

## **'PETITONS' SHOWCASE CAUSE FOR GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY'S FOUNDING**

**By: Chad Fred Bailey**

In 2020, the Jonesborough Genealogical Society celebrates a milestone that many organizations never get too – 30 years in preserving, studying, documenting, and promoting family heritages in Northeast Tennessee, Washington County, and Jonesborough. One of the earliest acts of the society was to petition the Washington County Library Board to establish a genealogy and history center at the Washington County-Jonesborough Library in May of 1990. Lorraine Bennett Rae, daughter of Charles Marion Bennett and first Genealogical Library Chair of the JGS, lobbied for space within the library for a genealogy and history collection, which the society eventually got later in the year, but the first attempt on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, was not a success. Recently, a red folder with copies of this first petition was revealed in the collection of Elaine Scott Cantrell. Over 86 pages of letters, petitions, and enthusiasms for the oldest town in Tennessee to have a genealogy and history collection was displayed.

Within this packet there are 51 letters from genealogists, historians, and researchers from Tennessee, Virginia, Indiana, Oklahoma, Arizona, California, Michigan, Florida, Texas, North Carolina, Missouri, Colorado, Alabama, Wisconsin, Louisiana, Kansas, and Ontario, Canada. In addition to these letters, a letter from the Washington County Historical Association and a letter from the State of Franklin Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution accompanied. Examining these letters also showcases a range of dates, backgrounds, and interests within local history and genealogy. One letter from James T. Morgan, Texas, states, "I've heard from friends who share my interest in East Tennessee ancestries that Jonesboro may become a depository for genealogy records. I certainly hope that this is made to happen. East Tennessee is a Mecca as well as a mine for us outlanders who have roots there." Another from Martha Waddell Roberson, Louisiana, states, "Although I have been in Genealogy only for about four years, I think we are only at the "tip of the iceberg" of beginning to preserve are [sic] heritage through computers, microfilming and microfische. I shutter when I think how careless we have been storing old records in basements and attics of courthouses. Many older people who have large collections of genealogy would certainly be happy to have a safe and secure depository for their years of work." Another from William Ralph Phillips, states, "Nearly all of my ancestral lines come through Washington County area in pioneer days and some cousins still live there. Nell Phillips Fox and her brother County Clerk Roy Phillips share my Phillips ancestry. We also share in our descent from Jacob Brown the Wagonmaker whose farm on Little Limestone straddle the Great Wagon Road and who operated a blacksmith shop there." And yet another from Verna Shannon Jones, California, states, "Michael Fraker from Frederick County, Virginia purchased land and he and the Campbell brothers donated the land for the town of Leesburg. We need to know more about the history of the area before it gets lost to time. There is so much history that has never been recorded except for we who do genealogical research which we learn from searching back in time."

Even though this is just a touch of the information jammed packed in these letters, the progressive feelings presented a sense of hope that a genealogy and history collection at the Washington County-Jonesborough Library would bring to the genealogy and history narrative of the time. According to the first newsletter of the society dated August 1990, "Members have made exhaustive presentations and petitions of hundreds of names trying to convince those in charge that a safe, well-organized corner in our Library for these and many other valuable pieces of History will earn unending gratitude from the returning descendents [sic] of our pioneers. We try to make up for what may appear to be disinterest by personally doing all we can to introduce visitors to our limited resources – we have recently been provided a new vertical file and will have copies of family files from the Watauga Association of Genealogists as well as new additions our members will share – we will

appreciate a copy of your Family Charts to add to the file. We hadn't made note of all the States represented by visiting searchers, but since April 21, 1990, Anne Shaw kept notes. She has gone to the Library and helped people from Arkansas, Michigan, Washington, Oregon, California, New Mexico, Nebraska, Illinois, North Carolina, Delaware, Florida, New Jersey, Mississippi, New York and many from other parts of Tennessee." Further over in this edition of the Newsletter, showed a letter from Lorraine Rae. In this letter, she announces the acquisition of Mary Hardin McCown's papers by stating, "I told you that I was trying to obtain a large collection and now, I can tell you that I have gotten it – the materials of Mary Hardin McCown! Forty-four boxes – primarily books – have been delivered... Mrs. McCown's papers are stored at a school of religion in Carter County, and we hope those will soon be inventoried. All things pertaining to the Christian Church will remain there, but we will get the family papers." This edition also included a listing of 25 books donated to the library as well as 13 family files that were added.

Eventually, the organization received the collection space at the library later in 1990. Rae also provided two collections to start the collection. Rae donated her father's collection and books to the library, as well as received the donation of some family papers of Mary Hardin McCown, Johnson City's first historian. These two collections combined started the vertical files collection at the library. According to Volume 1 no. 3 of the Newsletter, Rae reported, "The first step in expansion and improvement of our genealogical and historical facilities has taken place. Shelves have been installed which separate the portion of the Library from the rest. It gives us quite a bit more shelf space and will tend to keep non-g. and h. researchers from using all the table space."

Yet today, almost 30 years after the first attempt to gain a genealogy and history collection at the Washington County-Jonesborough Library, the shelves are almost full. One report from Gene Hurdt, Library Scanning Project coordinator for the society and member of the Library Board, shows the collection "contains around 2,200 books, approximately 1,900 genealogy journals, vertical files, microfilm, maps, etc. Approximately 40% of this collection has been donated by over 200 individuals, groups, organization, etc. The genealogy collections began with the collections of Mary Hardin McCown and Charles Marion Bennett, but many others have been added including part of the late County Historian Mildred Kozsuch's collection. The Library genealogy collection has family files on 895 surnames."