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SARAH GAYLE AND VIOLENCE IN THE OLD SOUTHWEST

BY SARAH WOOLFOLK WIGGINS

An early nineteenth-century journal illuminates the dangers facing those who lived in Alabama during its earliest years as a state.

ALABAMA’S OWN HENRY B. WALTHALL

BY JOANNA JACOBS

For a brief moment toward the beginning of the motion picture industry, one of the biggest stars in the world was a slight, refined, serious-looking farmer’s son from central Alabama.

MARION MILITARY INSTITUTE: THE MILITARY COLLEGE OF ALABAMA

BY JOSEPH W. (“BILL”) MATHEWS JR.

The history of Marion Military Institute was profoundly shaped by a single family—the Murfees.
“ALABAMIANs IN THE GREAT WAR”

BY GRAHAM NEELEY AND GEORGIA ANN CONNER

Editor’s Note: This issue of Alabama Heritage inaugurates a new department on the collections of the Alabama Department of Archives and History. Curator Graham Neeley sheds light on the process by which the archives came to acquire a particularly strong collection of World War I artifacts and records, many of which are currently on display in a new exhibit, “Alabamians in the Great War,” in the archives’ Museum of Alabama.

On February 3, 1919, Alabama became the first state to enact legislation calling for a memorial to commemorate its citizens who had served in World War I, also known as the Great War. The Alabama Memorial Commission was tasked with promoting the idea of erecting a memorial building and raising the funds to complete construction. The building was also to house the Department of Archives and History, which had been located in the State Capitol since its founding in 1901, and the Department of Education.

Unfortunately, financial setbacks and the untimely death in 1920 of Thomas (Tom) McAdory Owen, the archives’ first director and backbone of the memorial building proposal, prevented a timely completion of the project. Twenty years passed before Tom’s widow and successor as director, Marie Bankhead Owen, successfully led the effort to build the World War Memorial Building, which opened its doors in 1940.

Delays with the building did not hamper Tom’s efforts between 1917 and his death to collect war-related materials. Appointed as the state war historian by the Alabama Council of Defense, Owen and his staff at the Department of Archives and History were tasked with collecting books, manuscripts, official histories, service records, uniforms, and personal items that pertained to Alabama’s involvement in the Great War.

Even prior to America’s entry into the war, Owen and his staff began collecting “periodicals, newspaper files, and pamphlets” for preservation in the state archives. When America entered the war, Owen became the obvious choice for state war historian, and the archives became the logical repository for all things related to Alabama’s involvement.

Many wartime souvenirs traveled to the US with returning servicemen, but few were as uncommon as this Prussian Cuirassier (cavalry) Reserve Officer’s helmet. These ornate styles were replaced with the more protective Stahlhelm. (All photos Alabama Department of Archives and History)
1917–1918, but it was during the occupation period of 1919, when the 167th Infantry Regiment was stationed in Germany, that correspondence asking for artifacts and relics increased. Owen wrote Col. William P. Screws, commander of the regiment, asking him to encourage the men to donate items to the archives.

Screws enthusiastically replied that he would send German weapons and equipment. He also mentioned the idea of bringing home a German train, dubbed the “Alabama Express,” that was “captured in the St. Mihiel Drive.” As soldiers returned home, many donated their uniforms, personal items, and relics. Items from all branches of the military came through the archives’ doors in the years immediately following the war.

A second wave of World War I–related donations came in the 1940s, when the Alabama World War Memorial building opened its doors. Veterans and immediate family donated items to the building honoring their service. The variety of items donated range from uniforms to captured German equipment. Since then a steady flow of artifacts has come to the archives.

Even though the World War I collection is one of the largest within the archives’ museum collections, gaps are still apparent. The African American experience, both at

The Maschinengewehr 08 or MG 08 was the German Army’s standard machine gun during World War I. The water-cooled gun could fire 400 rounds per minute with an effective range of up to 2,200 yards. Positioned with overlapping fields of fire, arrays of this weapon had devastating effect on advancing Allied troops. This gun was donated by Eugene M. Barrett, who served as a master electrician in the US Signal Corps. He secured the weapon on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, and presented it to the state in 1919.
home and in France, is the most noticeable. A close second would be in the area of women’s participation, also on both the home and military fronts.

The “Alabamians in the Great War” exhibit is made possible in honor of Nimrod T. Frazier by the generous support of his colleagues at Enstar U.S.A. Inc. The exhibit is installed in the Alabama Treasures gallery, which has been restored to its 1940 appearance and is sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. Guice Slawson. The Museum of Alabama is open Monday through Saturday, 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Admission is free.

Graham Neeley is a curator at the Alabama Department of Archives and History. Neeley holds a BA in history from Huntingdon College. Georgia Ann Conner is the communications officer at the Alabama Department of Archives and History and is a native of Baldwin County, Alabama. She is a graduate of Furman University and holds a BA in history and a BA in studio art. Sponsorship for this department is provided by Lee Sentell and the Alabama Tourism Department.
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