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Secret, sensitive files were kept on Montgomery employes

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ROCKVILLE — Secret files containing derogatory information concerning the private lives of county employes were actively kept in Montgomery as late as 1971, despite vehement denials by county officials.

In a report Wednesday to County Executive James P. Gleason, State's Attorney Andrew Sonner said "information of a sensitive nature was placed in white business and brown paper envelopes," which county employes earlier alleged was used against them.

In 1974, a reporter for the Montgomery Journal, a county weekly, first revealed the existence of the secret files, and was subsequently fired by her editor for irresponsible reporting after County Executive James P. Gleason, county Personnel Director Ronald Lloyd and Chief Administrative Officer William Hussmann flatly denied that such files had ever been kept.

In October, 1974, the County Council instructed the Personnel Board to investigate the charges, but the board later concluded that no defamatory information could be located. In April, 1975, Sonner's deputies swept unexpectedly into the personnel office to "confiscate employes' files after Sonner was "tipped off" that certain information in the sealed brown envelopes was being destroyed.

Sonner said Wednesday he was now returning the seized files and closing the investigation, noting that "in the hours immediately preceding the seizure (of the files)," his office had been notified that evidence... "was being destroyed by those then in charge of the records, thus making prosecution for the alleged violations impossible."

Sonner, in a carefully written statement, told Gleason his office had concluded there was no evidence to support allegations that personnel records were "systematically" destroyed with any intent to violate the criminal laws of the State.

Further, there is "no substantiation whatsoever" for complaints that anyone in county government ever used data in the files with the intention of violating the criminal laws of Maryland, Sonner added.

But, Sonner continued, "you should know that, for many years, the Personnel Office retained and concealed

seized the files, Police Superintendent Kenneth Watkins, now retired, denied any knowledge of police connection with the files. The files alluded to in Sonner's report date back to the 1960s, when John P. Gaquin was Personnel Director and Watkins was a major in the Criminal Investigation Division and Captain of Detectives. Watkins has admitted he and Gaquin were close friends.

Gaquin served as Personnel Director for 21 years until 1972. He committed suicide in January, 1974. In Sonner's report to Gleason, he stated that "we have no knowledge of how the

material (secret files) was used or for what purpose it was maintained." According to county sources, Gaquin had "tremendous power, reaching beyond his scope as Personnel Director."

Sonner's investigation into the personnel files followed on the heels of a State's Attorney's probe into alleged wrongdoing in connection with the issuance of county contracts. One of those contracts, dealing with the Public Service Training Academy (Fire and Police) in Gaithersburg, is still under scrutiny.

within its records, in white business and brown paper envelopes, information of a derogatory nature which, in our opinion, ought not to have been so

Pointing out there was no means by which employes could challenge the information contained in their files or protect against its improper use, Sonner said the "very existence of the information... did encourage suspicions that it was being used improperly."

Among the "questionable" material Sonner found in the files were reports of political activities and beliefs of employes, police reports of allegations of criminal activity by them and members of their families, reports of background investigations by the Police Department, and reports of evaluations of employes' mental health.

Montgomery's new police chief, Robert di Grazia, said that, if Sonner's reports are true concerning police involvement in the information gathering process, "I wouldn't want to see that sort of operation (non-criminal activity surveillance) in any police department."

In April, 1975, after Sonner's office