Whitewater: an archival angle

Kim Allen Scott

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BY KIM ALLEN SCOTT

A century-old precedent for the charges aimed at the Clintons can be found in an Arkansas archive.

As an archivist and special collections librarian I am sometimes asked, "What is the use of all that old stuff? Isn't it just kept for genealogists and stuffy guys in tweed jackets?" I usually answer with some defensive prattle about such material being the "memory of mankind" and try to appeal to the questioner's sense of patriotism; but lately I've been thinking that a good case for relevance can be based on contemporary events. If I can show that the material I care for is the same grist for the mill as that used by Geraldo and Limbaugh, perhaps I can convince those skeptical taxpayers that an archive is an exciting (not to mention necessary) function of a free society.

While I'm sure plentiful examples exist at institutions all over the United States, I found a nice addition to my argumentation arsenal at the University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections Division. On deposit there is a copy of an interesting nineteenth-century reminiscence that helps explain President Clinton's recent agonies over the Whitewater affair.

As anyone who has read a newspaper in the last year knows, one of the main features of the Whitewater controversy is the destruction of pertinent documents by the prestigious Rose Law Firm of Little Rock, Ark. Hillary Rodham Clinton worked for the Rose partnership at the time of the shredding, and the missing records have been suspected by some investigators to hold the key to the entire case. But as much as they would like to directly link Mrs. Clinton with the shredding machine, modern sleuths need to be aware that the destruction of the Clinton documents by employees of the Rose Law Firm is certainly not the first instance of important papers lost while in their custody: The firm's founder, Uriah M. Rose himself, started the tradition of manuscript mangling during the Civil War while fulfilling a lucrative contract for the state of Arkansas, and a lengthy copy of his recollections is available to anyone willing to look at the "old stuff" that an archive maintains.

According to his memoirs Uriah M. Rose traveled to Arkansas in 1853 after studying law at a prestigious out-of-state institution, just as Hillary Rodham would do, more than a century later. Rose eventually settled in Little Rock, where he assumed the position of Pulaski County chancery judge in 1860; but the Civil War soon interrupted the lawyer's continued climb to prosperity. When the federal army advanced on Little Rock in September 1863, Rose, along with the entire Confederate state government, fled to Washington, Ark., near the state's southwest corner. Business in the courts became understandably slow afterwards, prompting Uriah to look for some other way both to serve the Southern cause and to earn a living.

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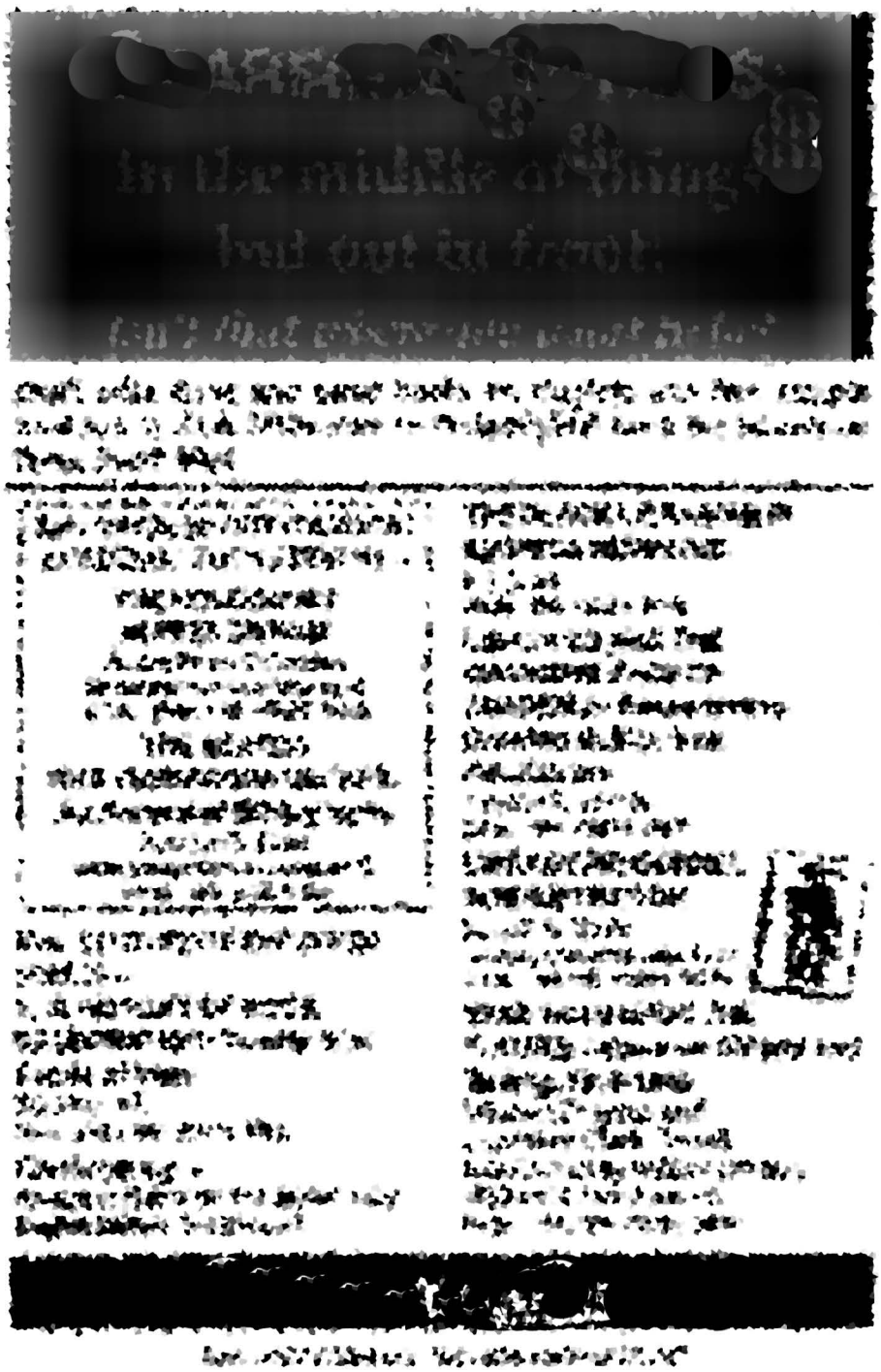
It is interesting that of all the Confederate states only Arkansas decided to act on a new piece of legislation that came down from Richmond in early 1864. The law authorized individual rebel states to appoint official archivists for the transcription of documents held at the Virginia capitol, but most legislatures were too busy with the war effort to worry about records preservation. Perhaps Rose had friends in high places who owed him a favor, or perhaps it was just plain good luck; but the exiled Arkansas legislature allocated $6,000 for the lawyer and awarded him the rank of major to perform the duties of official historiographer.

Rose received the assignment in July and began a long odyssey to Virginia to

KIM ALLEN SCOTT *is special collections librarian at Montana State University in Bozeman.*

begin his duties. Crossing the Mississippi could only be accomplished in a leaky canoe with Rose's horse swimming along behind him, and once he landed east of the big river Rose discovered a rather unpleasant fact of Confederate life—inflation had reduced the spending power of his paper money to a fraction of its Arkansas value. When he arrived in Richmond he quickly spent his stipend on wages for secretaries and such personal expenses as apples costing a dollar each and coffee that went for five dollars a cup. Before Rose could finish the job in December he had spent the entire $6,000 Arkansas had provided along with an additional $2,000 of his own Confederate currency.

Shortly before Christmas the major shipped a trunk full of copied records to a warehouse in Jackson, Miss., and then tried in vain to find another daring ferryman to bring his cargo back to Arkansas. Only gold would convince anyone to cross the river with the records and Rose could offer nothing more than stacks of printed currency that lost value practically by the minute. He finally abandoned the records in Jackson in order to reach Washington, Ark., by Christmas. Before Rose could return to Jackson to retrieve the papers, the federal army entered the town and burned the warehouse where the archives were stored.



Grist for conspiracy theorists

Uriah Rose made light of the expense for the doomed archival project by explaining that the state never had to make good on the debt incurred by the worthless currency anyway; his biggest regret was losing all the records he had been assigned to save. However, the loss of that information may not have been regretted by others once the war had ended, since it consisted primarily of service confirmation of Arkansas men during the rebellion. While most Southern soldiers received amnesty after the war, they may have been a tad uneasy regarding any official record detailing their service, especially during Reconstruction. In fact, one might even anticipate modern media critics examining the actions of Uriah Rose and loudly crying "conspiracy" at the notion of records disappearing under the lawyer's charge.

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It cannot be proved that Uriah deliberately placed the papers in harm's way any more than it can be proved that Hillary ordered her own papers shredded at the office 120 years later; but we all know contemporary writers love to theorize regardless of proof.

It may be small comfort to the Clintons that their current agonies have a longstanding historical precedent; but perhaps the Uriah Rose incident can help an archivist such as myself explain why our materials are more than a batch of curiosities for a handful of genealogists and writers. At the very least, archives explain who we *are* by showing the actions of who we *were*. For two famous Arkansas attorneys, Uriah M. Rose and Hillary Rodham Clinton, the archives show that past and present are sometimes very much the same. □