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Taking the Man Out of Manuscripts: Atlanta's Pilot Project for the Women's History Sources Survey

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Interest in woman's history is on the rise. A recent issue of Woman's Abstracts lists over fifteen articles that explore aspects of women's past: from English lady philanthropists of the Romantic period to early community work of black Atlanta clubwomen; from women who supported John Wesley to housewives of seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts. For the most part these articles deal not with political women, the suffragettes and other ardent reformers whose attacks on male-dominated institutions have been so widely studied, but rather with woman's social and economic past, examining their lifestyles to discover what they did, how and why they did it.

As the field of women's history expands, with more systematic attention given to the lives of individuals, the need for subject access to primary material increases. To date, however, most sources lie buried in manuscript collections whose general descriptions rarely highlight the material: Mrs. John Doe's diary and household accounts seldom have any prominence in the catalog of the John Doe papers. It is to uncover and describe fully such "hidden" documents that the recently-launched Women's History Sources Survey addresses itself.

Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the project is headed by Andrea Hinding and Clarke A. Chambers

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of the Social Welfare History Archives of the University of Minnesota. Its goal is to produce a multi-volume guide, modeled on the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC), to consist of thousands of descriptions of individual collections—personal and family papers, government, corporate and institutional records—together with subject, name, and geographical indexes. These descriptions will be obtained from all known repositories, including national, state, and local archives, historical societies, and church, business and other institutional collections. Information will be gathered by mail or through visits conducted by one of the sixteen paid area representatives of the project.

Although the Women's Survey was funded only in the autumn of 1975, its initiating proposal was described in the April, 1973, American Archivist, and the potential importance of the project has been appreciated since then. In the autumn of 1974, a year before actual funding, Darlene Roth-White, who has done important research into the history of women's organizations in Atlanta, and the present writer determined to anticipate funding by designing a pilot project, the success or failure of which would be relayed to the Minnesota headquarters. We chose two archives for our experiment—the Special Collections Department at Emory University, to be explored in the fall quarter of 1974, and the Georgia Department of Archives and History, to be examined in the following quarter.

The key to the success of our non-funded project turned out to be the students in my course in Social Science literature, for theirs was the responsibility of making accurate descriptions. All had had a prerequisite course in basic reference. They were given the option of counting their participation in our experiment as their term project in the course. The level of interest was such that most chose to take part. In a special, preliminary session, Ms. Roth-White talked to them about the ever-widening parameters of women's history, and I acquainted them with NUCMC, Philip Hamer's Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States and Canada, and the other important guides to manuscripts. Then the students, as a group, accompanied me to the archives to be searched that quarter.

From the beginning I hoped to make the project mutually beneficial. Through their examination and description of manuscript collections potentially valuable for the
experiment, the students also would be producing data of real value to the archives itself. Thus it was important that the student treat the material with care and describe it according to the archives' own format (the descriptions could be adapted to a Women's Survey format later if necessary). At each repository, the curator of manuscripts showed the students how materials were arranged, pointed out how they were to be described, and made a cautionary statement against disrupting existing order. The curator also provided a list of possibly useful collections from which each of the students selected one to examine. If no inventory existed, the students made one; if there was an inventory, they edited a copy to emphasize the women's papers. Most descriptions followed an expanded NUCMC format. The students were requested not to bombard the staff with questions, but to ask me. To maintain continuing supervision, I met with each student weekly and kept in close contact with the archivist. Because completeness and accuracy were of utmost importance, the students were asked to spend five hours a week at the archives. The alternative to this arrangement, assigning them a certain number of boxes to "get through," might have inclined them to speed carelessly through the task. Some students completed several small collections; others spent the quarter describing one large set of papers. Throughout the experiment the archivists at both institutions were warmly encouraging and very helpful; all of us working on the project were impressed and most appreciative of their support.

At the end of the quarter, each student handed in three copies of each description. One went to the archives, a second was reserved for the Women's Survey, and a third was placed in our files. The archivists reported the descriptions to be of high quality and some to be of permanent use. The value of the project from the students' point of view also was considerable. Without exception, they found the experience rewarding, and some participants were enthusiastic enough to choose to do archives-related projects in later quarters. Ms. Roth-White and I were pleased also, for we accumulated in-depth descriptions of over fifty collections that held papers important for the study of women's history.

Among the rich holdings at the Georgia Department of Archives and History, the students found five boxes of personal and business correspondence, 1906-1956, of Rhoda Kauffman, an outstanding figure in the development of Atlanta's health and welfare agencies; a journal, 1857-1883, filled with
the shrewd observations on religion and Southern society of Louisa Warren Patch Fletcher; the letters, records, and clippings, 1951-1967, of Adah Toombs, active in Atlanta civic movements and a campaigner for Georgia prison reform; and, in a lighter vein, the collection, 1865-1959, of the musical Barili family, which included material on Adelina Patti, and Emily and Louise Barili, important figures in Atlanta's early cultural growth, 1870s-1940.

The students also had success at Emory University's Special Collections. Among the most interesting sources located there were the Civil War and Reconstruction diary and letters of Dolly Lunt Burge, within the Burge Family Papers; papers, reports, and correspondence, 1918-1963, of women's activist Mary Barker and of her educator sister Tomie Dora Barker; five boxes of material, 1868-1970, by and on Methodist civil rights activist Dorothy Tilly, which include her papers as a member of the President's Commission on Civil Rights, 1947; and twenty-three boxes of documents and correspondence, 1958-ca. 1970, relating to Eliza Paschall, an important figure in Atlanta politics who, among other positions, has been director of the Greater Atlanta Council on Human Relations.

Although the Women's History Sources Survey recently received the funding requested for it, we plan to continue our "pilot" project in the Atlanta area as long as there are archives to explore, students eager to explore them, and archivists to welcome our effort.