A NOTE ON THE LIBERIAN ARCHIVES*

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I

Two decades of civil war have left Liberians facing many challenges. One such group includes those concerned with the preservation and maintenance of Liberia's archives, which were severely compromised during the period of conflict. This paper provides a brief introduction for scholars as to the nature of Liberia's archival materials available in-country, the impact of the war on the collections, and details about how scholars interested in the history of Liberia may access these records.

There are three archival collections in Liberia. The first is at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Tubman Boulevard, between 12th and 13th Streets. The second is at the Center for National Documents and Records (National Archives) at 96 Ashmun Street, while the third—the Presidential Archives—is at the Executive Mansion on Capitol Hill.

II

Materials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs–contained on the third floor of the building–fall into one of three categories. The first, and largest collection includes title deeds and articles related to land ownership. The second is the "corporate section," which includes documents related to the formation/dissolution, etc. of companies in Liberia. The third–smaller still–contains materials related to intellectual property. This reflects the

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dual nature of the archive as both a records center and an archival institution. Materials in the archive date back to the 1830s; indeed, I was able to view one land title deed written in 1839. Unfortunately, the war's effect was felt most strongly on the older holdings from the nineteenth century. Between 1990 and 1993 the archives were un-staffed due to the war; many documents were thrown out of the windows by looters, and many torn to pieces. The older documents suffered disproportionately. Staff estimate that 30 to 40% of the materials were lost. Those materials that remain are organized in chronological order, although the material for many years is thin. The sum total of the records for 1905, for instance, exist in a thin manila folder, and are simply fragments of paper identifiable only by virtue of a date found on them.

The archive has a trained staff, headed by Mr. Jackson K. Purser, who has held the position of Director of Archives since 2001. Non-Liberian researchers wishing to access the archives should write to: Her Excellency Olubanke K. Akerele, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Monrovia, Republic of Liberia. They should state the purpose of their visit, their institutional affiliation, the type of materials they wish to access, and the anticipated end-result of their research. The archives are open from 9am to 4.30pm from Monday to Friday. There are no computer or microfilm facilities, although photocopying can be arranged onsite with the permission of Counselor (and deputy minister) Ms. Krubo Kollie.

III

The second repository in Liberia is the Center for National Documents and Records (National Archives), which contains papers related to the workings of government, including such items as acts of legislature, commission reports and speeches. This collection contains limited materials dating from the nineteenth century, and possesses its largest collection of documents from the William V.S. Tubman era (1944-71). The war had an even greater effect on holdings in this archive. Before 1992, the materials were held at the purpose-built archival center on Tubman Boulevard in Sinkor; following looting, staff were given three days by then-president Sawyer in which to remove the materials to a safe location. The files were brought to the J.J. Roberts House at 96 Ashmun St., but staff estimate that 60% to 75% of their 24 million pages were looted or destroyed back in Sinkor. There is currently no system of cataloging of the collection that numbers over 1000 boxes.

Scholars wishing to access this archive should write to: Director-General Philomena Bloh Sayeh, Center for National Documents and Records (National Archives), 96 Ashmun St., Monrovia, Republic of Liberia. They

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should attend to the same details in their letter as noted above for the archive at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Archives are open from 9am to 4pm from Monday to Friday. There are no computer or microfilm facilities, although photocopying can be arranged on-site with the permission of the Director-General.

IV

The third collection–the Presidential Archives–is held on the fourth floor and in a basement room of the Executive Mansion. Unfortunately, due to renovations and a fire in 2007, these archives are currently inaccessible.

All three archives are currently underfunded, shelving space is limited, and air-conditioning and dehumidifiers are needed. But there is cause for hope in the near future. At the end of January 2009, the Center for National Documents and Records (National Archives) began its move back into its former facilities in Sinkor, which are currently being vacated by the National Investment Commission and Liberia Telecommunications Authority. By the end of 2009, the aim is for all three collections to be housed in this purpose-built location.

For those wanting more information on the specifics of the collections, Foley, Holsoe, Shick, and Solomon and d'Azevedo's efforts will provide a starting point of sorts, though due to their pre-war publication they are now outdated.[1] It is also worth noting that the Liberian Collections Project at Indiana University has extensive holdings of Liberian documents, including copies of many that were destroyed in Monrovia during the Civil War. In addition, representatives of the university sampled a series of 1,442 documents from Liberia's archival collections in 2005, and published their findings.[2]

[1]David Foley, "Liberia's Archival Collection," *African Studies Bulletin* 11(1968), 217-20; Tom Shick, "A Catalog of the National Archives of the Liberian Government," *HA* 3(1976), 193-202; Marvin Solomon and Warren d'Azevedo, *A General Bibliography of the Republic of Liberia* (Evanston, 1962). Also of use is Svend Holsoe's four-volume bibliography of Liberia. See Svend Holsoe, *A Bibliography on Liberia. I. Books* (Newark, DE, 1971); idem., *A Bibliography on Liberia. II. Publications Concerning Colonization* (Newark, DE, 1971); idem., *A Bibliography on Liberia. III. Articles* (Newark, DE, 1976), 1976); *A Bibliography on Liberia. IV. Dissertations and Theses* (Newark, DE, 1984). For an excellent reference resource, with an extensive bibliography see D. Elwood Dunn and Svend Holsoe, *A Historical Dictionary of Liberia* (Metuchen, NJ, 1985).

[2]The Indiana University Liberian holdings, including the Liberian Collections Project's materials, may be found at www.libraries.iub.edu/index.php?pageId=7821.

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