

Task Force Preserves Historical Texas Documents

BY ELLEN CARNES

On Sept. 26, the Supreme Court of Texas held a hearing where the Texas Court Records Preservation Task Force detailed its investigation into the state of records storage in Texas courts. Immediately following the hearing, **James A. Baker III**, former U.S. Secretary of State and senior partner in Baker Botts, L.L.P., spoke at a reception at the Texas Law Center in Austin, where 20 notable historical documents were unveiled.

The Texas Supreme Court created the 19-member task force in November 2009. Partially funded by the State Bar of Texas and Baker Botts, L.L.P., the task force is co-chaired by **Bill Kroger**, a partner in Baker Botts, L.L.P., and Mark Lambert, deputy commissioner of Archives and Records for the Texas General Land Office. The investigation covered 254 counties with more than 500 archives, many of which housed their documents in perilous conditions — in dilapidated buildings without climate control, haphazardly packed into storage bins, and, in one memorable instance, teetering near holiday lights and decorations.

“Texas has a reputation as a unique and colorful place to live,” Kroger said. “These documents, and the thousand other pages of historical information discovered during the task force’s work on this project, confirm that reputation, and enhance it in many cases. However, more important than reading about our past during the past year is discovering that many of these links to our state’s past were either lost, about to be lost, or in a state of great disrepair. The challenge going forward is to find ways to preserve these records for generations to come.”

Among the records that the task force has worked to preserve

were the 20 notable ones highlighted at the hearing. These include a Bexar County District Court minute book from 1842 that details Santa Anna’s capture of the county courthouse; a Jack County District Court minute book that is the only surviving record of the trial of Kiowa Chiefs Satanta and Big Tree; and a Jim Wells County injunction filed by a young Lyndon B. Johnson against Coke Stevenson, his opponent in the 1948 U.S. Senate race. Other names familiar to Texas history buffs — Charles Goodnight, Sam Houston, Richard King, John Wesley Hardin, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, and Jack Johnson — crop up in these records.

State Bar President **Bob Black** and Baker spoke at the reception while guests were able to examine the documents firsthand. “This is our history and we must share it if we’re going to educate future generations. The State Bar of Texas is excited to partner with the task force on this extremely important endeavor,” Black said. Preserving the legal profession’s rich history is a priority of Black’s. Both the March 2012 issue of the *Texas Bar Journal* and next year’s Annual Meeting in Houston will feature the historic documents.

The work of the task force is important not just to attorneys, but to non-attorneys as well, Baker said. “[These documents] contain priceless information about our ancestors,” he added. “The bottom line is that history matters. It gives us a sense of place, identity, and purpose. We give a great gift to future generations.”

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Task Force Co-Chair Bill Kroger, former U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker III, and State Bar President Bob Black.



Guests examine historical documents at the Task Force reception at the Texas Law Center.



James A. Baker III and the Justices of the Supreme Court of Texas.