January 1983

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"STARTING AN ARCHIVES": A DECADE LATER

Kaye Lanning

In the premier issue (fall 1972) of Georgia Archive, David B. Gracy II described some of the planning and preparation required to start an archives. Ten years later, his extremely popular article is still being studied by archivists who are beginning new operations as well as by those trying to make existing organizations more efficient and usable. Since the article appeared, archivists have rethought old practices, learned from experience, and borrowed techniques from friends in libraries, records management, and computer programming. Sources for professional development and education have broadened, financial situations have grown perhaps less certain, and the quantity and types of materials being collected have expanded. Technology has given new hope for processing massive amounts of materials. Also during this time, new archives have opened while others have expanded their staffs and their areas of collecting. Still the purpose remains the same as that stated by Gracy in 1973, to preserve and make available for research historically valuable materials—whether they be volumes, manuscripts, correspondence, microfilm, or computer tapes and disks.

In LaGrange, Troup County, Georgia, much time has been spent recently in planning and starting an archives. Several years ago, citizens began to express concern that a lovely old bank building on Main Street was falling into decay. In 1976 a Victorian jail was converted into the Chattahoochee Valley Art Association, and people hoped similar use could be found for the bank. Also, the Georgia legislature authorized local municipalities to maintain their records and provide care for historically valuable volumes and papers. The Troup
County Historical Society, with the support of the Callaway Foundation, decided an archives to care for city and county government records and other local records would be an appropriate institution to house in the sixty-five year old bank building. A new archives was conceived.

Archival planning began at this point. Archivist Richard Kesner, then of the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University, was consulted. Building plans were drawn which met archival requirements for records rooms and processing space. The plans included specifications for security provisions and temperature and humidity controls.

Planning continued with the hiring of archivist Faye Phillips as director. Beginning in July 1982, she worked with contractors to see that the building was finished, with salesmen to equip the building properly, and with the community to familiarize them with the purpose of the archives. The author began work as archivist in January 1983 in time to do exhibits for the opening, to assist in developing procedures for use of the building and its holdings, and to start inventorying county records already transferred to the archives. Much planning has already gone into starting this archives; more will be done as the staff meets the basic archival responsibilities of collecting, preserving, and making available for research materials of enduring historical value—county and city government records, manuscripts, and genealogical materials documenting LaGrange's and Troup County's past.

In this article, Gracy's 1973 statements are examined in light of experiences of the staff and planners of the Troup County Archives in starting the new organization in the early 1980s. That his article is still relevant today is reflected in the fact that people who planned Troup County's archives shared many of his concerns. They realized the need to find qualified archivists in a profession with no certification and few prescribed steps for becoming an archivist. The planners recognized the need for adequate, long-term financial support. Knowing that
materials would be needed for collecting, they began thinking of photograph collections, family records, and printed materials which should be in the archives. They also discussed their concerns about the safety of county and city government records and those of local educational institutions. Finally, the planners were aware of the historical interest already in LaGrange—preservation of century-old homes and buildings is a topic familiar to many of the town's citizens. This base could be built upon to make the archives a true community asset.

In the early paragraphs of his article, Gracy discussed the reasons for establishing an archives. He stated, "The paper explosion of the twentieth century brings not only more documents to save but also more pressure to act."² The Georgia Records Act as amended (1982) gave the people of Troup County an impetus to consider starting an archives. The act mandates that each municipality, county, and school board in Georgia approve a records management plan and include provisions for the maintenance and security of the legal records documenting the activities of the department or office. With the director's appointment as records management officer for the county and the archives' designation as the repository for records of permanent historical value, the archives enabled the county and city to meet the General Assembly's specifications. Also, at this stage in discussing the need for an archives, efforts were made to ensure that the program would receive sufficient funding. The support of the Callaway Foundation in providing proper housing and the promised financial support of the county and city government for day-to-day operations gave members of the Troup County Historical Society sufficient assurances to continue their efforts to build an archives.

The next step, mentioned only briefly by Dr. Gracy but examined in other archival literature, was planning the building. Kesner was consulted and space was allotted for various archival tasks. The third floor has a workroom for processing activities,
a records room with 4,388 square feet of shelf space, an audiovisual room for microfilming and developing photographs, and a classroom and office space. The second floor is designed for use by the public. It has a large conference room, a meeting room which can seat seventy persons, offices for the historical and genealogical society, and a kitchen. The first floor contains a laboratory with work space for various conservation activities, a vault, photocopying equipment, office space, microfilm reading room, a large research room with shelving for reference and rare books, and a foyer or exhibit area. Security measures were part of the building plans from the very beginning. Fire and smoke detectors, fire-retardant doors for the records room, bells announcing a person's entrance into the building, and security alarms provide extra measures of protection needed by manuscript repositories. A former bank building, which last housed the Good Will Store, has been renovated into a modern archives.

The time had come to staff the new enterprise. After a search of several months, members of the historical society's Archives Committee selected Ms. Phillips as director. Her qualifications included eight years of working experience at several southern manuscripts repositories (including the Southern Labor Archives, with Dr. Gracy) and advanced degrees in history and library science. In both 1973 when Gracy wrote his article and 1982 when Troup County was looking for an archivist, standards for judging archivists' qualifications remained limited—experience and good judgment continue to be more important than specific degrees and particular skills. Then, as now, archivists need to possess a wide range of talents—archival competency; ability to work with employees, researchers, donors, and advisory board members; knowledge of records management and cataloging practices; and administrative expertise to develop budgets, apply for grants, and plan for growth. These talents and skills are needed as the director juggles roles as administrator, records manager, archivist, and
building maintenance supervisor. The variety of duties and demands have changed little since Gracy wrote.

After assuming her duties, Ms. Phillips began to staff the archives, to write a collection policy, and to develop a statement explaining what the archives does and does not do. The collection policy provides the archives staff a rationale for accepting certain materials and rejecting others and a framework for planning future development of the collection. The policies have been clearly stated and made available to interested researchers, donors, and persons providing financial support. The collection policy serves as one means of educating the public about the types of materials one might expect to find in the archives and the types the staff might be interested in adding to its holdings. Guidelines for general building use were also developed at this time. They were incorporated in press releases distributed for the dedication and included in brochures given to users and donors. The concern now, after several months of operating, is that the archives staff must abide as much as possible by the policy. Care must be taken to see that research materials which complement the goal of documenting and preserving the area's history are accessioned and inventoried. A properly outlined collection policy can do much to aid in future planning and to assure that a collection reflecting the objectives and reasons for existence is built.

Somewhere in the development of the archives, the front doors are opened—either quietly or with a well-publicized event announcing the commencement of a new operation. Troup County chose to have a formal dedication ceremony. The occasion was used to begin explaining to the community what an archives actually is; in Troup County, as elsewhere, few people knew. The gratifying support given by the community and fellow archivists through their presence and kind words at the opening provided welcome encouragement as the staff began a large but exciting task.

The very next morning after the dedication,
researchers wanting to use the collection had to be faced. Fortunately, before the opening, Gracy's advice to have materials available for research had been followed. One of the archives' groups, the West Central Georgia Genealogical Society, donated their collection of local and family history magazines and books. The archives staff added other county histories and reference books about the state. Though small, the collection is useful to both longtime and beginning genealogists. The books are shelved in an easily explained subject arrangement while cataloging, done mostly by Library of Congress MARC card orders, proceeds. This has meant that genealogists have been the most common early users but the staff expects to attract local historians, scholars, and other interested persons as more materials are made available. Gracy's point about having materials ready for use should not be overlooked—the books gave researchers materials to use, permitted the staff to devote their attentions to inventorying the first shipment of county records, and enabled the archives with its potential research value to stay in the minds of the public and possible donors. Over one hundred and twenty persons used the collection through research visits, calls, and letters during the first months of operation.

During this time, a microcomputer has been used to inventory over seven hundred volumes of county records. Researchers can go from census records to deed indexes to tax digests. The widespread use of computers and their applications in archives has been a major innovation since Gracy's writing and has enabled the Troup County Archives staff to avoid developing a huge backlog of unprocessed materials in the first few months of operation.

The Lanier E-Z 1 microcomputer at the archives combines word processing and basic computer (data managing) functions. The computer is used for listing government records and for indexing and describing both manuscripts and archives. The card catalog is for books and periodicals only. One computerized accessions list serves as a donor file,
a title index, a locations file (maybe major additions will not cause major headaches), and a chronological index. The list can be sorted to separate like items, that is, all maps carry the code MP- and an accession number. These codes can be sorted both alphabetically and chronologically to group the various types of materials included in the collection. The lists can also be used to determine the size of holdings or the size of recent donations; a couple of commands yield a statement regarding the number of linear feet, items, and volumes. The list also indicates which items have been processed or cataloged and when gifts were made. Finally, groups which have been inventoried are footnoted on this list. A separate file maintained for Accessions/Footnotes contains the inventories. Copies of these lists, inventories, and indexes can be produced at any time and, thus, can be easily updated. Also, lists produced for use by the public do not contain location or donor information; a holdings list notes only archives codes and numbers, titles, inclusive dates, sizes, and brief descriptions. Developing a subject index will be the next project.

County and city records also are being accessioned on the computer. Holdings are entered and like items—such as Superior Court minutes, for instance—are grouped together on the computer with locations indicated. Thus, the staff can avoid spending days physically shifting large volumes and boxes to get the items together on the shelves and can easily tell where gaps exist. The computer file also assists with records management; permanence or scheduled date of destruction are indicated.

Reference procedures have been developed and amended during this time. Since the archives is open to the general public, care must be taken to explain how hundred year old, decaying volumes should be handled. Sometimes people have to be instructed where they should begin their search of their family tree. (Of course, other researchers have chastised staff members for not researching their own families, emphasizing the thrill of finding a grandfather eight
Forms have been developed and decisions made about how detailed researcher registration will be. The basic rules and regulations researchers are expected to abide by have been written. Photocopying procedures and costs also have been determined. Throughout this, care was taken to avoid overwhelming users with forms and regulations while allowing the staff to operate a professional and secure archives which preserves rather than destroys its holdings.

Another vital part of daily operations proved to be public relations with donors, members of the parent organization, and the community. These public relations activities include everything from speaking to the Rotary Club and the Retired Teachers Association or showing slides to a classroom of fifth graders to giving the city manager a tour of the building as a reassurance that records are better cared for in archives than elsewhere. The director's public relations activities have been many and varied. Support of community members and interested community groups, such as historical societies or university history departments, will always be important to the success of archives. These groups may also prove to be valuable in seeking out other donors or in serving as allies in times of fiscal, legal, or other troubles.

A final area of planning, which seems appropriate to consider in this look back at "Starting an Archives," is for the future. In these early days of existence, the Troup County Archives is occasionally haunted by ghosts of the future. Will there be groaning in 1993 about the way things were done in the beginning and the problems caused by poorly rendered decisions? In 1983, is everything being done to make sure this will not be the case? Planning and deciding what procedures and policies to use take time. Following the guidelines chosen while still being flexible will not be easy. Even deciding what information to include in computer inventories is time consuming. The hours could be spent cataloging more books or arranging photographs; yet, it is hoped.
that by taking the time today—and next year and the years following—to do the job right, tomorrow's archivists may avoid grudgingly living with what was done or having to redo work. Troup County Archives in 1993 will not be perfect, but the present staff intends to work hard to see that it is at least a very good archives with a sound records program.

The future holds other concerns as well. Will the financial bases be sound? Should steps be taken now to build an endowment? Should an off-site storage area for proper records management of county and city records be used to save work in the future? Will archivists be prepared, through education, experience, and professional development, to meet the demands of 1993 and, later, the twenty-first century? Is formal computer training needed for survival? Is one certified records manager, in the person of the director, enough? The questioning and the thinking about the future goes on. The important thing, whether at institutions six months or sixty years old, is that archivists think about their institutions and their profession and begin preparing for the future today.

These are certainly not the only steps required for starting an archives, but they are points to be considered in beginning operations. They are also concerns David Gracy had ten years ago. Today, as then, each situation continues to be different from the next, but much can be gained by looking at the experiences of others. Older institutions can learn from the experiences of newer ones, and new institutions will certainly be, as Troup County Archives is, in debt to the archivists at older facilities who have already faced the same problems and offered their assistance and advice when asked. It should be remembered that different types of archives—university, historical society, religious, government, and business—share many of the same goals and problems of preserving and making available for research materials of historical value. Archivists should also remember Gracy's closing statement:
Yet, it is the good judgment and careful planning of the archivist that finally combines the principles of the profession with the specifics of the occasion to produce an effective archival operation.3

NOTES

2 Ibid, 20.
3 Ibid, 29.