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## Hicks column: Register of Deeds office focused on preserving Charleston's official history

**BRIAN HICKS**



Charleston County Register of Deeds Michael Miller examines a 19th century document housed in his offices. Miller is looking for ways to preserve thousands of historical maps, deeds and other records in his custody. Brian Hicks/Staff

**BY BRIAN HICKS BHICKS@POSTANDCOURIER.COM**

The hand-drawn map shows Ansonborough as originally subdivided and laid out to the specifications of Lord Anson.

It is a one-of-a-kind piece of Charleston history. The map is also fragile, brown and brittle — which is exactly as you would expect from a plat dated June 24, 1760.

Right now, this aging relic resides in a climate-controlled room at the county Register of Deeds' office. It is stored alongside thousands of other historical maps, plats, documents and books that record the transfer of property — and in some cases, slaves — going back to the days before Charleston was officially Charleston.

Michael Miller first discovered the Register of Deeds office in September 2017 while searching for records of his family's property. The former school board member returned when he was researching land ownership in the Maryville neighborhood for the West Ashley Revitalization Commission.

Less than two years later, Miller is running the office — and the preservation of all these documents has become his problem.

“This is not just Charleston's history, it's American history,” Miller says. “And I have a duty to preserve it.”

That is precisely his job as Charleston County Register of Deeds.

In November 2018, Miller was elected to the office, becoming not only the first African-American Register of Deeds in Charleston history, but just the seventh person to hold the post overall.

Some of that has to do with Julius Elisha Cogswell's 63-year tenure, which ended in 1956 — when the office was still called the Register of Mesne Conveyance (an English term even older than that map of Ansonborough).

Miller kept most of the staff from Charlie Lybrand's and Elaine Bozman's quarter-century of tenure, but he's made some changes that have ruffled feathers among real estate agents and attorneys — the two groups that most often use the office.

For instance, the office no longer accepts titles or deeds with mistakes or missing information — which staff used to accept and correct. Miller says it's a liability issue, as the slightest variation in a person's name can become a legal headache that requires untold amounts of bureaucracy to repair.

The biggest challenge facing the Register of Deeds office is both modernization and preservation. Many of the county's records are on aging microfilm that needs to be refurbished (if not transferred to newer technology), which is expensive — and harder than it sounds. If the office sends off those records to have them cleaned up or digitized, the county is left without some official documents that may be needed for real estate research.

But the preservation of the office's colonial and antebellum documents consumes much of Miller's time these days. While the state archives has some of Charleston's oldest records, the Register of Deeds office still has a plethora of 19th century material, as well as some 18th century maps. The office also gets frequent donations of old plats, often from the 19th century.

There is important, often unmined, history in this office. The first deed book includes an account of a man inquiring about the insurance on his ship before he sets out on a voyage to Barbados and western Africa to buy slaves to sell in Charleston.

That is history that cannot be allowed to deteriorate. Bob McIntyre, a veteran of the register's office, is scanning documents on the office's state-of-the-art imaging machine, a slow process that will eventually save these records digitally.

But some of them are not only records, they have intrinsic historical value. Those include a set of South Carolina county maps drawn by architect Robert Mills, the man who designed the Washington Monument.

Miller says these documents belong to the people of Charleston County, so he wouldn't consider turning them over to a museum or archive. He just needs the money to maintain them.

He has reached out to Sens. Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott, as well as Congressmen Jim Clyburn and Joe Cunningham, hoping to find federal grant money to fund the preservation work. He's gotten a few leads, but Miller has not ruled out a private fundraising campaign.

"Charleston wasn't just the capital of South Carolina, but the Carolina colony, which encompassed North Carolina and Georgia," Miller says. "This isn't just our history, it's the country's."

He's absolutely right. So, one way or another, county residents should find a way to help Miller save Charleston's officially documented history.

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