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Papers donated to Georgia Historical Society offer fresh insight into prominent Savannah family

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By Chuck Mobley

Stored in steamer trunks and left forgotten in a New Jersey attic for decades, a collection of ledgers and letters, belonging to a prominent Savannah family, that were recently donated to the Georgia Historical Society constitute a “national treasure,” said W. Todd Groce.

The president and CEO of the GHS, Groce said the papers of businessman Gazaway Bugg Lamar include correspondence relating to his lengthy post-Civil War legal battles against the government of the United States, and a copy of the “Slave-Trader’s Letter Book,” a compilation of documents providing insight into that nefarious pursuit and its participants.

“This is an extraordinary gift,” said Groce, gesturing toward the stacks of ledgers, letter books and other documents. “Who knows what new interpretations may come from these.”

The donation to the GHS was made by Jim Jordan, a local author, historian and tour guide, who has researched the Lamar family for some 10 years, and is on a first-name basis with its members.

“Gazaway sued everybody, and everybody sued him,” smiled Jordan. “The lawyers should have put up a memorial to him.”

Some of the documents he donated concern Lamar’s post-Civil War efforts to recover money he felt was owed to him by the U.S. government, Jordan said. That effort did pay off: Lamar was awarded \$574,000 in 1874, the largest settlement made by the Southern Claims Commission for confiscated property.

In all, Jordan added, Lamar’s court cases were so voluminous, and so complicated, that his will was not probated until the early 1900s.

Lamar’s controversial son — Charles Augustus Lafayette Lamar — is also represented in the collection.

Carefully holding up the “Slave-Trader’s Letter Book,” Jordan said that there is only one other copy of it known to exist. Its hard-to-read onion-skin pages recount the younger Lamar’s role in the African slave trade, including his business dealings with the Wanderer, the infamous ship that unloaded some 400 Africans at Jekyll Island in 1858.

That incident, and the pursuant federal court case that played out in Savannah, shook the nation, and the elder Lamar was not pleased with his son’s role in it, Jordan said.

Gazaway was often exasperated with his son, said Jordan, who wrote of their relationship in detail in a 2009 Georgia Historical Quarterly article, “Charles Augustus Lafayette Lamar and the Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade.”

Charles was unrepentant, Jordan said, and soon got involved in another slavery scheme. It was, he said, a “pretty dysfunctional family.”

For more on the Lamars

The Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library at the University of Georgia has an extensive Gazaway Bugg Lamar collection. A listing of the documents and letters runs to more than 50 pages.

The National Archives also has a wide range of correspondence concerning Gazaway Bugg Lamar, an accumulation that includes business activities and wartime letters.

