-2005 = 559 linear feet (175 boxes and 707 volumes)  
Superior Court of Law and Equity [Record Group 18], 1784-1835 = 11 linear feet (13 boxes and  
17 volumes)  
Washington County Photograph Collection [Record Group 21], 1886-1912 and undated = 3  
linear feet (1 box and 5 oversized folders)

Following the inventorying and organizing of records, detailed written guides were created by archive staff to help both staff, volunteers, and researchers access the vast holdings of the department. Once the guides were completed, digital versions were created and uploaded to the departmental website where they are viewable by researchers all over the world via the Internet.

Early tax lists found in the County Clerk's office were processed during the year and later scanned and posted on the website. Processing of loose wills formerly stored in the basement of the courthouse began, as did a second project of typing box and folder lists of old Chancery Court case files (1831-1913 and undated).

## OPENING THE DOOR

A year of hard work preceded the opening of the archives to the public. As well as opening the physical door to patrons, a redesigned website opened our door to the world.

The Washington County Archives building was officially dedicated in ceremonies held across the street at the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough on Saturday, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. Over 100 people attended the event. Tours of the building were conducted for the public. I felt fortunate that Mildred Kozsuch, former County Historian and one of the county archives' earliest and most forceful proponents, was able to attend the event. She passed away two months later. The Reading Room is now named for her.

We officially opened our door to researchers on Monday, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Our first researchers were three Korean doctors researching the life of Dr. John Heron, who practiced medicine in Jonesboro in the 1880s and then went with his wife to Korea as a medical missionary. There he founded the first medical school in the country, which has produced thousands of physicians since that time. These three doctors were the first of thousands of researchers that have visited the Reading Room since.



Cake baked by Mike Ford for the dedication.

During the spring and summer of 2017, a departmental website was planned, designed, and created, replacing an earlier version. Donna Briggs, archive assistant, took the lead role in building the website. The Friends of the Washington County Archives pay the annual fee for having the site hosted on WordPress. The website URL is: <https://wctnarchives.org/>.

The website provides general information about the department, detailed digital guides to processed collections, links to other useful sites for researchers, news and events about the Archives, a photo gallery of historic and current images about the county, the archives and archive personnel, information for those planning a visit to the archives, digital versions of historic county documents, and much other useful information. The website is seen as an evolving document that will constantly be revised and improved.

Website visitation increased the public presence of the archive tremendously. Since the website went live on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017 to June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 1,256 individuals visited the archive webpage. This included visitors from 11 different countries, including the United States, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, France, Ireland, Israel, Japan, and Luxembourg.

At the time of the original building renovation, monies were not available to install a fire suppression system. Saving our money, we were able to remedy this problem with the installation of an Inergen clean agent fire suppression system by Simplex-Grinnell during June-July 2017. The Cherokee Nation uses the same system to protect their tribal records in their archive in Cherokee, North Carolina. The total cost was \$109,538.46. The oldest, most valuable public records in Tennessee were now protected by a state-of-the-art security and safety system.

In the six-year period from April 2011 when the department was legally established through 2017, a lot had happened in bringing the long-held dream of a county archives into being.

-- By Ned Irwin, Washington County Archivist and Records Manager, April 2024

Copyright © 2024 by Ned Irwin. All rights reserved.

###