January 1980

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Recommended Citation

Shaw, Barton C., "From the User's Perspective: Research in Georgia Archives," Georgia Archive 8 no. 1 (1980).

Available at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol8/iss1/5

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FROM THE USER'S PERSPECTIVE: RESEARCH IN GEORGIA ARCHIVES

Barton C. Shaw

About fifty years before the birth of Christ, a fire destroyed part of the holdings at the Great Library in Alexandria, Egypt. In A.D. 273 the Roman Emperor Aurelian also did his bit to thin the collection when he put Alexandria to the torch during one of his campaigns. And in the fourth century, a Christian mob broke down the doors of the repository and further decimated the holdings. By the fifth century, it is safe to say that archivists in Alexandria had had their fill of fire, war, and Christians. What once had been a magnificent collection, containing hundreds of thousands of scrolls, was now little more than a ruin. Yet, during much of this period, scholars continued to journey to Egypt, intent upon study at the Great Library. They were undoubtedly disappointed by what they found, and probably complained to the archivists about the rather glaring gaps in the holdings. Why, scholars may have wondered, had more not been done to protect the collection?

At least in a symbolic sense, I suspect the tension between archivists and scholars began in Alexandria: the scholars aghast at what had been lost, the archivists thankful for what had been saved. In an amiable sort of way, this dispute continues today. When archivists remind us of the miraculous discovery of a portion of the James Boswell papers in Boulogne, France, English professors will glumly note that many of the Boswell letters were lost when a French restauranteur accidently used them to wrap sausages. When archivists point out that there exists, contrary to popular belief, a great trove of Warren G. Harding papers, historians will moan that perhaps the best part of the collection was burned by Mrs. Harding. In short, many scholars believe that too little is being done to preserve past records.

Up to a point I think archivists would agree. More than anybody they realize that many valuable documents do, in fact, disappear. On the other hand, they are likely to observe that the extent of their work is frequently proportional to their budgets. Archivists are also apt to observe that while scholars are always ready to use public and private repositories, at least some fail to give archivists the support they need.

When I selected the history of the Georgia Populist party as a dissertation topic in 1975, I began to learn something about the frustrations of research and the realities of the archival profession. The Populist movement started in this state in 1892 and lasted until
1910. Although I was dealing with less than twenty years of Georgia history, I hoped to find a sizable number of manuscript collections. The papers of a number of prominent Georgians—Tom Watson, Hoke Smith, Rebecca Latimer Felton, and William J. Northern—had survived. But I was dismayed by how much had been lost. Fire had taken a terrible toll upon state records. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the courthouses of Georgia burned with uncanny regularity. The great Augusta fire of 1916 also consumed valuable documents.

Even more disheartening was the loss of the papers of Eugene Talmadge, Clark Howell, and Joseph M. Brown. During each of his three terms as governor, Eugene Talmadge would slowly fill his basement with a mass of documents and letters concerning his administration. At the end of each term, Talmadge would haul all the papers to his backyard and burn them, apparently for no other reason than to tidy up his cellar.

A similar fate awaited the Clark Howell papers. Howell, who was editor of the Atlanta Constitution and a power in state and national politics, left a group of papers in his attic. Unfortunately, the Howell family was reluctant to part with this collection. When the Howell home and its contents passed into other hands, an archivist quickly asked the new owners if he might examine Clark Howell’s papers. This, the new owners replied, was impossible. A short time before, they had thrown out all the rubbish that had been in the attic.

The Joseph M. Brown collection perished in a similar manner. Brown, who was governor of Georgia from 1909 to 1911 and from 1912 to 1913, also left papers in his family home. When the house was remodeled, a scholar saw a chance to acquire the collection for his university. He went to the Brown house and evidently talked to the contractor who was in charge of the remodeling. Yes, the contractor said, there had been some old papers in the house. Then he pointed to an ash heap where his men had burned them a day or two earlier. A few of the letters had failed to catch fire and had blown across the lawn. These the historian gathered up. They are virtually all that remain of the personal papers of Joseph M. Brown.

Such events did little to facilitate my research on Georgia Populism. They did, however, force me to think about the problems of archivists in general and Georgia archivists in particular. How were they to preserve the past, if the past could so easily be destroyed when a courthouse burned, when a governor tidied up his basement, or when a contractor disposed of what he thought was old rubbish? To a considerable extent the documents that had survived had done so by happenstance. But there were even greater problems. Much of Georgia's history had been forged by men and women who were illiterate, or nearly so. Beyond a marriage license, a birth record, or an inscription on a tombstone, many left almost nothing to remind us of their existence. Because many Populists could barely write, this problem became all the more important to me.

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Once my research had begun, I became fairly familiar with the archives of Georgia. These repositories aided my work in countless ways. Almost invariably, their collections were well organized, their reading rooms comfortable, and their staffs competent. These archivists proved to be helpful in even informal ways. On many occasions they gave me the phone numbers of persons they thought might be of aid, and thus I was able to discover people who were working on topics similar to mine. This made my research all the more pleasant and fruitful.

I have since learned that the question of privacy has become a controversial point among archivists, and some object to making public any information about their patrons. I do not claim to understand all the legal and professional implications of this dispute, but I can at least give you my own opinion, based upon recent use of Georgia repositories. It seems to me that a certain amount of secrecy is valuable. But I see no reason why most research topics should not be made public. To do anything else would be a disservice to scholarship. At best, such privacy would keep researchers with similar interests from exchanging ideas; at worst, it might allow two scholars, both blissfully ignorant of each other's existence, to devote years of work to the same topic. The chances of this occurring increase considerably when researchers from separate disciplines examine the same topic, and the normal grapevine of gossip breaks down. Indeed, researchers from different fields have few links other than the archivist.

Of course there are cases in which it would be uncalled for to divulge research topics. For obvious reasons reporters and free-lance writers often do not want to have their subjects revealed, and their wishes should be respected. How, then, can archivists protect privacy and still promote scholarship? It has been suggested to me that there is an easy way to solve this problem. When a patron registers at a repository, he should be handed a card explaining the value of making research topics public and asking him to register his topic but giving him the choice of keeping his subject private.

As I continued my study of Georgia Populism, I soon learned that in many ways Georgia is doing a commendable job in preserving its written records. The Georgia Department of Archives and History is attempting to bring together under one roof many important documents. The University of Georgia is currently trying to microfilm all extant issues of the state's old newspapers—again an immense aid to scholars. And some archives are even beginning to expand their collections beyond Georgia and southern interests. Emory University, for example, recently bought a portion of the William Butler Yeats papers.

This is not to say that the archives of Georgia are without failings. The letters and documents of plain people are sorely missing. Georgia repositories are largely filled with the papers of politicians, ministers, lawyers, and businessmen—the sorts of people who dealt principally in words. Without denying that historians still study these kinds of individuals, it is also true that such subjects are
hardly on the frontier of the profession. A few years ago the history of blacks, Chicanos, Indians, and other minorities was in vogue. Now the history of sports and recreation promises to be a closely examined subject in the near future. Other subjects are also gaining the attention of historians, including children, the family, conservation, prostitution, industrial architecture—the list can go on and on.

Yet some archivists, like some historians, seem to be only dimly aware of these new interests. Possibly this is an example of ignorance being bliss. It is hard enough to acquire, organize, and preserve the papers of a politician. But how does an archivist collect and preserve the experiences of children, our most inarticulate citizens? Yet they do have an oral tradition and they do leave records, if only schoolroom drawings.

The question remains: how can archivists, with all their many duties, keep abreast of the latest developments in the historical profession? And how can an archivist, even an expert on history, know about recent happenings in literature, science, the arts, and other fields? With all the specialization common to academe, it is not very helpful to exhort archivists to read more.

Instead, I suspect, this is an area in which the scholar can be of assistance. It is vital that archives take advantage of consultants who know, among other things, that they have an obligation to keep archivists up-to-date. Moreover, archival journals should invite scholars to write about the latest interests of researchers in their fields. It should not be too difficult to gain the ideas of academics. Most have a weakness for the soap box and the captive audience. In addition I think—perhaps I should say I hope—the day has passed when any scholar needs to be told that the success of an archives depends totally upon the archivist.

Few things are as pleasant as giving advice, but I have to admit that none of my suggestions would have saved the papers of Clark Howell, Eugene Talmadge, or Joseph M. Brown. Nor, for that matter, would they have prevented the Christians from sacking the Alexandrian Library. These suggestions might, however, make the archives of Georgia even more helpful to future scholars. And, if nothing else, they may prepare the archivist for that terrible day when a bespectacled historian walks in off the street and asks, "What do you have on Atlanta children in the 1950's?"