The Bennett Collection Case Statement

The Bennett Family

The Bennett family of Clinton, Louisiana, has a long history of civic, social, and political involvement in East Feliciana Parish. William Thomas Bennett (1903-1976) enjoyed an important career there as an attorney and judge. An LSU graduate and LSU Law School graduate, he was active in ROTC while at LSU, and went on to serve in the U.S. Army during and following World War II. He practiced law privately before being elected judge of the 20th District Circuit Court of Louisiana in 1966. In addition to rearing her family, acting as secretary to her husband, and overseeing the restoration of the family’s antebellum home in Clinton, Mary Fargeson Bennett was instrumental in establishing the Audubon Regional Public Library and active in historic preservation, promoting tourism, and other local civic activities.

The Bennett Collection

In 1996, Judge and Mrs. Bennett's children donated their family papers to LSU Libraries Special Collections. These papers offer scholars and students insights into the life, work, and political and civic activities of this prominent family, primarily Judge William T. and Mary Fargeson Bennett. The collection will foster research and discussion on a host of subjects from political and legal issues, to a variety of aspects of daily life and culture for a mid-twentieth century family.
What does the collection contain?

"The Brame-Bennett House contained 150 years of East Feliciana social history in the form of letters, account books, diaries, photographs, greeting cards, meeting minutes, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks and so much more. The result of our grandparents and parents being "keepers" is a fascinating portrait of the lives of 20th century people and places of East Feliciana."

- Melanie Bennett Hurta

The William T. Bennett-Mary Fargeson Bennett Collection comprises 21 linear feet of correspondence, topical files, legal files, newspaper clippings, photographs, notebooks, calendars, and other documents created by or related to Judge and Mrs. Bennett. Mary Bennett’s papers are more voluminous and include personal correspondence, photographs, and materials related to her interests in historic preservation, libraries, local history, and family and house history. Judge Bennett’s papers include personal and professional correspondence; biographical information; materials related to his military service, law career, and election as judge, and issues of special interest to him as a lawyer and judge. Topics include proposed legislation for the judicial system, and practices and conditions at both the East State Hospital (Jackson, La.) and the Louisiana State Penitentiary, which were in his district. Files on local and civic events are also among his papers.
How will the Libraries make the collection usable for researchers?

The Bennett Family Project encompasses multiple activities that will result in the preservation and promotion for scholarly use of the Bennett Collection. Proposed activities include processing the collection, conducting oral histories with the adult children of Judge and Mrs. Bennett, digitizing a selection of the papers and making them available online, and an exhibit. The total projected cost for all projects is estimated to be $32,612.

Processing

Processing the collection ensures the preservation of the collection and facilitates access by researchers; it entails organizing, properly housing, and cataloging the collection, resulting in a finding aid similar to those found online here. This work is the core of the project and would be carried out by a graduate student and student assistant funded through the project. Cost: $22,465.

Oral Histories

Oral histories with the Bennetts’ adult children Letitia, Melanie, and William will help document that aspect of the Bennett family history. As much as the written record found in the Bennett collection can tell us, there are stories and perspectives that live only in the memories of those who knew Judge and Mrs. Bennett. The LSU Libraries is home to the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, which will direct the oral histories. Costs include interviewing, transcribing, auditing, indexing, editing, sound engineering and digital preservation, and cataloging of these interviews, which would also become part of the holdings of Special Collections and be cross-referenced with the collection of papers. Cost: $3071.
Digitization

Digitizing selected portions of the collection will serve to promote the collection, provide a curated body of research material, and offer an online, public-facing venue to highlight Judge and Mrs. Bennetts’ contributions. 150 items (up to 600 scans) will identified during and after processing by the graduate assistant, Head of Manuscripts Processing, and the Curator of Manuscripts. The selected items will be digitized, cataloged, and placed online in the LSU Libraries’ digital library system. Any oral histories that are funded and conducted as part of the larger project will also be included. Cost: $5796.

Exhibition

An exhibition will be mounted in the Hill Memorial Library lecture hall to highlight both the Bennetts’ history and contributions to the Felicianas and the potential research topics offered by the papers. It will comprise at least two display cases and wall items. The exhibit will coincide with the opening of the physical collection or the launch of the digital collection. Visitors in Hill for research, classes, lectures, the main gallery exhibition, and other events will have the opportunity to view it. Cost: $1280.

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