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History Making History*

David B. Gracy II

What a wonderful occasion! A celebration of forty years of growing and strengthening the archival community of Georgia through association in the Society of Georgia Archivists. A celebration of forty years of service of the archival community of Georgia to the citizens of this wonderful and historic state. A celebration of forty years of contribution to the archival profession of the United States—no, not just the United States, but every part of the world where *Georgia Archive* and *Provenance* have been and continue to be read. This is a great occasion to bask in the pleasure of long-time and good company. It is the perfect occasion to look at where our Society of Georgia Archivists fits into the historical firmament of archival associations and how well we archivists are doing at telling the story of the contribution of archival enterprise to society.

* This address was presented at the Society of Georgia Archivists annual meeting in Savannah, Georgia on November 4, 2009.

ARCHIVAL ASSOCIATION HISTORY

The farthest we can go back with the history of archival associations is the formation by Dutch colleagues of the very first professional organization of archivists in 1891. The Dutch Association of Archivists is 118 years old this year. The SGA is forty—already one-third as old as the very oldest. In Georgia in the year of the founding of the Dutch Association, William Jonathan Northen was governor. Having a progressive streak, he established an agricultural and mechanical college for black students and a school for training teachers. Pertinent for us archivists, after leaving office he worked for a time as the state historian and utilized some archival sources in producing the multi-volume work, *Men of Mark in Georgia*.¹

The Society of American Archivists arose in 1936 and is seventy-three years old this year. At forty, the SGA is more than half as old as our national association—and gaining fast! Why, forty years from now, the SGA will be more than two-thirds as old as the SAA. In Georgia in the year of SAA's founding, Eugene Talmadge was serving the second of his three terms as governor. Unable to succeed himself, he ran for the U.S. Senate, but lost to Richard Russell, whose archival legacy alone justified the wisdom of the Georgia electorate in selecting him.

The International Council on Archives was established in 1950 and is fifty-nine years old. At forty, the SGA is more than two-thirds the age of the international organization—and gaining even faster! In the Georgia capitol, Eugene Talmadge's son Herman was too busy continuing his father's segregationist policies to notice the evolving archival community.

The Society of Georgia Archivists was formed in 1969. It was the fourth association of archivists founded in this country. Only archivists in Michigan in 1958 and Ohio in 1968 pioneered organization before Georgia. The single regional organization established ahead of the SGA—the South Atlantic (later Southeast) Archives and Records Conference, shepherded in large measure by our own A. K. Johnson whose booming voice could move mountains—came to life in 1966. An association of institutions rather than of archivists and lacking a formal structure, the SARC has left the scene. This vaults the SGA

¹ Gilbert Head to David B. Gracy II, email communication, October 29, 2009, in possession of the author.

to being the third oldest of now fifty-five (more if you list the SARC and others that have vanished) regional, state, and local associations of archivists listed on the SAA Web site.²

That's not a bad statistic for an organization whose president in 1989—the irrepressible and indomitable Kaye Minchew—wrote on our twentieth anniversary: “Twenty years of active service is a long time for an archival organization.”³ Oh, and look at you now!

Regarding the ferment in Georgia that birthed the SGA, I need to note two other facts of archival history. First, the SGA was founded two years *after* Carroll Hart, the director of the forward-moving Georgia Department of Archives and History, launched the Georgia Archives Institute to create educational offerings initially for her staff, then for paying students. This was the first archives institute established after the Modern Archives Institute at the National Archives and the first based outside of Washington. The archival community in the United States had reached a maturity such that its needs for expanded educational opportunities had to be met.⁴ Georgia's archivists formed the SGA two years later to meet the need yet more fully and widely.

Second, the SGA was established three years *before* the SAA, then thirty-three years old, issued its first newsletter. Georgians responded even faster than our national organization to the swelling demand for fostering communication among practitioners in the rapidly growing archival community.

Occupied with the increasingly difficult work of continuing the government's segregationist policies, Lester Maddox doubtless failed to notice the gathering of Georgia archivists in 1969. Two years later in 1971 in the very next gubernatorial election, Jimmy Carter was swept into office and ushered in a progressive period, especially in regard to archives.

² Virginia J. H. Cain, “State and Regional Archival Organizations Serve the Southeast,” *Provenance* 2 (Spring 1984): 16-17.

³ Kaye Lanning Minchew, “Foreword,” *Society of Georgia Archivists: 20 Years In Celebration, 1969-1989: Setting The Record Straight Since 1969* (n. p.; Society of Georgia Archivists, [1969]), v.

⁴ Linda M. Matthews, “The Georgia Archives Institute and the Training of Archivists, 1967-1989,” *Society of Georgia Archivists: 20 Years In Celebration, 1969-1989*, 48-53.

Consider this: Carter signed the Georgia Records Act advancing records management and he made the records of the office of the governor the property of the state. (I'm sure I don't need to remind you that as president of the United States he signed the Presidential Records Act in 1978.) Carter not only brought the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board to life, but further he exhibited unusual wisdom in selecting archivists to serve as the first members.

In launching *Georgia Archive*, now *Provenance*, thirty-seven years ago in 1972, from what I have been able to find, we began publishing only the fourth journal of archival scholarship in English in the world after the *American Archivist*, the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* in Britain, and *Indian Archives* from India. We preceded both the Canadians with *Archivaria* and the Australians with *Archives and Manuscripts*. (We organized six years before they did, too.) Further, our second journal of archival scholarship in the United States has had an imitator. Seeing that *Georgia Archive* thrived despite the many archivists who said there was not enough scholarship to support a second journal and after negotiations failed to conclude a way in which to harness the energies of the two groups in a single journal, the Midwest Archives Conference successfully launched a third—the *Midwestern Archivist*, now *Archival Issues*.

In the thirty-two years since I left Georgia to work in Texas, I have seen the SGA continue to lead. Being deeply invested in encouraging the American archival community's Archives and Society initiative, focused on developing a robust presence for the archival service to society, I noted with special pleasure when twenty years ago you initiated an Archives and Society award, which you are continuing as the President's Award.⁵ For me, the fundamental work of archivists is doing all we can to ensure that the absolutely essential activity of managing society's singular archival resource is not taken so much for granted that all those who benefit from our dedication treat the archival asset as they treat air—something that, however essential to their being, requires no individual commitment to have clean, abundant, and usable. Your work bringing the

⁵ Sheryl Vogt, "The Society of Georgia Archivists: Twenty Years of Meeting Archival Needs in Georgia," *Society of Georgia Archivists: 20 Years In Celebration, 1969-1989*, 75; Jill Severn to David B. Gracy II, e-mail communication, November 2, 2009.

archival service to the consciousness of those benefiting from that service shines beyond Georgia's borders. In this we all took pride in Austin when Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board chair Ross King received the 2009 J. Franklin Jameson Archival Advocacy Award for his work raising "understanding of the value of archives among local, state and federal officials who will be important future supporters of archival initiatives."⁶ Keep it up, Ross.

In sum, from the earliest days of the Society of Georgia Archivists, we have been an organization to take initiative and do good things. For forty years, Georgians have been at the forefront of the development of archival enterprise in the United States. What a wonderful occasion is celebrating forty years of leadership of the archival profession in Georgia and the United States. Give yourselves a hand. You deserve it.

THESIS

The history celebrated on anniversary occasions is fun, and should be. At the same time, on a broader plane, history is serious business, and we archivists have not taken our history seriously. At least we haven't put it to work for us as we could and should. In writing and in celebrating it, we have approached our history from the perspective that no one but archivists really would or should find it of moment. On the contrary, we should be writing the history of archives and the archival enterprise that advocates for archival service.

Hear the three components of that sentence: Archives and archival enterprise. Archives and archival enterprise are fundamental to society. Archives constitute the largest store of raw experience documented as it was being gained, documented before the person gaining and recording the experience normally even knew the full depth, breadth, and value of the experience. My mother used to say that you have to crawl before you walk, and walk before you run. As true as that is for humans individually, for human societies, it is true where archives do not exist. Holding the documented experience of all variety of people from all walks of life and from ages stretching

⁶"Colleagues Honor Their Peers with 16 Awards: 2009 SAA Award Recipients," <<http://www.archivists.org/recognition/austin2009-awards.asp#jameson>> (accessed November 11, 2009).

over centuries, archives permit us to profit from a range and depth of experience that we can obtain in no other way. Learning from and building upon human experience is the definition of civilization. That means that archives are a fundamental and irreplaceable foundation of civilization.

But archival documentation in which the experience is laid up can benefit society only after archivists:

- **Appraise and accession** it, determine what part of all records information—information created in the conduct of affairs for the purpose of forwarding and/or documenting those affairs—has enduring value; and then archivists must take title to ensure that the documentation remains available to use;
- Appraise, accession, and **arrange** the archival documentation under the principles of respect des fonds and original order—provenance, if you like—that organizes it so that the context in which the experience was gained and the records were used continues to be integral to the depth of experience the archives document;
- Appraise, accession, arrange, and **describe** it in a manner that has a convenient standard structure that informs potential users of the extent and content of the fonds;
- Appraise, accession, arrange, describe, and **preserve** the documentation by providing an appropriate environment in the fullest sense of that term, from atmosphere to housing;
- Appraise, accession, arrange, describe, preserve, and **help people use archives**: assist users in fashioning strategies for finding among the hundreds or thousands of cubic feet of unique documents in unique fonds in any one or combination of repositories those records and papers essential to fulfilling the information need of the user;
- Appraise, accession, arrange, describe, preserve, help users make use, and **administer** the repository so that it is staffed, supplied, outfitted, and run to meet the needs of society. The raw experience documented in archives that is fundamental to the existence of civilization cannot benefit society unless an archivist performs, and performs well, all these tasks that are required to deliver the critical archival service to society.

History. History, like archives, is one of the distinguishing features of humanity. Doubtless it is the best known product realized from using archives. On the surface, history is the simple recounting of events. On a deeper level, history is the work of

characterizing, seeing relationships between and among, and then making meaning from those events. Identifying trends, watersheds, and periods allows humans to define and then appreciate the nature of occurrences. Progress, backsliding, status quo, and stagnation are conclusions we most commonly draw from characterizations of and relationships seen among events developed from serious historical study. Making meaning from experiences documented in archives and reported in historical study offers guideposts, judicious uses of which form the pebbles and boulders in the stream of civilization.

The history we archivists have written so far has been history intended for audiences of archivists. Without question, we need to write history for ourselves. There are things we need to know of, learn from, and enjoy about and in our own history. But this is history storytelling and meaning-making for which you will search in vain at Barnes & Noble. Most of it is in our journals.

And in this regard, I am pleased to compliment the editors of *Provenance*. Just short of half—twelve—of the first twenty-six volumes contain at least one article dealing completely or largely with history—from archives in Republican Rome to disposition of federal records and to southern archival leaders. No journal has a better record.

One of the articles on archival history is Jim O'Toole's outstanding "The Future of Archival History." O'Toole does not reach the end of his first paragraph before stating that our poor record of investigating our own history has "left us as archivists with virtually everything yet to be known about the history and meaning of what we do."⁷

O'Toole echoes Richard Cox, who observed years earlier that, "A knowledge of archival history ought to be an essential part of any archivist's training and work. Acceptance of the values of archival history is the sign of a more mature, vital, and healthy archival profession."⁸ Then, happily, O'Toole tells us to put this history on a higher plane than the narrow recounting of work done by our predecessors. "A broad cultural approach to

⁷ James O'Toole, "The Future of Archival History," *Provenance* XIII (1995): 1.

⁸ Richard J. Cox, "On the Value of Archival History in the United States," *Libraries & Culture* 23 (Spring 1988), reproduced in Cox, *American Archival Analysis* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1990), 200.

archival history and its meaning,” O’Toole directs, “will take us in the right direction.”⁹ He is on track as far as he goes. We have much to learn from studies of: (1) archival practices in earlier times and places, (2) the nature of and changes in media and methods of production of records, (3) the purposes of record keeping through time, and (4) the influences of society broadly and resource allocators specifically on the selection of records for preservation and the work archivists have been encouraged to do or prohibited from doing.

As truly valid as are O’Toole’s laments that we know too little of our history and that the history we do know needs to be elevated to a higher plane than just recounting events, I have to ask, are we—archivists—the only audience for this history? My answer is a question to you: Why should we be the only audience?

Advocacy. Advocacy—the act of pleading or interceding in favor of and/or defending—is a term hallowed by history—nearly 700 years so far.¹⁰ The earliest documented use dates from 1340 and in a religious context expresses a passion not unlike that with which, from time to time, some archivists of my acquaintance have been known to erupt.

The Oxford English Dictionary shows that the term “advocate” entered our language nine short years after King Edward III of England in 1331, at the age of eighteen and within months of taking full control of his kingship, ordered officials in his government, upon their departures, to leave for their successors the records they created, received, and used in the conduct of their government business. While the skimpy sources suggest no connection between Edward’s defense of his archives and the religious sentiment expressed in that earliest use of the term, research remains to be done.

Through the years, we American archivists have worked various methods of advocating for archives, beginning with talking to sympathetic groups, to getting feature stories in newspapers, to creating opportunities to talk about archives by fashioning events such as those that take place during Archives Month, to taking formal positions on matters of current public

⁹ O’Toole, “The Future of Archival History,” 19.

¹⁰ “Advocacy.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd. ed. 1989.

interest relating to archives, and finally to testifying and writing letters to public officials supporting or opposing proposed legislation. All of these are good and must continue to be pursued, but all are focused on the here and now—the issues on the table at this moment. And the moment always fades as new matters come along. Other than whatever change may be affected, nothing remains on a bedside table, coffee table, or other convenient place to continue the advocacy, especially in the absence of our personal passion.

PROPOSAL

Archives and Archival Enterprise, History, and Advocacy—the meaning I draw from the relationship of these facts is that we archivists need to be writing, or encouraging others to write, the history of the archival enterprise that advocates for the archival enterprise.

History that advocates is history just as well grounded in archival and other primary sources as the best history, just as informative and well balanced as the best history, just as engaging as the best history. Indeed, all good history is history that advocates. Historians don't just present facts, they offer interpretations of those facts. They tell readers what those facts mean, what lessons can be taken from them. History that advocates for archives would do no more—and no less.

The difference from what we have been writing is that history that advocates for archives and the archival enterprise is written for audiences beyond the community being written about—for us, it would be an audience, however specific or general, other than archivists. Ours would be written with a goal of opening to this audience through the telling of engaging stories why and how archives and the management or subversion of the archival enterprise have mattered. It will demonstrate how archival enterprise—the management and sometimes mismanagement of archives—has altered the course of history and the state of society, has affected the lives of groups of people, even of individuals. It will demonstrate why and how archival enterprise and archives truly have mattered, and by extension still do.

History advocating the archival enterprise will recount the progress of and impediments to stewarding society's archival asset. The more that this history enfolds the reader in

the struggles that archivists have faced and the bases for the choices they have had to make (including choices that have compromised the integrity of the archival record), the better and more effective the history will be.

This history will treat:

- The archivists, by whatever titles they are known, who deliver the archival service in particular, and through all the ages, as well as those who have impeded and subverted the archival contribution;
- Management of the irreplaceable archival asset, from single treasured documents to the treasure that each fonds is in its own right; and
- Debates over the nature and conduct of the archival enterprise and delivery of the archival service—debates such as those between the archivists of East and West Germany over the value in archives and more basically the role of archives in supporting the state.

Each story will challenge the reader to reflect on the role and contribution of archives to the development of civilization.

PRODUCING ARCHIVAL ADVOCACY HISTORY

Has history like that which I am proposing ever been written? At least two, if not three initiatives can provide guideposts from which the preparation of history advocating archives could profit. One is a sumptuously illustrated, multi-volume set of books titled *The History of the Library in Western Civilization*. Written by library admirer and architect Konstantinos Staikos, the work in fact is much less than its title promises. It is more a history of library structures and of the use of materials in libraries than of the role, work, and contribution of the library and librarians in and to Western Civilization. But the goal of writing the history of archives in civilization is one we can adopt and toward which we should work.

The second initiative that I think should be considered is a history of a single repository—the State Library and Archives of Texas—being published next May by the University of Texas Press. One principal motive I had in writing the work was advocating for the agency. It remains to be seen how well the study will serve this consciously intended purpose. Whether or not it does, we will have a work written from this advocacy

perspective, the effectiveness of which we can judge so as to shape the next offering more effectively for the purpose.

The third initiative is the section of historian Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra's award-winning study of *How to Write the History of the New World* in which he discusses the creation of the Archives of the Indies.¹¹

I don't propose that these are the only, or maybe even the best examples. But they are good examples. None was written for the practitioner community. All can serve as guideposts as we set about producing advocacy histories of archives and the archival enterprise. Note that while one of these tries to treat the institution in all of western civilization, the other two deal with a specific repository and body of documentation. While I look forward to the day when we produce something on the grand scale of "Archival Enterprise and Archives in American Civilization"—or "in Western Civilization," or "in Human Development"—we first have to produce advocacy histories within much smaller frames on which we can draw to craft the grander study. We need to start with advocacy histories of activities and individuals on the local level.

WORK FOR US ALL

All archivists can contribute to the production of works of archival advocacy history in one of several ways. Two tasks beckon.

- One is ensuring that the archives of our institutions, of our associations of archivists such as the SGA, and of individual archivists are preserved for use. Second nature to us, this job is nonetheless essential.
- The other is purposely and systematically recording oral histories: (1) of users of archives, (2) of policy makers whose decisions have affected delivery of the archival service, and (3) of archival colleagues serving as leaders of associations of archivists, directing archival repositories, heading teams of archivists, and simply working individually in the archival trenches. Recording oral histories cannot help but provide an essential personal, human flavor vital to crafting compelling history.

¹¹ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 170-203.

As historians, we need to begin thinking toward, then writing (or encouraging others to write) for audiences beyond the archival community. We need:

- Stories of archivists managing the archival asset for society and of archivists associated in organizations as the SGA raising the level of and improving the environment for the conduct of archival enterprise;
- Explorations of the challenges in managing archival repositories;
- Relations of the uses of the archival asset that have made differences (and haven't they all in one way or another?); and
- Accounts of the history of bodies of archives.

CONCLUSION

The Watershed

When the history of archival enterprise in the early years of the twenty-first century is written, I believe this time will emerge as a watershed period, especially in terms of advocacy of the archival enterprise. Of the many developments that are coalescing to make it so, two stand out.

One development is the imbedding of advocacy in what we define as “archival work.” Advocacy has become a component of the archival enterprise as surely and completely as arrangement and description. The American archival community has moved from tentatively pursuing what thirty years ago we called outreach, to the purposeful in-reach of two decades ago, to the determined advocacy of the present. Georgians are in the forefront. Most recently, your advocacy in securing co-sponsors for PAHR—the Preserving the American Historical Record Act—has brought the total of Georgia co-sponsors to third among all the states.

The second development will be the attention the American archival community pays in the coming few years to the history of archival enterprise in America. Recognition of the many upcoming anniversaries of regional, state, and local archival associations following that of the SGA and the looming seventy-fifth anniversary of the Society of American Archivists in 2011 stand to energize and sustain our attention to the history of archival enterprise broadly defined. As this happens we will be able to mobilize our general but passive interest in archival history. With interest in history mobilized, we can generate

energy to extend the impact of anniversary celebrations far beyond the moment of the grand days of the anniversary, as those we are enjoying here in Savannah.

The Work

Coupling attention to the history of archival enterprise with energetic advocacy will position us to produce or encourage the writing of archival-advocacy history as a principal tool for gaining the resources essential to delivering the archival service to society.

We/you in the Society of Georgia Archivists are conscious that you have contributed to history—no, not just contributed but also made history, and thus have a story to tell. Just recall the work of figures prominent in only the first decade of the SGA—work done individually, in their repositories, and in the then-young society—figures such as Carroll Hart, Ed Weldon, Dick Eltzroth, Gayle Peters, Wilbur Kurtz, Minnie Clayton, Lee Alexander, Harmon Smith, Bob White, Linda Matthews, Pete Schinkel, Sheryl Vogt, Faye Gamel, and Brenda Banks, among others.

By turning significant attention to—that is, by writing—histories short and long of archival enterprise in Georgia, of archivists in Georgia who have made a difference in the conduct of the archival service, of events in Georgia's history broadly that highlight the contribution of the archival enterprise to the life of society, you in the SGA have an opportunity once again to pioneer. Because the anniversary of the SGA that we are celebrating here initiates what should be a period of celebration of anniversaries of other regional, state, and local associations, you have the prospect of inaugurating archival advocacy history writing at the regional, state, and local archival organization level.

One thing I can guarantee you is that this is not the last time you will hear this appeal. At the 2009 SAA Annual Meeting in Austin, former SAA president Lee Stout and I were seated as co-chairs of the SAA Archival History Roundtable. Starting with the nearly six hundred members of the Roundtable, we mean to elevate in the consciousness of the American archival community an interest in and knowledge of our shared history. Further, I jumped at the invitation to serve as the chair of the SAA's seventy-fifth anniversary task force. With Lee again, I will be calling on all of our colleagues to look to our history

as a resource for advocating for the archival enterprise. You as individuals preserving your own archives and recording stories of your experiences stewarding the archival asset and providing the archival service to society, you who are ensuring preservation of the records of your repositories, you who are documenting the work of archivists associated in the SGA, you archivists of Georgia, members of the third-oldest association of archivists on the regional, state, or local level in the country, you by the history you have made already—you are in position to step forward in the work.

So, let us enjoy this celebration today and tomorrow of forty years of archival history. But don't permit the trials and tribulations, losses and gains experienced in these forty years to end here. Engage this history to make history. Use your unique and important history to make history, advocating for the archival enterprise in Georgia and throughout the country.

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