

Western unveils Civil War records

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Bowling Green did not play a major role in the outcome of the Civil War, but with a new collection at the Kentucky Museum and Library at Western Kentucky University, it could become a center for study of the conflict. The university now has one of the largest collections of documents related to the war in the United States, culled from the archives of other schools across the country.

"It's a lot of documents you can't find in one place," said Jonathan Jeffrey, a special collections professor at the library.

The collection was assembled and put onto microfilm by LexisNexis, an information-gathering company. It offers such collections for sale to universities.

Several other schools have purchased parts of the collection Western now has, but none has bought the entire range of documents, said history professor Andrew McMichael, who led the effort to get the collection at Western.

"I think it's safe to say this is a staggering collection," McMichael said Friday night at the official opening of the Civil War and Southern History Research Collection, as it is being called. It is stored on over 2,000 rolls of microfilm in 28 drawers in the library, along with four drawers of microfiche. Much of the information is related to plantations in the South, along with diaries, military unit histories and the journal of the Confederate Congress.

Also included are migration **records** of blacks who left the South, from just after the war through the 1920s, McMichael said.

"I wish I had another 30 years to use some of this material," said Marion B. Lucas, who just went into partial retirement from his position as the history department's Civil War professor. Lucas is still teaching some classes, including one on the old South. He has already brought that class into the library to study the plantation records.

Robert Dietle, a history professor whose specialty is revolutionary France, was impressed by the collection. "I just wish it were in my field," he said.

Both Dietle and Lucas worked with McMichael to bring the documents to Western. They thought it would be a good way to build another project they have been working on, the Center for the Study of the Civil War in the West.

The collection was priced at \$500,000, but LexisNexis discounted it to \$300,000 because Western was buying so many documents, he said.

McMichael decided to propose the idea not only as a way to bring primary documents to the school, but as a way to help Western achieve some national prominence, a phrase President Gary Ransdell has often used to describe his vision for Western.

So McMichael took the idea to Ransdell.

"I sort of thought of it as a pipe dream," McMichael said. "But his first reaction was 'OK, how can we get this done.' "

The president's office is paying \$75,000 a year over the next four years for the collection, McMichael said.

"The more I learned about it the more I felt that we had to find a way to do it," Ransdell said at the opening.

But having a prestigious collection does not mean only elite scholars can use the collection. "While it is a collection of national prominence, it is available to our students," McMichael said.

The materials are also open to the public in the library on the second floor of the Kentucky Museum, located at 1 Big Red Way on Western's campus. The library's hours are 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays. It is closed Sundays.

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