

**EXPLORING THE COAST:
USE OF RECORDS AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES-
SOUTHEAST REGION FOR RESEARCHING COASTAL GEORGIA**

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The National Archives-Southeast Region is one of eleven regional archives in the Field Archives system of the National Archives. It does in the field all the things the National Archives does in Washington; including appraisal of records, accessioning such documents of permanent value into the National Archives, arranging, describing, and preserving these materials, and making them available for research. We currently hold about 45,000 feet of textual records created by Federal executive agencies and courts in the eight southeastern states east of the Mississippi River and south of the Ohio River.

The field archives also serve as repositories for a substantial portion of the National Archives microfilm collection. The Southeast Region archive has about 45,000 rolls of microfilm out of approximately 300,000 rolls in the total National Archives collection. This film can be used for regional, national, and even international research. The largest single collection of film, the Federal Population Census Schedules, is used primarily by genealogists and local history enthusiasts. Much of this microfilm, however, such as State Department dispatches and central office correspondence of original cabinet offices, are of interest to a broader spectrum of academic researchers. The goal of the microfilm deposit program is to get records for both amateur and professional historical research out of Washington to make them more accessible to the researching public.

Records relating to coastal Georgia can be found in both the paper and the microfilm records. This paper is an effort to present a brief overview concerning the many types of documents that might be relevant to researching the coast. Additionally, it will discuss briefly those records which have a heavier concentration of material relating to the coastal area. Such an approach is purely illustrative. It in no way means to imply that only the records mentioned can be used in such research. Nor is it intended to imply that these materials can be used only in the ways mentioned.

Most of the records considered just happen to be relevant to the Georgia coastal area. That is, they were created by Federal agencies throughout the country, some of which are on or near the Peach State's coast. For example, there are United States district courts throughout the country, including one at Savannah. Further it is at times difficult to identify material relating to the coast. Many of the regional offices of the Federal agencies that are in Atlanta might have records relevant to a specific topic. To find this material, one needs

to use the traditional methods of archival research which simply involves identifying the issue or event involved, determining what agency of the Federal government might have become involved, learning where the records of that agency might be, and then asking if those records have anything to say about the topic under consideration. Generally, the more specific the request the better. It frequently takes several hours to pull together the information about the records relating to coastal Georgia research. Few archival collections are arranged so as to allow quick answers to "tell me everything you have about" questions. It is always a good idea to write or call the archives before a trip to the facility. One can save time this way and might save an entire trip.

Many of the records at the National Archives-Southeast Region cluster around certain events or, if you will, certain time periods such as the American Revolution, the Civil War and Reconstruction, World War I, the Depression, and World War II. There are a few, such as the census, that cover a longer period for Georgia (1820-1910). One can use the census records to get fairly good time sequence data for almost a 100 year period. The researcher can also utilize many other records to obtain "snapshots" taken during different periods. Federal Court records document crises in the lives of individuals, only some of which overlap with the larger social dislocations reflected by our other materials. For example, people have gone bankrupt and sued each other throughout our history. They may well have done so in greater numbers during periods of crisis. Thus, these records are important for documenting such crises periods as well as the entire period between 1790 and 1860. The records of the Federal Courts will be mentioned from time to time throughout this presentation.

As part of the present government, our records begin, for the most part, with the events leading up to the formation of the Federal government of the United States of America. The major exception to this is a series of colonial court documents from Charleston, South Carolina. These Vice Admiralty Court records deal with such matters as the enforcement of unpopular colonial laws and the suppression of piracy. The infamous Stede Bonnet was sentenced to be hanged by this court. While not specifically relating to Georgia, this material might be of relevance to pre-1733 coastal Georgia.

Logically, the first major collection of records to consider is the Papers of the Continental Congress. A comprehensive index of all persons, important places, and subjects mentioned in these materials was prepared by the National Archives in celebration of the Bicentennial of the United States Revolution. The geographic index includes letters written from or about the places mentioned in the comprehensive index. The geographic index has 32 entries for the Savannah River, 280 for Savannah, 36 for the St. Mary's River, eight for St. Mary's, and 12 for Chatham County. Much of this correspondence includes petitions from the Georgia legislature to the Continental Congress about conditions in the state.

The National Archives--Southeastern Region also has the Compiled Service Records of Revolutionary War Soldiers and Sailors and Applications for Pensions and Bounty Land Warrants based on Revolutionary War Service. Although people tended to more around a lot at this time, one could use the Continental Congress Papers and the Revolutionary War records to investigate the role played by Georgia and Georgians in the Revolutionary period. It perhaps goes without saying that Georgia during this period was coastal Georgia.

Obviously the Civil War had a tremendous impact on the whole South, including Coastal Georgia. Federal records illuminate many aspects of the upheaval resulting from the conflict and Reconstruction period which followed it. While the records of the Confederate government in the National Archives are, for the most part, in Washington, we do have some documents created by the Confederate courts in Georgia. These judicial entities usually meet in the same facilities which the United States courts had utilized until war-time contingencies forced some to seek safer habitats. Many also used the same forms that the Federal Courts had employed by substituting the word Confederate for the words United States. Some cases were even continued from the Federal to the Confederate Courts. Most of these probably were carried over from term to term throughout the Confederate period with no action being taken. One interesting such case in which action was taken involved David S. Martin, accused of stealing the yacht *Wanderer*, which was already notorious as a slave trader. Martin was originally indicted in the United States Circuit Court. He was not apprehended and tried, however, until the Federal Courts were suspended in Georgia. Nevertheless, the indictment brought in the Confederate Courts read *United States of America versus Davis Martin*. This is quite an interesting episode which involved the *Wanderer*, Jekyll Island, slave trading, Charles A. L. Lamar, and the continuity of the judicial system which sometimes transcended the divisions imposed by the Civil War.

The majority of the business considered by the Confederate Courts consisted of garnishment and sequestration cases. In these the Confederate government sued to have debts owed to "alien enemies," citizens of the United States, payable to the Confederacy, or to take custody of property in the South owned by "alien enemies." Confederate Courts met in both the Southern and Northern Districts of Georgia. The court for the Southern District met in Savannah from 1861 until December, 1864, when it moved to Augusta. Its records consist primarily of garnishment and sequestration files, but do include other materials such as files relating to admiralty and criminal cases.

One interesting sequestration case from Savannah involved the estate of John Butler on Butler's Island. The Confederate government claimed the estate was owned by Butler's widow, a citizen of Pennsylvania. Among the documents relating to the case was a list of 502 Negroes who were on the estate in

November, 1861, together with the deaths and births that had occurred since that time. This material is valuable because, for example, it points out that some of the common causes of death among the slaves were whooping cough, dropsy, fever, and debility. The documents also noted that there had been an outbreak of measles on the estate involving 225 people.

There are a number of documents dealing with the immediate post-war period. Among these are the records of the Federal Courts, the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands, (Freedmen's Bureau), the Southern Claims Commission, and letters received by the Department of Justice from Georgia. The Freedmen's Bureau was established to aid the newly freed slaves, help in their education, and care for destitute refugees and freedmen. Originally General William T. Sherman had ordered that the coastal islands be reserved for blacks. This command was soon amended, however, to allow whites who had lived on the islands quietly during the war, and who had taken the oath of loyalty to the Union, to continue to live on their land.

The Southern Claims Commission was established to compensate southern unionists who had their property sequestered during the war for use by the Union military. Southerners who had not been unionists may have thought they had the right to try and get compensation for at least part of the losses they suffered at the hands of the Yankees. One could investigate this topic by examining the number of such claims filed and approved in the coastal area. Another possible step would be to compare this information with another coastal area or an inland location. The National Archives-Southeastern Region depository has the records created by the commissioners in carrying out their investigations, but not the actual case files.

The letters received by the Department of Justice from Georgia between 1871 and 1884 deal with such subjects as reconstruction conflicts, civil rights, and internal revenue and customs matters. The last of these probably would relate primarily to the coast while the first two would cover the whole state. Separate judges and other court officials were first appointed for the Northern and Southern judicial districts of Georgia in 1882. It is quite likely that the correspondence dealing with this development would reveal a great deal about the political factors involved in the creation of these separate judicial districts. It also should tell much about the Reconstruction era in the state.

Federal Courts resumed activity in Georgia shortly after the Civil War. Much of their activity probably was not directly related to the War, but a good deal of it was tangentially connected with the conflict. A Federal bankruptcy act, for example, was enacted in 1867. And a good proportion of the bankruptcy filings resulted from losses suffered during the War. The National Archives-Southern Regional Field Depository is in the process of indexing the 1867 Bankruptcy case files for a number of courts, including Savannah.

Between 1867 and 1878 when the law was repealed, over 1600 bankruptcy cases were filed in Savannah. There were approximately 900 cases filed in Wilmington, North Carolina, and 700 in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. As more cities are indexed, it will be possible to make similar comparisons with them. Because each person filing for bankruptcy was required to list his assets and creditors, researchers could use these files to examine trade patterns. For example, one could compare Savannah with some other city or examine changing patterns within Savannah itself over the life of the Bankruptcy act. Relative to this last point, it is clear that cases filed between 1867 and 1868 tended to result from pre-war debts while those in the 1870s resulted mostly from post-war debts.

An unknown proportion of the civil suits might be attributed to war-related debts or losses. Similarly, some criminal activities might be attributed to losses resulting from the war. There were a number of cases resulting from the new status of blacks after the war, as throughout the South there were efforts to interfere with the voting rights of these new citizens. The records of the Federal Court meeting in Savannah would reflect these conditions just as they would for every period from 1790 to 1960.

Probably the most important records from World War I are the draft cards created by the Selective Service System. Approximately 24 million men registered for the draft in 1917 or 1918. The records for the entire country are available in Atlanta. They are arranged by state, country, and thereunder alphabetically by the name of the registrants. This material includes such information as name, address, age, occupation, place of birth, next of kin, and race and citizenship of the registrant. This information has been used to study the operation of the Selective Service System as well as housing, occupational, and mobility patterns in addition to a number of other socio-economic, status-related topics.

The tremendous impact of World War II on American society is clearly reflected in the National Archives' records. There were governmental agencies to regulate employment in defense industries (the War Manpower Commission), insure that employees were not discriminated against on the basis of race or religion (the Fair Employment Practices Commission), and guarantee that people working in war industries had adequate housing (the Office of Housing Expeditor). The records of the above mentioned agencies relating to defense industries located in the Georgia coastal area would contain useful information. At the end of the war, the government owned a great deal of property in the form of various military bases and war industries which it no longer needed. The War Assets Administration was established to dispose of this property. Some years ago, former residents of what is now the Harris Neck Wildlife refuge complained that they were promised certain things when their property

was commandeered during the war. They further complained that these promises were not kept when the property was disposed of after the war. The National Archives-Southeastern Region Archives hold both the United States District Court case by which the government took custody of the land and the War Assets file for the disposal of the property.

One group of records not mentioned yet are those of the Savannah District Office of the Corps of Engineers. These materials have been the target of an ongoing search for years. Unfortunately very little has been found. Army records centers were located previously in both St. Louis, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas. The records of the Savannah District Office of the Corps of Engineers may have been sent to one of these locations, the Atlanta Federal Records Center without being properly identified, or they may still be in Savannah.

Federal Court records have been mentioned a number of times. The Atlanta Archives has the Federal records from Savannah from 1790 through 1960. They include *Chisholm v. Georgia*, a number of suits involving Eli Whitney and his cotton gin patent, and cases relating to Blackbeard's Island. Furthermore, there are a number of cases involving the illegal importation of slaves into Georgia, title to thousands of acres of Dodge Lumber Company land holdings in Dodge County and surrounding areas, bankruptcy proceedings that Louis Schmier has used so profitably in his study of Jewish merchants in the Valdosta area, and civil litigation files that Tom Armstrong has utilized in his studies of living and working conditions among turpentine farmers in south Georgia.

These examples are intended to present some ideas concerning how records at the Atlanta Archives have been used. In some instances, the researcher can examine one or two large case files to study one particular individual, family, or business. In other situations, they can review a number of cases to gather aggregate data where no one particular litigation is more important than any of the others. The Federal Court records probably reveal more about United States society than any other records in the Archives. The potential for academic research in these and other records at the National Archives-Southeast Region is limited only by the imagination of the individual scholar. The staff does what it can to make potential researchers aware of the depository's holdings. All are invited to come to the National Archives-Atlanta Branch. The employees will do what they can to make research visits as profitable as possible.