

Elbert Hilliard: A Storied Legacy of Public Service

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "The arc of history is long, but bends toward justice." In Elbert Hilliard's case, the arc may bend toward service.

Elbert Hilliard bears the distinction of the longest tenure of an agency director in Mississippi's history, entirely fitting for a Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) director. Upon retirement in 2004, one might think Hilliard would want a break from the eight-to-five of the public sector. Instead, Mr. Hilliard has served as an MDAH volunteer for the last seven years, averaging over two thousand hours of service each year.

Mr. Hilliard's first job title at the Archives was "Curator of History," but in his forty years as an employee, he wore many hats. With this unique background, Hilliard's scope of volunteer work is as broad as his knowledge base: his prodigious research, writing and editorial skills make him an integral member of MDAH's Public Information section. He also serves as the department's liaison to the volunteer-operated Mississippi Historical Society, where he has fulfilled duties of Secretary/Treasurer for 38 years. His extensive experience proves an invaluable institutional asset to MDAH administrative staff. Hilliard is also an inspirational, motivated volunteer recruiter, as he served as one of the first managers of MDAH's now-flourishing volunteer program: few can say no to a man who holds so much enthusiasm for the department and its mission.

Hilliard's professional career began in education, and it remains a driving force in his volunteer work. He is directly responsible for a wealth of books, lesson plans, essays, articles and other educational materials widely available in both print and online media. He is a fixture at the annual social studies Teacher Workshop, networking with educators from around the state and securing sponsorship for the workshop itself, as well as scholarships for teachers who might not be able to afford Historical Society membership. Hilliard sees to it that MDAH's publications, including the "Mississippi History Newsletter," "Mississippi History Now," the Journal of Mississippi History, and the book series Heritage of Mississippi, maintain the department's long-standing level of excellence. Hilliard's commitment to history and those who teach it is evident in his relentless search for worthy candidates for the Mississippi Historical Society's John K. Betterworth Award for Outstanding History Teachers.

Historic and Cultural Preservation is another of Hilliard's great interests; he has inspired others to take on the daunting task of documenting and preserving our knowledge of the first Mississippians--Native American, West African, and European settlers--as well as the diverse groups within modern Mississippi's population.

Every day, Hilliard comes to the William F. Winter Building, where his sole mission is to share his time, his knowledge and his great love of teaching others. Hilliard's tireless devotion to historic preservation and public education has broadened the historic view of Mississippi history, and his work will inspire aspiring historians for generations to come.