

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Lanning Minchew, Kaye, "Lessons Learned While Saving the Georgia Archives," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 31 no. 1 (2013).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol31/iss1/6>

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Lessons Learned While Saving the Georgia Archives

By Kaye Lanning Minchew

Essay/Opinion

The Georgia Archives was authorized in 1918 and opened in 1919 and has had a long and proud history. The new building opened in Morrow in 2003 with state-of-the-art storage vaults and preservation lab. Then, in September, 2012, Brian Kemp, the Georgia Secretary of State who was the elected official over the Archives, announced that the archives would be open only by appointment starting in November and would be staffed with only three employees. An outcry arose. With assistance from Governor Nathan Deal, the Georgia Archives remained open without appointments and with five staff members. Following passage of legislation a few months later, the Board of Regents took over operation of the Archives. Starting July 31, 2013, the Archives has been open four days a week and will be adding staff members bringing the total up to eight full-time employees. Along the way, supporters of state archives have learned many lessons.

Since 2008, the Georgia Department of Archives and History has absorbed numerous budget cuts as the economy of the State of Georgia and the United States worsened. The Archives had been part of the Georgia Secretary of State's office for over eighty years. When monies had to be saved within the Secretary's offices, the Archives always took their share of the cuts. Since the Archives has always been a relatively small state department, even the initial cuts hurt. Archival and building supplies were used more carefully. Staff also experimented with things like adjusting settings in vaults to see if temperature and humidity levels could be maintained within recommended archival ranges while also saving money. After a few years of cuts, several staff members had lost their jobs or taken early retirement and the number of days the archives was open to the public started to decrease. An onerous lease agreement with an escalation clause negotiated during construction of the building only made the situation worse.

By October, 2011, the Archives was open to the public for the fewest number of hours of any state archives in the country. That fall, interested supporters of Georgia Archives organized the Coalition to Preserve the Georgia Archives at the suggestion of then State Archivist David Carmicheal. Ken Thomas and I agreed to co-chair the Coalition. We knew we needed to work with historical, heritage, genealogical and related organizations in Georgia to increase support and awareness of the Archives. The Coalition, with support from the Friends of Georgia Archives and History (FOGAH), Society of Georgia Archivists (SGA), Georgia Genealogical Society (GGS), Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board (GHRAB), and others, quickly got to work. Various members of the coalition approached members of the Georgia legislature and worked with staff at the Georgia Secretary of State's office. A legislative breakfast in the Secretary's offices was well attended by members of the legislature plus representatives from the archives, genealogical, and historical communities. During the 2012 legislative session, the Coalition succeeded in getting an extra \$67,500 from the legislature. The legislative budget stated the funds were to keep the archives

open extra hours. The Archives was the only department under the Secretary of State to get extra funding that session.

In May, we learned from Secretary Kemp that the extra funds from the 2012 legislative session would go toward the rent payments even though a few weeks later, staff expected that the Archives would be open an extra day per the legislative budget. In summer, 2012, members of the Coalition began to develop a new strategy to reach out to the Governor and legislators. One task was to collect letters from a wide variety of organizations asking the Governor to increase financial support of the Archives. Then Governor Deal announced that all departments of State Government needed to save three percent of their budgets. Georgia's economy had begun to improve and sale tax collections had started to increase but rising medical costs in the state were a major concern. The Georgia Constitution requires a balanced budget. The state cannot spend any more money than it brings in. Archives supporters realized another budget cut might result in even more Archives staff losing their jobs.

Then on Thursday, September 13, 2012, shocking news came from the Secretary of State. Kemp reported that all of the budget cuts from his offices, including corporations, elections, and licensing, would come entirely from State Archives. This would mean that seven of the ten remaining staff would lose their jobs and the Archives would be open two days a week *only* by appointment starting November 1. Certainly, the Secretary of State had to make tough choices but Georgia's history and archives were at risk as the Secretary tried to save \$795,000!

Fortunately, *Georgia had organizations ready to act*. We never expected such cuts but *we were somewhat prepared when the crisis hit*. The Society of Georgia Archivists had developed its communication skills and contacts with the media and other archival organizations through the years. The Coalition, GGS, and FOGAH had been making legislative contacts plus FOGAH had a solid budget and had been successful in recent years in raising funds for special projects. Plus, we had emails and addresses for several hundred historical, genealogical, and heritage groups in the state.

Reaction and expressions of shock came swiftly as the Secretary's press release went out to the public. Archival colleagues from around the United States and the world expressed their dismay. *Newspaper articles, plus reports on radio and television* began to appear. Supporters used social media to help get the word out. Various archives supporters stepped up to make sure that the word got out. The FOGAH website and Facebook pages carried almost daily updates. Elizabeth Dill of Valdosta started a petition on change.org asking the Governor to keep the Archives open. Signing the online petition meant that supporters in Georgia and beyond felt like they were doing something.

Just six days after Kemp's announcement, a large crowd turned out at the Capitol for the Governor's signing of a proclamation designating October as Archives month. The irony of celebrating Archives month just before the Georgia Archives closed to the public except by appointment was felt by all. The meeting with the Governor had been set up weeks earlier by members of the Society of Georgia Archivists, just as they have done for several years. Only 25

people could join the Governor because a large crowd had not been expected until Kemp made his announcement. Marie Force, President of the Society of Georgia Archivists, presented the Governor with a printout giving the names of over 10,000 people who had signed the online petition (the number soon grew to over 17,000). I gave the Governor almost 100 letters from organizations from around Georgia, the U.S. and Canada, asking him to reconsider closing the Archives. I was privileged to speak on behalf of the group and asked the Governor for his assistance in saving the Archives. He responded that he was there to help the Georgia Archives though he gave no specifics. The group naturally applauded and expressed our enthusiasm to the Governor. The press took note. Our group *had to take a public stance against the closing* and this meeting provided the perfect forum.

Having the petition with thousands of electronic signatures and having letters from archival and historical organizations made a dramatic impact. *The importance of social media cannot be overstated.* Social media in the form of Facebook, email, websites, and Twitter feeds, kept the issue alive between media reports. Having the enthusiastic support of colleagues in the historical, archival, and genealogical fields provided a tremendous morale boost to those of us in the trenches. The fact that officers and members of national organizations took the time to call, email and write letters expressing their support was noted by political leaders of the state.

The media kept the story going. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* carried several major stories. The *Clayton News Daily* had several stories on the issue occurring within their geographic area. WSB and WXIA television stations in Atlanta had reports. Georgia Radio Network and Georgia Public Radio updated the story periodically. We were fortunate to have a story in the *New York Times* early in the controversy. We were first able to speak to the *Times* reporter because someone met her brother at a conference. Several stories were picked up by the Associated Press and carried in newspapers statewide and nationwide and online sites. One of those stories was picked up by the *Huffington Post*. I was quoted in that article because I returned a call to an AP reporter one night about 8 p.m. *We had good success in reaching the press because we had a compelling story and we made ourselves available to the press when they had time to speak to us, including late in the day and on weekends.*

At this point, people from outside Georgia had done about all they could do. This had to be a Georgia fight from this point forward. The governor, Secretary of State, and Georgia representatives and senators *had to hear that Georgians cared* about their Archives – especially Georgians who would be voting in future elections!

Getting more organized became a priority. Committees were established and plans to keep the issue before the public were discussed. Ken Thomas and I began calling legislative leaders to ask for appointments and support. We met with Chris Riley, the Governor's Chief of Staff, and Representative Terry England, head of appropriations in the Georgia House of Representatives. Riley suggested that we consider all alternatives. The idea of moving the Archives from the Secretary of State to the Board of Regents began to officially be considered that day. The Board of Regents already operated several archives and special collections at public universities in

Georgia, plus nearby Clayton State University had a new graduate program to train professional archivists.

The need for a rally quickly became evident. People in Georgia needed something to do to publicly indicate their desire for the archives to be open regular hours with an adequate number of trained staff members. FOGAH and other groups organized the rally at the Georgia capitol because the Gold Dome is a central focal place in Georgia and the place to get noticed by the Governor, legislature, Secretary of State, and the press. Getting permission to have a rally at the state capitol was considerably easier and quicker than it would have been to have a rally in Morrow at the Georgia Archives. Close to three hundred people showed up for the rally on October 3. People had signs and came up with chants about the archives, plus the State Patrol stood by to make sure the rally stayed peaceful – all firsts in Georgia Archives history! Inside the capitol, former Georgia Congressman Bob Barr, historian Jim Cobb, Emma Davis-Hamilton of the African-American genealogical community, and others spoke of the importance of having an archives and having access to historical information. Political leaders spoke as well. State Senator Gail Davenport, State Representative Debbie Buckner, and Mayor J. B. Burke of Morrow addressed the crowd. Ken Thomas, Dianne Cannestra, and I also spoke about specific concerns of the Coalition and FOGAH. *The rally showed political leaders and the press that a wide variety of people were interested in the cause and would come out to express their opinions.*

After the rally, the question of how the Governor would fulfill the promise he made on September 19 to help the Georgia Archives remained unanswered. We learned that the Governor had no funds to help worthy causes. Also, while we considered this to be a dire emergency, the Governor's staff had trouble equating this to a natural disaster. The legislature could not help prevent the November closing since this occurred between legislative sessions. They would not meet again until January.

The question of how to continue this fight was debated among archival supporters. Should we try to get a government affairs consultant/lobbyist or should we sue the Secretary of State? If the archives had closed except by appointment, the State of Georgia might possibly have been in violation of Georgia laws which said records had to be open and accessible. The groups investigated both avenues and spoke to several attorneys and lobbyists. We quickly learned that suing would end much of our ability to talk openly with elected officials. People seldom comment about ongoing legal issues.

On October 18, Governor Deal announced that he would provide \$125,000 toward keeping the Archives open beginning November 1 with no appointments required. The number of layoffs was reduced, leaving the total number of employees up to five. With this news, the focus for future activities settled on getting the best government affairs consultant possible to work on the archives issue in the legislature. While we had had success the previous legislative session in working the House of Representative and Senators ourselves, we knew we would need much more in the coming year than the \$67,500 gained from the legislature in the winter of 2012.

FOGAH took the lead at this point. They interviewed candidates and chose to work with Joe Tanner and Associates. Joe Tanner felt strongly about the value of archives and the need to have records accessible to the public. After he and his team toured the state Archives, they felt even more strongly that we needed to do everything we could to protect our state's records and keep the archives in its state-of-the-art building. FOGAH had the 501(c)3 status and had a budget big enough to be able to devote some funds and energy toward the matter without endangering their non-profit status. They received several contributions to cover the costs and Tanner reduced his fee significantly and did some work pro bono.

In anticipation of passage of an Archives bill, Chancellor Hank Huckaby of the Georgia Board of Regents appointed an archives working committee comprised of several employees of the Regents' system and Dianne Cannestra, President of FOGAH. Tim Hynes, President of Clayton State University, chaired the committee. The committee considered various aspects of work done at the Archives and how the archives could best work within the university system.

At this point, we worked to get the word out in Georgia that the Archives was open two days a week with no appointments required. Joe Tanner and Associates worked with FOGAH to fine tune our message for the state legislature. The Society of Georgia Archivists began updating a very professional handout they first prepared in January 2012 to reflect the current situation. Tanner held training sessions at the SGA Fall Meeting and via conference calls. The goal was to have constituents reach as many of their own legislators as possible. We wanted them to talk with their representatives and senators either in person or by phone. If that failed, we wanted them to make contact by email or send a letter. We asked that constituents share the message that State Archives should be moved to the Board of Regents and an additional \$1.15 million dollars was needed to enable the archives to properly operate. *We wanted everyone to share the same message.*

Once the legislative session opened, the Archives bill was introduced and the waiting began. People gave periodic reports about discussions with legislators. We planned a breakfast for legislators and chose Valentine's Day. FOGAH provided food; SGA helped with the invitation. Joe Tanner recommended having a legislator invite the other representatives. We had about twenty or so representatives and senators visit. We briefly shared the Archives story, gave them the handout, and asked for their support. In mid-March, the House passed GA House Bill 287 unanimously, 170-0. Representative Matt Hatchett of Dublin, one of the Governor's floor leaders, sponsored the bill in the House.

Then the bill went to the Senate and the Higher Education Committee. We made contact with the Vice-Chair of the Subcommittee and others and emphasized the move to the Board of Regents and the need for an additional \$1.15 million. The bill soon passed the Senate unanimously. Senator Rick Jeffares of Henry County sponsored the bill. The Archives was transferred to the Board of Regents though with only \$400,000 added to the budget. Then on May 6, 2013, the Governor signed the bill. Several supporters were there along with Board of Regents representatives Steve Wrigley and Chancellor Hank Huckaby, Representative Hatchett and

Senator Jeffares. The signing gave us the opportunity to thank the Governor for his assistance in saving the Archives.

On July 31, the Archives began opening four days a week to the public. They added two reference archivists and will add a preservationist to their staff. Certainly a great battle to keep the Archives open to the public without appointments and with a reasonable amount of staff had been won. Still the Archives had 54 staff members in 2002 and will have eight by the end of 2013 with the addition of two reference staff members and a preservationist. Much institutional memory has been lost with the departures of several long time staff members. Many people heard about the threatened closing except by appointment of the Archives and still think the Archives is closed. *Staff will need to resume efforts to digitize records and make records accessible to the public through the Virtual Vault or its future incarnations. Staff will also need to redouble their efforts to make sure that records needed for the Archives are collected from State agencies.*

An equally large challenge remains. The interested public and archives supporters must realize that *now is not the time to relax. We cannot assume that everyone appreciates archives and recognizes the value of history. We also need to continue to seek additional funding for the Archives to increase staff.* Finally, we need to remember that *advocating for the Georgia Archives needs to be a routine part of life for archivists, historians, genealogists, and others who care about archives in Georgia.* We must continue to get to know legislators and the Governor. We want them to know about the archives and the many services provided there. We also want them to visit the archives to gain a better appreciation of the building and the services provided by the Archives. Fortunately, at least for now Georgia Archives and Georgia history not going to be lost to save the state less than \$1 million.

Kaye Lanning Minchew has served as co-chair of the Coalition to Preserve the Georgia Archives since 2011. She has served as the Executive Director of the Troup County Historical Society in LaGrange, GA since 1985. She oversees operations of the Troup County Archives and Legacy Museum on Main. She received a Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of North Carolina at Asheville, and Master of Arts in history and Master of Library Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is recipient of the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board Lifetime Achievement Award, 2007. She was named a Fellow by the Society of American Archivists in 2011 and by the Society of Georgia Archivists in 2009. She testified before Congress about NHPRC in 2010 on behalf of NAGARA. She has been a member of the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board since 1993 and board member of FOGAH since 2012.