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The Obituary Index Project: A Collaborative Gateway to Local History

Gerald F. Patout, Jr

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Introduction

Genealogists and local historians are converging on libraries and information repositories in record numbers, armed with questions and determined to locate answers buried in the documentary annals of the past. This crusade is sometimes met with the same confounding and perplexing problems that challenge library genealogy and local history professionals - a proliferation of information resources, the questionable accuracy and validity of certain sources and the daunting and repetitive task of instructing end users in meaningful inquiry and research. In response to these changes, the New Orleans Public Library (NOPL) and The Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC) are collaborating on an effort to computerize and then upload to their institutional web sites NOPL's Louisiana Biography & Obituary Index, the primary local history reference tool card file index of biographical information found in New Orleans newspaper obituaries from approximately 1804 to 1972. Currently, fourteen aging metal file cabinets on the third floor of the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library (NOPL) contain over 650,000 index cards of information, some with multiple citations that have been described by researchers as a treasure trove and remarkable historical chronicle of local characters and color.

Origins of the Index

The Obituary File was begun by Works Progress Administration (WPA) staff working in the City Archives Department in the 1930's. The department was located in City Hall (now Gallier Hall) and the adjacent annex building on St. Charles Avenue. In addition to the manuscript journals and ledgers of city government dating from 1769, it also contained the largest collection of bound New Orleans newspapers in existence. From this newspaper archive, the Obituary Index was created as one of several W.P.A. indexing projects conducted in that department including the Louisiana News Index,

which provides coverage of news articles, exclusive of obituaries. The indexes were maintained by the City Archives Department staff after the W.P.A. project closed down.

Although the City Archives Department was transferred by ordinance in 1946 to the New Orleans Public Library, it was not until December, 1947, that the newspaper files and the W.P.A. indexes were moved to the old main library on Lee Circle. As the library staff began to go over the Obituary Index cards, they began to uncover specific date omissions and other inadequacies in the file. It included references only to deaths of prominent citizens, and it usually omitted editorials or feature stories relating to deaths. Instead, such articles were filed in the Louisiana News Index under such unhelpful topics as "people." The Obituary File was also divided into three sections: 1804 - 1936, 1937 -1945 and "current," the last category covering the portion of 1946 that had been completed at the time of the transfer to the Library. To remedy these deficiencies, library staff initiated a project, beginning with the year 1946 and extending forward, to index all obituaries. They also began to re-index retrospective time periods, beginning with the Civil War era, in order to fill in incomplete coverage.

Due to staffing limitations, work on the Louisiana News Index was concluded in the 1960's; coverage stops at the end of 1963. NOPL staff work on the Obituary File continued, but in the early 1970's volunteers were recruited to take over the project. The decision was made to stop ongoing coverage of obituaries at the end of 1972, when printouts of indexes to statewide death certificates began temporarily, it turned out, to be made available. The volunteers began to concentrate on filling in the gaps in the index. This volunteer effort brought full coverage back to 1858, before the project was put on hold for a number of years. In 1998, the project was revitalized, and a massive effort was made by several volunteers to fill in coverage of obituaries in the *Daily Picayune* back to its beginning in 1837.

When this part of the project was completed, New Orleans Public Library (NOPL) could finally say that the Obituary File had complete coverage from 1837-1972. While only the *Daily/Times Picayune* is fully indexed, the index also includes references from the old *New Orleans States & New Orleans Item* during the post-World War II years, from all New Orleans dailies during the Civil War era, and from a number of other newspapers, such as the *Louisiana Gazette*. The index also includes references to biographies of Louisianans appearing in selected collective biographies published before 1960. Thus, the index eventually came to be designated the "Louisiana Biography & Obituary Index."

Computers & Collaboration - A New Age For a Card Index

After much discussion, careful deliberation and even a summer of field testing design possibilities, an agreement of co-operation to begin the project was signed in April of 2000. In June of that year, two part-time staffers from the Historic New Orleans Collection began data input on premises at the New Orleans Public Library. Arriving at this point of data input was also the result of considerable application software analysis and technology discussions between the participating institutions that would not only satisfy the purposes of the effort, but would be visionary in addressing the needs of this slumbering body of print information.

Although a number of criteria were employed to evaluate various database options, two interrelated and important factors guided the final decision in selecting the Minisis database management tool for this project. The first factor was the additional vendor cost associated with their proprietary web uploading software package. A second consideration was the fact that The Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC) had just chosen Minisis as their new institutional information management software.

The Minisis application selected was designed and built to meet the general requirements for this database project as well as simultaneously meet the greater institutional information management needs of the archival, library and museum components of The Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC). Minisis is a multi-platform object-oriented relational database management tool that has been developed, distributed and supported since 1975 by the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa, Canada. Fully bilingual, with over 450 pre-defined data elements, the user-friendly nature and easy customization features provided application development and solutions to successfully launch this project. A sample of the customized Minisis Obituary Index main data input screen is provided in Illustration 1.

Illustration 1 - Data Input Screen – Main Screen

Data Input Screen - Main Screen

Since June of 2000, The Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC) data input staffers have been routinely entering individual card information, like names, death dates, and the specific newspaper citation(s) into the computer database. Recognizing the tedious and monotonous nature of this process as well as human nature, the data input process does get interrupted and slows when specific concerns about information contained on a certain card is questioned. To this end, the project utilizes volunteer support staff that routinely check problem or “snag” obituary index cards with newspaper citations, enabling the data input personnel to specifically continue data input. Starting with the A’s and B’s of the card file index, project data input staffers have now developed rather keen instincts for obituary index card details as well as the nuances related to the handwritten notes or the numerous typefaces on these historic records. In addition to maintaining a processing journal that records the development of this project, the data input personnel regularly record noteworthy and some very interesting obituary index cards for future project presentation and publicity purposes. With this process in place and over 4,000 hours of data input having been completed, nearly 145,000 obituary index cards have been keyed into the new computer database. Also, countless volunteer hours have been utilized in validating and verifying specific card data.

Importance of the Obituary Index

For the genealogist and local historian, the importance of the Obituary Index is found in the access to newspaper information and the focus that it provides when initiating a specific inquiry. The index can help researchers rapidly narrow a genealogy search to a specific time frame, a specific religious affiliation or specific sets of government and religious records, thus making more efficient use of time and effort. In addition to access and search strategy attributes, the index tells us about ourselves and the community and collectively records local history over a substantial time period. Besides historical demographic data, the computerized indexed information will be able to detect trends and verify those periods of epidemics as well as economic prosperity. As an access point for genealogical research as well as resource for confirming legal information, the computerized

edition of the index is certain to broaden accessibility, making use faster, simpler and more productive for end users. For genealogists, web accessible and computerized obit index records will accelerate the process of substantiating all-important birth, death and cemetery locations, all-important aspects of basic genealogical inquiry.

As the computerized obituary index begins to take shape in electronic form, the body and the “soul” of print card file information extracted and compiled thus far is quite telling and interesting. In a city known for excessively celebrating and actively promoting its colorful and unique cultural past, obituary cards tell us that voodoo doctors were actually a part of the local landscape as were any number of characters who roamed the streets of the French Quarter. Noted authors Henry Castellanos and Robert Tallant mention the mystical cast of New Orleans characters in their respective writings, but the obituary index actually validates voodoo doctor James Alexander’s existence in time and space.

Illustration 2 - Alexander, James – Reproduction of Obituary card from NOPL Index

Alexander, James (COLORED)	Age: 57
(VOUDOU DOCTOR)	
Died: 8-19-1890	
D.P. 8-20-1890 PG. 8 COL. 3	

Miss Louisiana “Lulu” Rebel Blackmar is not only noteworthy in name, but her obituary index card notes that her very famous father, A.E. Blackmar, a prolific and controversial songwriter was fined and imprisoned during Civil War General Benjamin Butler’s occupation of New Orleans for publishing the “Bonnie Blue Flag.” Personalities aside, the computerized index literally speaks to our native tongues, eccentricities and ethnicities. Blanchard family names are very rich and revealing, with Clerfruy, Clerphe, Clesida as well as Odalie, Oliziphore, Onesaphore and Orelo Blanchard being just a linguistic sampling of some of the exotic first names. The computer index picks out “place”

name people like Illinois Barconey and Mrs. Kentucky Barclay and odd names like Etienne Beausoleil Batcave. With a "nicknames" field search, one can find "Okey Dokey" Bagnerise and "Short Block" Adams but perhaps, most indicative of the power and potentiality for this developing electronic resource, the obituary index card for one Joseph B. Albite declares on the card that Mr. Albite died of lockjaw. As unusual as these scraps of information appear, these clues can become meaningful leads and relevant access points for researchers either starting or furthering genealogical inquiry.

Whether this collaborative endeavor produces what some might consider an enormous electronic catalog of biographical information or realistically documents actual footprints on the path to local history, the automation of the obituary card index is certain to serve as the primary vehicle for launching genealogical inquiry related to New Orleans and Louisiana. Replication of this collaborative model between institutions and organizations sharing common goals of public service and related historical collections is one that should be considered by the entire library community.

The Southeastern Librarian Seeks New Editor

The Southeastern Library Association (SELA) seeks an experienced writer or editor to produce *The Southeastern Librarian (SELn)*, the official journal of the association. The quarterly publication seeks to publish articles, announcements, and news of professional interest to the library community in the southeast. Two newsletter-style issues serve as a vehicle for conducting Association business, and two issues include juried articles. Review of applications will begin June 1, 2004 and continue until appointment is made. Applicants must make a two-year commitment and attend the SELA biennial conference and leadership meeting.

The editor will be responsible for soliciting manuscripts for feature articles and news of interest, receiving, approving and editing submissions. The editor will establish a close working relationship with and serve as liaison to the SELA Board and Committees. Serves as ex-officio member of the Executive Board.

The incoming editor will assist with production of the Fall, 2004 and Winter 2004/2005 issues and will assume the full duties of editor with the Spring, 2005 issue. Applicants must be SELA members and have a strong overall knowledge of the association and its goals, have an interest in and knowledge of issues relevant to libraries, and a familiarity with current library literature. Applicants must have written and published articles and/or have editorial experience. Preferred applicants will have experience or familiarity with the technical and editorial issues associated with electronic and web publishing. Access to word-processing software and electronic mail is essential for the editor. The editor receives an honorarium of \$300 per issue.

Applicants should send a resume and cover letter summarizing their editorial philosophy and at least two samples of published work or editorial activities to:

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Vice-President/President-Elect, Southeastern Library Association
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The successful candidate will be asked to provide professional references.

Questions may be directed to Ms. Gibbons or to Frank Allen, outgoing editor. Mr. Allen can be reached at fallen@mail.ucf.edu. Membership and general information about the Southeastern Library Association may be found at <http://sela.lib.ucf.edu/>.