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19th-century papers shed light on early Natchez history



A collection of 19th-century papers, recently donated to the J.D. Williams Library's Archives and Special Collections, provides insight into the unique history of the Natchez area.

"I think what is so significant about this collection is the size and early nature of the Mississippi materials," said Jennifer Ford, director of Archives and Special Collections. "The earliest materials start in 1821 and go through 1900 and represent the importance of the Natchez region to the state."

Leighton Lewis, who donated the collection, is an alumnus of the university and son of the late Arthur B. Lewis, dean of the College of Liberal Arts in the 1960s. The papers are a collection of letters, receipts and business records from Lewis' great-great-great grandfather and namesake, George Leighton.

Leighton was initially from Gloucester, Cape Ann, Mass. In 1820, he moved to the Natchez area. He lived in Red Lick near Lorman and east of Rodney.

"George Leighton was a pack rat," Lewis said. "He saved just about everything. The papers begin with him building gins and mills, and he has descriptions of the things that he buys to build them. He also built a Presbyterian meeting house, and he has the particulars for building that house in the papers. After that, he started keeping papers about farming – merchant receipts, receipts for cotton and some letters."

In Leighton's time, Rodney was the business hub of the Natchez area. Numerous transactions between Leighton and merchants in Rodney are outlined in the papers.

"Leighton would buy normal needs from them but also bulk supplies such as barrels of sugar, salt, flour, coffee, meat, etc., which the Rodney merchant would order from New Orleans," Lewis said. "After all, he was feeding not only his family but 30 or so slaves and their families. Of course all of this was done 'on account,' both for Leighton and, I am sure, the Rodney merchants."

During this time, business transactions were conducted without money, which was fascinating to Lewis.

"When cotton was shipped, it was through one of the Rodney merchants," he said. "The cotton broker in New Orleans would notify Leighton directly of its value. Somehow this 'credit' was passed on to the Rodney merchant who would credit Leighton's account. It amazes me how they carried on commerce with no official currency, most of it being issued by local banks."

The papers are in very good condition, considering they survived the Civil War, Lewis said.

Ford said she is excited about the collection being at the university.

"I think these papers are so important because they outline the history of the state in its early years – the antebellum years," she said.

Lewis said he knew that the papers should be donated to Archives and Special Collections.

"I felt like they needed to be preserved somewhere, in a place where they could be of use to someone," he said. "I wanted them to be at Ole Miss because I love Ole Miss."

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