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L. Marion Gressette

(1902-1984)

Papers, c. 1920-1924, 1950-1984

- Volume:** 10 linear feet
- Processed:** 1996, by Tracy Harter; 2006, additions by Micki Blakely
- Provenance:** Donated by Lawrence M. Gressette, II
- Citation Form:** L. Marion Gressette Papers, South Carolina Political Collections, The University of South Carolina
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Biographical Note:

“Governors come and go, but Gressette has remained and become a legend.” Thus stated former governor John C. West at a 1981 testimonial dinner honoring South Carolina state senator Marion Gressette (1902-1984). Nicknamed the “Gray Fox” due to his legislative cunning and slicked-back gray hair, Gressette’s forty-seven year presence in the senate chambers, 1937 to 1984, commanded the respect of political allies and adversaries. At the time of his death it was said no man might ever again accrue the power which Gressette had acquired over the years.

Lawrence Marion Gressette was born on February 11, 1902 in the Center Hill Section of Orangeburg County. He was the fourth of eight children born to planter John Thomas and Rosa Emily Wannamaker Gressette. A lifetime of public service in the General Assembly began in the lower chamber, where Gressette served from 1925 to 1928, and 1931 to 1932. He was elected to the South Carolina Senate in 1936, and served from 1937 until his death on March 1, 1984. Gressette chaired a number of powerful committees during his career, including the Education Committee, 1951 to 1955; Judiciary Committee, 1953 to 1984; Rules Committee, 1959 to 1974; Highways Committee, 1973 to 1975; and Natural Resources Committee, 1945 to 1950. Gressette was elected President Pro Tempore of the Senate in 1972.



Gressette is best remembered for his roles on the Senate Judiciary Committee and the South Carolina School Committee, which have often been referred to as “Gressette’s Graveyard” and the “Gressette Committee.” Although some legislators considered the Judiciary Committee a “graveyard” for good legislation, former Governor John West noted that, “no one will ever fully appreciate all the potential bad laws that Senator Gressette has mercifully laid to rest for this state.” Gressette, a master of parliamentary procedure, often exercised his power in the Judiciary Committee by tabling legislation he opposed.



Between 1951 and 1966, Gressette chaired a fifteen-man committee appointed by the governor to seek legal means to avoid forced integration of the state’s public schools. Dubbed the “Gressette Committee,” its historic role during the Civil Rights era in South Carolina has been an issue of debate for scholars and journalists, who have speculated on the committee’s original intent and legacy. In later years, Gressette observed that, “The committee’s real accomplishment was in preventing violence such as occurred in some other southern states.” [3/3/84]

While Gressette's leadership battling integration made him a symbol of intransigence, later actions reflected his ability and willingness to evolve and change as South Carolina society changed. In 1972, he was instrumental in helping draft legislation to establish a permanent state agency, the Human Affairs Commission, to work toward eliminating and preventing racial discrimination. He supported legislation in 1978 that proclaimed Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a state holiday and played a key role in helping draft a desegregation plan for state colleges and universities in 1981. Governor Riley best summarized Gressette's character at a memorial service held in the Senate chamber on March 6, 1984,-- "There were times over the years that Senator Gressette and I disagreed on the floor....But without exception I always found him to be an honorable opponent, a man of great integrity, and unflinching courtesy, a man of respect."

Scope and Content Note:

The L. Marion Gressette Papers consists of 10 linear feet of material, c.1920 to 1984. The collection contains primarily public papers chiefly dating from the 1970s to 1984. A small but significant group of records dates from 1953 to 1956. The collection is arranged in five series: General Papers, Topical Files, Speeches, Audiovisual Material, and Clippings.

General Papers, 1953 to 1956, and 1971 to 1978, includes correspondence with constituents and colleagues, notes, reports, and legislative records. Letters dating from 1953 to 1956 offer revealing insights into South Carolina's political climate during a period of heightened racial tension and uncertainty concerning the future of the national Democratic Party in South Carolina. Correspondence between Gressette and other members of the Democratic Executive Committee addresses the need for South Carolina Democrats to work together to get the state, as one Democrat wrote, "back in harness." Many political colleagues, confident of Gressette's legislative acumen and popular appeal, also wrote encouraging Gressette to run for governor or seek a South Carolina Supreme Court nomination. Other 1950s correspondence regards the Calhoun County Legislative Delegation, the Highways Department, Clemson University, and Winthrop College. Papers generated during the 1970s focus on issues such as unemployment, education, and the South Carolina Finance Equalization Act.



Topical Files, 1965 to 1983, chiefly consists of legislative files that represent Gressette's committee work as well as issues of local, state, and national interest. Extensive files document Gressette's role in helping defeat the ratification of the Equal Rights

Amendment in South Carolina between 1971 and 1978. This material consists of correspondence, newsletters, advertisements, and petitions for or against the ERA, as well as papers relating to the International Women's Year Conferences held in Columbia in July 1977, and in Houston, Texas the following November.



As first vice chair of the Senate Education Committee, Gressette strongly opposed the movement to make Winthrop College co-educational. The collection contains correspondence from Winthrop alumni and constituents between 1965 and 1975, as well as reports and statements from various organizations and individuals, including the transcript of a 1972 Senate Education Committee hearing discussing the future of Winthrop. Extensive newspaper clippings about this issue are located in the Clippings series.

Papers reflecting Gressette's participation in the South Carolina State Reorganization Commission date from 1972 to 1983. These include meeting minutes, information related to the Commission's history and budget, and responses of several state agencies to a questionnaire designed by the Commission to assess an agency's organizational structure, function, and programs. Records of the Commission's "Sunset Review," a process by which state agencies were assigned termination dates and required to document their progress to the Commission to remain in existence, constitute the majority of material between 1979 and 1983.

Gressette represented three counties between 1937 and 1984. Although he served Calhoun County throughout his entire career, re-districting expanded his representation to include portions of Orangeburg County in 1967 and Dorchester County in 1969. Records of his service in these two counties include correspondence, notes, reports, and drafts of budget appropriations. Documents relating to Gressette's service in the Calhoun County Legislative Delegation are not as voluminous as the Orangeburg/Dorchester material and are located in the General Papers series.



Although early material related to Gressette's role as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee is contained in General Papers, more voluminous later material, 1975 to 1980, is located in Topical Files. Letters from representatives of the Council of State Governments, the Lower Savannah Regional Planning and Development Council, the State Budget and Control Board, and the Rural Development Agency characterize the majority of papers. Other material includes transcripts of committee hearings held in 1979, records regarding sub-committee appointments made by Gressette between 1979 and 1980, and 1980 meeting minutes.

Speeches, 1950 to 1977, consists of handwritten and typed manuscripts. Topics of early speeches include segregation, budget appropriations, reapportionment, and federal and state relations. Gressette's speeches from the 1970s announce his support for then Lieutenant Governor John West during West's gubernatorial campaign and later in support of West's gubernatorial accomplishments.



Audiovisual Material, c. 1920s to 1983, is composed primarily of photographic portraits taken during various periods of Gressette's life, family portraits, and photographs with colleagues at various public and social events. A cassette recording dated May 26, 1978, begins with an unidentified speaker narrating the pivotal roles played by Gressette and fellow legislator and longtime friend Rembert Dennis in helping establish Orangeburg/Calhoun Technical College, and concludes with remarks from both senators. Another, dated March 26, 1981, records a "Testimonial Dinner" held in Gressette's honor, featuring the opening remarks of Governor Richard Riley and the keynote address of former governor John West, who declared Gressette to be "the number one man of our generation."

Clippings, 1924, 1955 to 1988, highlights legislative and social issues including topics such as race relations and government spending. Approximately one inch of clippings from the Gressette vertical file was added by staff.

Collection Inventory:

<i>PUBLIC PAPERS:</i>	
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<i>PERSONAL PAPERS</i>	<i>Box 8</i>
<i>SPEECHES</i>	<i>Box 8</i>
<i>AUDIO VISUAL</i>	<i>Box 8</i>
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- Children and IYC [*see also: Social Services, Department of*]
- Corrections
- Council of State Governments:
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- Education:
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 - Aviation Program
 - Educational Television
 - Financial
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 - Higher:
 - General
 - Citadel
 - Clemson College
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 - Winthrop College:
 - General:
 - 1953 - 1969
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 - Board of Trustees
 - Reports and Statements, 1965 - 1972
 - Sims, Harry [President]

- School Buses
- South Carolina Education Committee [*see also: Segregation*]
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- Technical/Vocational
- Elections and Voter Registration
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- Employment Security Commission
- State Employees
- Energy:
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- Fossil Fuels
- Nuclear
- Utility Companies [*see also: Public Service Commission*]
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- General
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- South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC)
- Highways Committee, 1973-1978

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 - Minutes and Memoranda
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Judiciary Committee [*see also: Bills and Legislation*]:

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- Hearings, 1979:
 - Product Liability
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- Minutes, 1980

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- Law, Committee on Unauthorized Practice of
- Legislative Council of the General Assembly
- Lower Savannah Regional Planning and Development Council
- Military and Veterans

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