

January 2013

The Georgia Archives Budget: An Unfolding Crisis

David Carmicheal

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carmicheal, David, "The Georgia Archives Budget: An Unfolding Crisis," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 31 no. 1 (2013) .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol31/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

The Georgia Archives Budget: An Unfolding Crisis

David W. Carmicheal¹

Essay/Opinion

On the morning of Tuesday, May 6, 2003, a small but enthusiastic crowd of archives staff and researchers gathered in the lobby of the just-completed Georgia Archives building. They were there to celebrate the opening of the building, which had been under construction since October 31, 2001. Excitement was high as I cut the ribbon with my Deputy Director, Brenda Banks. Then the researchers streamed in to explore and enjoy the new research room. They were optimistic about the future of the Archives and so was I. My optimism, though, was tempered by one reality: neither the Secretary of State (for whom I worked) nor any other state or local elected official had attended the opening. None had been invited. There were no grand speeches, no elaborate thanks to the partners who had realized our dream of a new building, no music, no press; none of the activities one would expect around the opening of the most important building the state had opened in many years. It was an early harbinger of things to come.

The new building was to be the tip of the spear in the Archives' budget woes. As state archivist, I had been given a very free hand in designing and constructing the building, but as a newcomer, I had watched the political and financial maneuvering from the periphery – sometimes included in the discussions, but not yet comprehending the unspoken questions and concerns that I would understand later. By the time of that ribbon-cutting in 2003 I realized two things: the building had become a politically sensitive topic, and our future depended almost entirely on future governors and legislatures maintaining the enthusiasm that had motivated construction of the facility in the first place. Both were huge challenges and both would prove almost insurmountable.

That the building was politically sensitive became obvious when the Secretary of State canceled plans to hold a formal, public opening of the building. I received word that there were those in her office who believed the building looked “too corporate” for a government building and that the Secretary might be accused of wasting taxpayers' money, a liability in any future campaign for statewide office. In retrospect, I believe the Secretary already realized something that all of us would understand soon: the political winds were shifting and a new outlook was coming to the Capitol, one that talked about reducing government, eliminating what it saw as wasteful spending, and one that looked for any example – real or imagined – of government excess. The Secretary understood that the new building could become a lightning rod of controversy for those willing to portray it as excessive and wasteful. The truth was quite different, but in politics the truth is very often drowned out by perceptions.

In fact, the Georgia Archives building had been constructed at a cost of just \$120 per square foot – the cost of constructing a middle school in 2003 Georgia – an amazing feat, given

¹ David Carmicheal was director of the Georgia Archives from 2000 to 2012.

that the building incorporated some of most advanced environmental controls available. Yes, its public areas boasted marble and were well-appointed (in some cases furnished with private funds), but the staff areas – though beautiful – were simple and functional, and all of the building’s beauty and function were achieved within the fixed budget. There were no requests for additional funds, no budget overages, no schedule extensions. The building came in on budget and on schedule. It was a story that should have been celebrated. That such a building went on to win the National Design Award from the American Institute of Architects only enhanced the story's appeal. But the building’s beauty proved to be its Achilles Heel. The next Secretary of State – elected on that wave of anti-tax fervor – would actively discourage the governor and legislators from visiting it. By the time a new Secretary of State began urging state officials to visit the building and recognize it as one of the state’s great assets, it was too late. The fervor that had motivated an earlier governor and legislature to construct the building had long since waned. This, as much as any other factor, would lead to the archives budget crisis.

Construction of the Georgia Archives was funded in an unusual way. The governor and legislature declined to fund construction through the state’s annual bond package. Instead, they authorized construction by a private company working in concert with a county development authority. The building would be constructed to our specifications, and then leased back to the state for fifty years. The lease was silent about the disposition of the building at the end of the fifty years, but the rent included a capital reserve fund that would grow for fifty years and potentially underwrite much of the cost of constructing a new building. The lease agreement – negotiated by the Secretary of State's Budget Office – included a rent escalator in which the rent automatically increased each year for the first thirty years. Later Secretaries of State and legislators would criticize this provision as too expensive and unfavorable to the state, but at the time – perhaps because real estate was booming – I heard no objections raised by anyone in state government.

Although the state was not funding the building through bonds, it was necessary for the Governor to include the first year’s rent in his fiscal year 2003 budget and it was necessary for the legislature to approve that budget. The Secretary of State insisted that the appropriations bill authorize the expenditure and, more than that, specifically authorize the Secretary to enter into the lease agreement. In retrospect, it seems that she was hoping to provide leverage in future budget negotiations; if the legislature authorized the lease, then future legislators would be morally (if not legally) obligated to fund the rent. Perhaps she foresaw the circumstances that eventually unfolded.

It took only four years for the first hammer blow to fall. The next governor did not share his predecessor's enthusiasm for the Archives, and his budget for fiscal year 2007 failed to fully fund the Archives’ rent. This first year's gap was just \$14,000, but subsequent budgets also failed to fully fund the rent until, by 2011, the gap between the rent and its appropriation was over \$120,000. This gap was in addition to the annual across-the-board reductions required of all state agencies. It was a pattern that could only spiral downward, and spiral it did. By 2011, the

Archives' rent, which had comprised 25 percent of the Archives' budget in 2001, consumed a whopping 60 percent of its annual budget. Nearly the reverse was true of salary expenditures: in 2001, the Archives had devoted 60 percent of its budget to salaries; in 2011 that figure was just 25 percent. All of this transpired during a time when the state archivist's own contact with the legislature was diminishing.

For many years the Archives had an excellent relationship with the state legislature, and the agency's budget issues normally received thorough attention and friendly response. The state archivist had always been permitted direct contact with legislators, both at the Capitol and in their home districts, and the Secretary of State actively supported efforts by the Archives to secure an adequate annual budget. In fact, in 2003 the Archives required a budget increase of \$590,000 in order to operate the new facility and, with the active support of the Secretary and direct contacts by the state archivist, the agency received nearly that entire amount. But by 2007 that changed when the Secretary of State determined that all contact with legislators would take place through the Secretary's legislative liaison. In fairness, there were legitimate reasons for such a restriction: legislators were increasingly critical of state employees roaming the Capitol during the legislative session and, in effect, lobbying for agency legislation. In response, the Secretary ordered all communications to be funneled through the legislative liaison. The effect on the Archives was predictably devastating.

The Archives is the outlier of the Secretary of State's Office. Other functions within the Secretary's purview are fairly easy to understand without lengthy explanation and their value to the state is essentially self-evident: the Elections Division, for example, is essential to free and fair elections, and the Corporations Division registers businesses (a popular function among "jobs-creating" legislators). These divisions touch a large number of Georgians in tangible ways, and every Secretary of State is understandably anxious to avoid the public exposure and outcry resulting from failure, or even slowdown, in any of these critical functions. Very predictably, these functions remained foremost in the thinking of the Secretary's legislative liaison, with the result that the Archives began to fade from the legislators' radar. Between 2008 and 2011, the Archives sustained cuts that were more than ten times greater than those required of Elections and Corporations.²

Any attempt to circumvent the Secretary's restriction on direct contact with legislators was doomed. The Secretary of State is an influential position and, in my experience, any request made of a legislator is almost immediately vetted with the Secretary by that legislator or his/her staff. The Archives staff continued to provide publicly available information to its supporters,

² See the budget documents online at http://opb.georgia.gov/sites/opb.georgia.gov/files/imported/vgn/images/portal/cit_1210/26/40/163051772gov_rec_fy09.pdf (p. 363) for the actual budget appropriation in FY2008, and http://opb.georgia.gov/sites/opb.georgia.gov/files/imported/vgn/images/portal/cit_1210/55/14/167205162State%20of%20Georgia%20Budget%20FY2012.pdf (p. 349) for the actual budget appropriation in FY2011. The Professional Licensing Boards (PLB) sustained even greater cuts than the Archives, but there seemed to be other political issues at play in that decision, and PLB began the period as the largest division of the Secretary of State's Office.

but it could make its case directly to legislators only when they visited the Archives building. In this respect, we were greatly aided by the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board (GHRAB), particularly by the annual GHRAB awards. About 2009 or 2010, I gave a tour to a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee. By then, we had laid off a large number of employees and he pointedly criticized me privately for having done so. Instead, he said, I should have reduced money for supplies or travel. I explained at some length why this had not been possible, but I could hardly tell him the entire story.

The first layoffs had come in 2008 (as part of the fiscal year 2009 budget). I had calculated that four layoffs would be required to meet the reductions, but I was ordered to lay off those four plus six additional employees and eliminate fourteen vacant positions. I was to submit the reductions in a format that could be publicized as a “staff reorganization.” I believed at the time (and still believe) that the additional layoffs were politically motivated, an attempt to show vigorous efforts at cutting government costs in anticipation of future election campaigns. In time, the six might have been laid off anyway – the budget reductions continued year after year and the Archives had little discretionary funding outside of salaries – but the timing was premature. I thought about that as I spoke to the legislator that night – I couldn't tell him that part of the story. Still, I had plenty to say: at the time, I was struggling to reduce the budget by yet another \$180,000. My supplies budget held a grand total of \$21,000 (down from \$100,000 in 2002), my travel budget another \$2,000 (down from \$20,000); the GHRAB grants no longer existed (reduced from \$100,000 in 2002 to zero); the Archives' rent was underfunded by \$120,000. In fact, all of the money reserved for discretionary spending (for items other than rent, salaries, and inflexible costs, such as gas, electricity, and water) constituted just 0.28 percent of the Archives' entire budget. Had I eliminated every penny of that money – purchased no supplies or postage or travel or printing whatsoever – it would have amounted to only about \$25,000 of the required \$180,000. “How,” I asked him, “was I to achieve that reduction without layoffs?”

The legislator professed to be stunned by the information, but occasional conversations with legislators were hardly enough to keep the Archives viable. For that we needed advocates in the form of citizens who cared enough about the agency to take their case to their legislators. Eventually, such a group arose, but it is a fact of life that most of us do not advocate until a crisis threatens – and then it is often too late. (I, for one, love libraries, but I admit I don't press this fact on my local elected officials unless they threaten to close the library or reduce its hours.)

The first efforts at advocacy were led (as they would continue to be led) by the Friends of Georgia Archives and History, the Georgia Genealogical Society, and the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board.³ The 2009/2010 advocacy effort was a learning experience for many people who had never before approached their legislators. I was encouraged by the increasing number of people who stepped up to make their voices heard, but that first effort was only as effective as most first efforts are. The archives reductions remained in effect and we absorbed

³ I avoided naming any individual advocates for the simple reason that I would almost certainly omit one or more names and end up offending someone. They (and many of you) know who they are. I am deeply grateful to them all.

them by reducing services and finding creative ways to cut energy costs (by, for example, removing two of every three light bulbs in most non-public areas). Still, the Archives advocates learned a great deal from their experience. They determined to return in greater numbers the next year, and they did.

The fiscal year 2011 budget became the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Reductions finally reaching the point where I was faced with a difficult decision: I could continue to fully staff the public-facing functions, such as reference, and eliminate the less public functions, or I could spread the reductions across the agency and reduce public hours. It was obvious to me that continuing the public functions alone would be futile; the Archives could no more operate without its behind-the-scenes services to state and local government agencies than a restaurant can operate without kitchen staff (few diners see them, but most would admit that they're essential). The reduction in public hours motivated the first well-organized and concentrated advocacy effort and it continued into fiscal year 2012 and beyond. The Secretary of State was supportive, and in early 2012 the advocates hosted a breakfast reception for state legislators in his office. That same year the advocates produced a professional quality, full-color booklet that succinctly and graphically explained the issues. Perhaps most importantly, they spoke with a single voice and expressed the problem and its solution in simple, unified terms. Their efforts began to pay off: the governor and legislature added funds to the amended fiscal year 2012 budget to shrink the rent gap. For the first time since 2006, the gap in rent funding began closing.

In early 2012, when I decided to resign my position as state archivist, I truly believed the worst was behind us. The budget appeared to have leveled off, state revenues had been rising each month for well over a year, and many were predicting that state agencies could look forward to several years of level budgets. We had recently concluded a deal that would provide significant rental income to the Archives, and all indications were that the state budget office would permit us to use those funds to offset our own rent expenses. The Secretary of State was actively pursuing a renegotiated lease agreement that promised to stabilize our rent in future. I hoped that within a few years the Archives would begin to see modest budget increases that would provide more adequate staffing and a return to full public hours.

My assumptions, however, proved too sanguine; the budget reductions continued. The recent transfer of the Archives to the Board of Regents is a positive step (one that I first advocated in 2011 when we transferred the Capitol Museum to the Board of Regents). In the University System, the Archives may find an environment that more fully appreciates its unique contributions to both research and public discourse. Ultimately, the Archives' troubles stem from a statewide lack of such appreciation.

The state archives is not a superfluous function of state government. It plays a vital role in Georgia's civic health and economic vitality:

- The Archives preserves the most important records of government – including every Act of the General Assembly – and provides open access to any resident who wants

to keep tabs on our elected officials. It provides that access without a fee, because the records were paid for and belong to the residents of the state.

- The Archives maintains legal records, such as the maps and surveys that prove our state's boundaries and the boundaries of our counties. During my tenure as state archivist, thirty-four counties questioned their boundaries in seventeen different disputes. All but one was settled amicably and, in fifteen cases, the dispute was settled at no cost after little more than an afternoon in the Archives and a handshake. Why? Because the Archives maintained records that clearly established the boundaries. In only one case did the Archives not have the required records, because the Archives did not exist when those records were created; as a result, those two counties have spent more than \$1,000,000 of taxpayer money trying (unsuccessfully so far) to resolve their dispute. Failure to preserve adequate records is a waste of tax dollars.
- The Archives houses records that have been used to make environmental decisions (where to reintroduce the American Chestnut tree in Georgia and what kinds of filters to place on power plant smokestacks), to stimulate business (how to make vineyards flourish in the hottest parts of the state and where to find caves that can be tapped for methane gas), and to support the state's position in legal disputes ranging from property disputes to water rights.
- The Archives attracts tourists from around the world, and those tourists stay in Georgia hotels, eat at Georgia restaurants, and shop in Georgia stores. One survey of out-of-state visitors to the Archives found that each stayed an average of four days or more and traveled to at least two other regions of the state during their visit.
- The Archives oversees the efficient management of records in all state agencies and provides assistance to local governments as well. In recent years the Archives has helped Savannah and other coastal towns protect their records from potential hurricanes and storm surges. Georgia taxpayers benefit immeasurably when their government records are managed efficiently and kept safe from disaster.

The last time the Archives was open regular hours and had anything approaching adequate staff was in 2010, when its budget was about \$5,400,000. That equates to an annual cost of just 55 cents per Georgia resident. So we might well ask: Why has our governor and legislature not found the will to spend 55 cents per resident to protect open government, stimulate business, and attract tourists? The answer can only be that Georgians have not demanded such expenditures because they do not understand the stakes. The state archives' story must be told repeatedly – not just during moments of crisis – until they do.

The long-term consequences of the budget crisis that has so weakened the state archives will be significant for the residents of Georgia, but without a basic understanding of the role the agency plays most Georgians will never appreciate that fact. The state archives and its supporters have a critical role to play in generating that understanding. They must exhibit and teach,

advocate to friends and relatives, legislators and governors and political candidates, but they must first and foremost have a personal understanding and conviction that archives matter, that historical context and authentic records matter, and that such things cannot be relinquished lightly.

David Carmicheal directed the Georgia Division of Archives and History from 2000 to 2012. During his tenure he oversaw the design and construction of the award-winning Georgia Archives building, introduced the Virtual Vault to provide online access to more than 1.5 million archival documents, and helped lead national efforts in emergency management, particularly for the protection of essential records. In 2012 he left the State Archives to establish a Department of Records and Information Management for the Atlanta Housing Authority, which focuses on document automation, the automation of business processes, and comprehensive content management across the agency.