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Thirty and Counting: A Personal Perspective on the Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists

Ellen Garrison

Fifty-seven issues. Two hundred and sixty-three articles. Four thousand four hundred and twelve pages. No matter how impressive, those numbers alone cannot tell the story of Georgia Archive and its successor Provenance. The numbers simply represent the dreams, ideas, and hard work of the journal’s editors, staff, and editorial board members and the commitment of the Society of Georgia Archivists to the journal through thick and thin in its thirty-year history.

David B. Gracy II established the journal in 1972 to “serve all who work with Georgia's archival resources.”¹ He planned to publish both descriptions of repositories with collections of interest to academic scholars and features that would “enhance the skills of Georgia’s growing community of archivists.” During his five-year tenure, Gracy did publish occasional articles about Georgia records in out-of-state repositories and


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regular reports of new accessions by Georgia repositories.\(^2\) However, by 1977 papers presented at meetings of the many new regional archival associations and other articles on archival topics dominated the journal’s pages.

A 1974 *Georgia Archive* article by Archivist of the United States James B. Rhoads, exploring the growth of these new organizations, explains why the priorities of the journal had changed so quickly. According to Rhoads, the new regional associations had developed to provide an outlet for the interests and skills of the host of recent entrants into the profession and “a mechanism for talent to surface.”\(^3\) SGA’s fledgling journal met the same need, offering budding authors a venue in which to begin their careers with help from the journal’s staff. It also provided a link between the increasingly complex profession and its practitioners in the region. In fall 1975 *Georgia Archive* became the only regional archival publication to receive the Award of Merit from the Society of American Archivists for its contribution to the profession.

Ann Pederson, the journal’s second editor, continued David Gracy’s practice of working with sometimes inexperienced authors to bring new viewpoints and ideas to the archives profession, solidifying the role that the journal would play in the burgeoning world of archival publishing.\(^4\) Although this proved to be a daunting task, one that demanded much of the journal’s staff, subsequent editors honored Pederson’s pledge. Over the next twenty-five years, many archivists whose work would later enliven the pages of national journals made their

\(^{2}\) The last article about collections that documented Georgia history appeared in the summer 1976 issue of *Georgia Archive*. Thereafter even articles dealing with Georgia records focus on archival problems and practices, not on the research potential of the records.


\(^{4}\) Pederson also gave the journal a new look with custom layouts, typeset pages, and illustrations. Modifications of appearance and production methods over the years have been another hallmark of the journal, which is now produced by computer and carries an illustration on its cover.
first appearance in print in the pages of *Georgia Archive* or *Provenance*.

By 1979 a beleaguered Pederson, faced with dwindling financial resources and "too much work for too few willing hands," experienced the journal's first crisis. She responded by seeking unsuccessfully an institutional sponsor and expressed the journal's willingness to relocate and change editor in return. When a membership poll in spring 1979 gave a clear mandate to continue publishing and strengthen the journal, two ideas went forward: 1) broaden the journal's acceptance through a name change and 2) explore cooperative publication arrangements with other archival groups.

Meanwhile, members of SGA soldiered on to safeguard the contribution that the society's journal made to the archival profession. The journal long had followed contemporary issues and the new editor, Linda Matthews, continued that practice thereby insuring that *Georgia Archive* would continue to be a bridge between national concerns and archivists in the region. The journal had long followed contemporary archival issues, and this tradition continued in the 1980s. First local records, then outreach took center stage in the journal's pages, followed by documentation strategy, non-textual records, and functional appraisal. An examination of the then-new SPINDEX system had appeared in 1980, and automation has proved to be a pe-

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5 *Georgia Archive* encouraged the creation of additional regional publications by featuring an article on the new Society of Southwestern Archivists and its newsletter in 1976, the same year *Midwestern Archivist* (later renamed *Archival Issues*) also first appeared.


7 The next year two different regional organizations independently approached SGA about the possibility of copublication, but no agreement was reached after lengthy negotiations.

8 This emphasis began with the 1977 issue, which featured three perspectives on the debate then raging over the proper place of the "activist archivist," a topic *Provenance* revisited in a 1987 issue that included a follow-up article by one of the original contributors.
rennially popular topic with the journal’s contributors as have archival education and the work of its practitioners and participants.

The journal’s editors have always solicited contributions among archival educators. *Georgia Archive* first published a student paper in 1977, and seventeen years later essays by students of guest editor Richard Cox (who was himself one of the journal’s earliest and most prolific contributors) filled a special double issue of the journal (1994-1995). In another effort to nurture fledgling professionals, the editorial board has recently created “Fresh Focus,” a feature proposed by David Gracy specifically for work by archival students.

The year 1982 found the society in healthier financial condition, and its membership reaffirmed support for the journal and changed the journal’s name to *Provenance* to reflect a new regional orientation. The next issue on “Archives in the Southeast” featured both an examination of the recently completed state needs assessment grants by the director of the National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and comments on the “problems and prospects for archives” in the region by colleagues from five neighboring states. These efforts brought to light a wealth of talent in the southeast, but a formal copublication arrangement among the southeastern state organizations never developed.

Sheryl Vogt, who became the journal’s longest-serving editor to date (1985-1989, 1993, 1996-2001), used a variety of methods to attract up-and-coming authors. While associate editor she created “Short Features,” a section that provided a forum for describing research and grant projects, sharing methodological innovations, circulating literature reviews, and offering professional observations and opinions that enlarged the pool of potential contributors. When she became editor she continued the position of associate editor who worked intensely with...

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9 An exceptionally prescient 1985 article on the impact of technology on archives would seem right at home in this issue, so accurate were its predictions.

one or two authors to develop their manuscripts. She and her successor Margery Sly (1990-1992) also actively recruited board members from other southeastern states in order to entice contributors and extend the journal’s scope and audience.

Archival publications, in general, have had difficulty attracting submissions since the early 1990s, and journal editors no longer had the luxury of simply waiting for material to arrive. So Vogt along with David Klassen, editor of the American Archivist, developed and led a series of workshops at meetings of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) designed to encourage archivists to write for publication. Representatives from the Archival Issues editorial board later joined the team in leading similar workshops at regional meetings. Theme issues proved to be a particularly effective way to bring previously unpublished contributors, many from outside the field of archives, to the journal’s readers.

Today SGA board members and Provenance staff troll meetings of national, regional, and local archival associations, as well as gatherings of related information professions and historical associations, for prospective articles. They also send letters and flyers to the growing cadre of archival educators and interrupt conversations at professional social events to suggest that a colleague’s idea “would make a great article for us.”

Occasionally in recent years the lack of material has even resulted in lapses in the journal’s production schedule. During this period Provenance, like other national and regional publications, has had to reduce the number of issues published annually. At times members of the society almost feared that the oldest regional archival journal in America, and the only one published by a single state organization, might not survive to see its next anniversary.

Georgia Archive/Provenance has endured, however, because of the willingness of its editors to adapt the journal’s format and content to the changing needs of its readers and the ability of the journal’s staff to nurture contributors from a variety of backgrounds and skill levels. The editors and the journal

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staff have also shared a dedication to their work as mentors and to the flexibility and tenacity such dedication demands.

A commitment to link archivists in the southeast to national developments and issues through a professional journal has been a hallmark of the Society of Georgia Archivists for thirty years. I have been privileged to be part of that adventure for most of those years. During that time the other members of the staff and editorial board and I have always regarded our labors first and foremost as a service to the society and to the archival profession.

Now our successors have begun another thirty years in the same spirit. We wish them well. May they find as much satisfaction in their journey as we did in ours. And may they continue to enjoy support of the society’s entire membership. The journal cannot survive with anything less.

Ellen Garrison is an associate professor of history at Middle Tennessee State University where she is developing courses in archival administration. She published her first article in the third issue of Georgia Archive, became the journal’s book review editor in 1977, and has served as a member of its staff or editorial board ever since. During her term as editor from 1982 to 1984, she oversaw the conversion of the journal from Georgia Archive to Provenance.