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Alden Monroe

Alabama Department of Archives and History

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Thomas Owen and the Founding of the Alabama Department of Archives and History

Alden Monroe

In 1901 Alabama established the first independent government archives in the United States. The founding of the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) preceded that of the National Archives by more than thirty years. Other states had sponsored history programs, assigning the responsibility for public records to state libraries, secretaries of state, or state historical societies, but Alabama was the first to create an official state agency. This concept of government-supported, but independent, archives would become a model for others in the United States.

The Alabama model was primarily the creation of one man, Thomas McAdory Owen, a visionary and one of the true pioneers of the American archival profession. Born on December 15, 1866, Owen was raised in Jonesboro, Alabama, near what is now Bessemer and located about twelve miles south-east of Birmingham. He attended the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, and in 1887 at the age of twenty-one, he gradu-
ated with both AB and LLB degrees. Two months later he was practicing law in Bessemer.¹

Within a year after beginning his practice, Owen became heavily involved in the local political scene, and in 1888 he was elected justice of the peace. By 1890 he was chairman of the Democratic executive committee in Jefferson County (encompassing Birmingham), and in 1892 he became assistant county solicitor of the same county. It was during this period that he met and married Marie Bankhead, daughter of United States Congressman John H. Bankhead.²

With their marriage on April 12, 1894, Thomas Owen became a member of one of Alabama’s most powerful and prominent families.³ The marriage proved invaluable for Owen, not only because of his wife’s political connections, but because both Marie and her father encouraged and assisted him professionally.⁴

In 1889 Owen began collecting the student publications of his alma mater, and as time progressed, his interest broadened to include all of Alabama’s history. Resolving to write a history of the state, he soon learned that no single library contained the sources he needed. This realization prompted him to begin building his own personal archival collection by accumulating old newspapers, pamphlets, maps, private papers, scrapbooks, and local and county histories.⁵ Owen’s avocation of history took up an increasingly large part of his time, and as a result his legal practice suffered, leading to financial difficulties.

Seeking to redirect his career, Owen asked his father-in-law to help him obtain a government position in Washing-

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³ Doster, “Thomas McAdory Owen, Sr.,” 98.


⁵ Doster, “Thomas McAdory Owen, Sr.” 98.
On September 1, 1894, Owen arrived in Washington with the title of chief clerk of the Division of Post Office Inspectors and Mail Depredations. This job occupied Owen's time from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., though he spent every spare moment outside of work devouring the historical and intellectual resources of the District. The Library of Congress and its director, Ainsworth R. Spotford, were particularly helpful to him, as were numerous librarians, history professors, and directors of historical societies throughout the United States. Among his new colleagues were historians Colyer Meriwether and Stephen Weeks. Owen joined them and a few others to found the Southern History Association in 1896. These contacts exposed Owen to the new scientific approach to history in which original sources were the foundation for research and scholarship. This reliance on historical documentation underscored the need for archival repositories of all kinds, including those housing government records.

Owen continued to build his personal collection of historical materials, and his search for Alabama sources was conducted throughout the United States. This interest led him to prepare two bibliographies, one on Alabama and the other on Mississippi. Both were published by the American Historical Association in 1897 and 1899, respectively, and garnered Owen a national reputation as a bibliographer.

As Owen's involvement with the professional history community grew, he became convinced that the most effective means of preserving the historical records of Alabama would be a publicly-funded statewide archives program. While still living in Washington, Owen submitted a bill to the Alabama legislature to establish a commission to study records related to Alabama history and then make recommendations about their preservation. The bill was introduced and allowed to quietly die from lack of interest. The experience taught Owen a great deal—

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6 Ibid., 98-99.


8 Doster, "Thomas McAdory Owen, Sr.,” 99-100.
a good idea is not enough. A stronger base of support was needed to successfully pass a bill in the legislature.9

Thomas Owen returned to Alabama in 1897 and set up a law practice in the Black Belt town of Carrollton located in Pickens County, but history remained his primary preoccupation.10 Owen focused his attention on the dormant Alabama Historical Society. Having been involved with the organization briefly in the early 1890s, he now saw it as a potential lobbying base.11 According to Owen, the organization had been “organized in 1850 and chartered in 1852. Although broadly planned, and in the hands of some of our best men[,] its progress was never satisfactory, and very few publications were issued.”12 In 1898 Owen convinced several people that the society should be rejuvenated. As a result, Professor Thomas C. McCorvey of the University of Alabama arranged for an organizational meeting.13

On June 21, 1898, the Alabama Historical Society met at Clarke Hall on the campus of the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.14 Owen came to the meeting well prepared. He supported the election of Governor Joseph Forney Johnston as president of the historical society and then introduced several resolutions which were accepted. These resolutions gave the secretary the authority to pursue any measures that would further the society’s interests, including increasing the membership, disseminating information concerning the society’s work and objectives, and publishing the proceedings of its meetings. Following the adoption of these resolutions, Owen was elected


11 Assessing Alabama’s Archives, 33.

12 Thomas M. Owen to Henry Bourne, October 29, 1904, Directors’ Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.


14 Ibid., 158.
secretary.\textsuperscript{15} (Owen remained secretary, and the practice of electing the sitting governor as president continued until the society ceased to exist around 1904. At that time its members voted to disband the organization because its duties had been assumed by the ADAH.)

As secretary, Owen began a campaign and increased the historical society's membership to nearly 300 persons, many of whom were state legislators. In addition to the membership drive, Owen launched a major publicity campaign.\textsuperscript{16} In 1904 he stated his plan: "After I had succeeded in building up the membership, and bringing public attention to the importance of the work[,] I [began] a campaign for state aid."\textsuperscript{17}

In this connection, he prepared two bills. The first requested $250 annually for two years to publish the Alabama Historical Society's \textit{Transactions}.\textsuperscript{18} The second bill would establish the Alabama History Commission with the following duty:

To make a full, detailed and exclusive examination of all the sources and materials, manuscripts, documentary and records of Alabama from the earliest times . . . and . . . embody the result of said commission in a detailed report to the Governor . . . with an account of the condition of historical work in the state and with such recommendations as may be desirable.\textsuperscript{19}

Both bills were submitted to the legislature in 1898, and Owen's contacts with the media garnered significant support from the local press. An editorial in the \textit{Montgomery Advertiser} provided a clear explanation of the intent of the bills; how-

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 158-59.
\textsuperscript{16} Doster, "Thomas McAdory Owen, Sr.,” 101.
\textsuperscript{17} Owen to Bourne, October 29, 1904.
\textsuperscript{18} Simpson, "The Origins of the ADAH," 160.
\textsuperscript{19} Thomas McAdory Owen, ed., \textit{Report of the Alabama History Commission to the Governor of Alabama, December 1, 1900} (Montgomery: Alabama Historical Society, 1901), 7.
ever, some confusion arose in the legislature the next day concerning the purpose of the bills. Representative William W. Brandon, historical society member and sponsor of the Transactions bill, initiated the discussion by stating that the legislature would be false to future generations if it denied the appropriation of this small amount of money to encourage the state's historiography. He went on to say: "We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to all the people of Alabama, [and] we owe it to all that is high and uplifting in life."20 Another member of the House questioned whether or not the historical society members would pocket the money for themselves. Representative Bernard Harwood, a historical society member, resented this statement and proceeded to appeal to the memories of Alabama's Civil War heroes. Next Representative William C. Davis, also a historical society member, stated that he could not understand why any Alabamian would vote against the bill. Following Davis, Representative B. H. Screws also expressed surprise at anyone's opposing the bill. In response to this, T. M. Patterson, the representative who had initially opposed the bill, stated that he had misunderstood the bill when he objected to it. Patterson then blamed the historical society for the misunderstanding and gave the bill his full support. The bill passed 75 to 3.21

The presentation of these bills was made at a fortuitous time. The day after the first bill passed, there was to be a celebration for the unveiling of a Confederate monument on the north lawn of the capitol building. In a demonstration of Southern patriotism and pride, the members of the House quickly passed the second bill to establish the history commission, 59 to 1, and then proceeded immediately to the unveiling.22

At this ceremony both houses heard former Governor Thomas G. Jones, a historical society member, make a speech spelling out the state's obligations to its past. He stated:

Our duty is not ended with the unveiling of this monument. . . . Where may [an] Alabamian find a roll of the

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20 "Historical Commission," Montgomery Advertiser, December 7, 1898.
22 Ibid., 349.
men who made history and yet left no name on its pages? Where can he find the names of the great throng who died, with no rank to attract the eyes of the country, and went down to death unheeded save by the firm beating of their own dauntless hearts? Can he find their names among the archives of the state for which they gave their lives? They are not there. In historic publications of her heroic sons? She has written none. Will he find them on the graves of the dead? Some have no headstones, and many are marked “unknown.”

The Senate passed both bills unanimously two days later. Within a year after reactivating the historical society, Owen had managed to introduce two bills that were passed by the state legislature.

Governor Johnston, acting as president of the historical society, appointed five historical society members, including Owen, to the history commission on January 6, 1899. The first meeting was held at the University of Alabama on June 19, 1899. At that meeting Owen was appointed chairman and authorized to supervise the preparation of the entire commission report.

Once elected chairman of the commission, Owen dedicated himself fully to the task at hand. He contacted hundreds of individuals and organizations, seeking information about Alabama’s historical records. In order to learn how other historical institutions functioned and to gather ideas for Alabama, he made a concerted effort to identify historical societies throughout the United States.

As a result of his research, Owen produced a 447-page volume that the commission submitted to Governor William J. Samford on December 1, 1900. The mass of information in-

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23 “To the Confederacy’s Soldiers and Sailors,” Montgomery Advertiser, December 8, 1898.


26 Doster, “Thomas McAdory Owen, Sr.,” 102.
cluded descriptions of various collections throughout the state, but the most important part of the report, by far, was the recommendation for:

... the creation of a Department of Archives and History, charged with the custody of the States official archives, and the collection and creation of a state library, museum and art gallery, with particular reference to the history and antiquities of Alabama, to be under the supervision of a Director.27

This mandate for the creation of Alabama's state archives was unique to other states in two areas: (1) It was designed to be an independent state-supported agency, and (2) it was charged with direct responsibility for the official archives of state government.28 Owen viewed the concept of a publicly-funded state archives as crucial to the preservation of the state's official records. In a 1904 letter to Henry Bourne, chairman of the general committee of the American Historical Association, Owen described his reasoning for proposing this recommendation:

After mature deliberation it was decided that, conceding the proposition that the State owed a duty to its archives (public records) and history, that duty could most satisfactorily be met by the establishment of a separate Department of State, correlating to the other State Departments, with headquarters in the State capitol or at the seat of government, and under the direction of a regular state official. The merits of the Wisconsin plan of large appropriations to the State Historical Society were given due consideration ... One of the principal advantages of our plan is the control given the Department of the State archives, as well as of county and municipal archives.29


28 Assessing Alabama's Archives, 35.

29 Owen to Bourne, October 29, 1904.
An important element of the proposed new department was how it would be organized administratively. In the same letter, Owen described this structure and the rationale for it:

In our desire to keep the Department free from politics, we were confronted with a very serious problem. Our plan of administration through a Board of Trustees is believed to meet all criticism and objection. It was felt that it would be fatal to leave the selection of the Director either to a direct vote of the people, to an election by the legislature, or to appointment by the Governor. The Governor is ex-officio member of the Board of Trustees and the Senate has the right of rejection in the matter of filling vacancies. The State is thus protected from an abuse of power on the part of the board.30

The report was well received by the state’s newspapers. Both the Montgomery Advertiser and the Birmingham News supported the concept of a new department. In fact, the News assumed that this recommendation would be acted on, and the focus of the news coverage turned to who the new director might be.31

Owen had used every means available to him to gain support for the creation of a state-funded archives, particularly the interest group he had developed, the Alabama Historical Society. As he later stated: “The whole moral influence of the membership of the Alabama Historical Society, numbering about 300, was brought to bear in the creating of public opinion favorable to State aid.”32

In a favorable response to the commission’s report to Governor Samford, he sent a special message to the legislature:

I recommend that you pass an act establishing a Department of Archives and History, and that two or three

30 Ibid.
32 Owen to Bourne, October 29, 1904.
rooms in the basement of the Capitol be set aside for the use of the department, and that said department be "charged with the custody of the State Official Archives" and the collection of historical facts, records and antiquities of Alabama, and that a Director be appointed to supervise the work and take charge of the department.33

Owen immediately drafted a bill for the creation of the Department of Archives and History. It was introduced in the House by Richard H. Clarke of Mobile and in the Senate by William Dorsey Jelks of Barbour County.34 Owen was aided in the House by a young representative named William B. Bankhead,35 his wife's younger brother who would later become Speaker of the United States House of Representatives. With Owen's extensive lobbying effort and assistance from Representative Bankhead, the bill passed both houses nearly unanimously and was signed into law by Governor Samford on February 27, 1901, thus approving the establishment of a state archives for public records.36

At the instigation of Owen, the new board of trustees held its first meeting just a few days after the bill was signed into law. According to the bill, the board of trustees consisted of one representative from each congressional district, and the governor served as an ex-officio member.37 By creating a board with geographical representation, the politically-astute Owen increased the chance of maintaining statewide support for the department. On March 2, 1901, when the board met in the private office of the governor, P. J. Hamilton moved that the governor be elected as president of the board and Owen as sec-

33 Message of Governor William J. Samford, Urging the Importance of a Department of Archives and History (n.p.: Alabama Historical Society, 1901).


35 Owen to Bourne, October 29, 1904.


37 Owen to Bourne, October 29, 1904.
retary. Based on a motion by Colonel J. M. Falkner, Thomas McAdory Owen was unanimously elected director.

Later in the meeting, Falkner proposed two resolutions which stated:

(1) That having full faith and confidence in the judgement, skill and ability of Thomas M. Owen, the Director of this Department, we hereby commit the management and direction thereof to him, with full power and authority to carry out the purposes contemplated by the act of its establishment.

(2) That the said director is empowered and authorized to control the expenditure for the use of the said Department . . . and the State auditor is requested to honor the requisition that from time to time [will] be made by the Director on said fund. 38

After some discussion, both resolutions were passed unanimously, thus bestowing leadership of the department on Owen. Upon being given this authority, Owen proceeded aggressively to build the department. Initially the department was given space in the Senate cloak room. This location proved very advantageous, for it allowed Owen to lobby the Senate on an almost-continuous basis. In addition to the cloak room, the governor allowed Owen to use the Senate Chamber as a gallery. 39 A special opportunity arose when the 1901 Constitutional Convention met at the Capitol. Owen used this convention to "demonstrate the practical utility of the Department by responding to the requests of many delegates for statistical and other information." 40 This helped Owen illustrate the integral role an official archives could play in the effective operation of state government.

With Owen's efforts the historical records accumulated and the department quickly ran out of space for the collections. In 1903 the legislature passed a bill for the enlargement of the

38 Alabama Department of Archives and History, Minutes (March 2, 1901).

39 Alabama Department of Archives and History, Annual Reports (1901).

40 Ibid., 1901.
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capitol building, and Owen was made secretary of the commission that would oversee its construction.\footnote{Ibid., 1902-1903.} His participation on this commission ensured that space would be allocated for the department in the new south wing of the capitol. This space included not only a gallery and museum but also a fireproof vault for the storage of records.\footnote{Ibid., 1905-1906.} On March 26, 1907, Owen reported that the department had moved into its permanent quarters.\footnote{Alabama Department of Archives and History, Minutes (March 26, 1907).} It was also in this month that Owen completed his first six-year term in office. During that time he had secured a permanent home for the department, built an extensive collection and growing acquisitions program, and increased the department's budget from $2,500 in 1901 to $6,250 by 1908.\footnote{Thomas M. Owen to Governor A. D. Chandler of Georgia, July 3, 1908, Directors' Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.} Owen had not only established an archives but a department that was vital to the running of Alabama state government.

Throughout this period the Alabama concept of an independent state-funded department, a plan that Owen claimed was "altogether an original plan of [his] own,"\footnote{Owen to Bourne, 29 October 1904.} received much attention throughout the country. Just a year after the founding of the Alabama agency, Mississippi passed an almost-duplicate law to create the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.\footnote{Ibid.} Before the decade was over, similar institutions had formed in Arkansas, South Carolina, and North Carolina.\footnote{Thomas M. Owen to Mrs. Harvie E. Jones, November 12, 1906, Directors' Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.}

Owen was not shy in promoting his new idea. When the American Historical Society met in New Orleans in 1903 as part of the celebration of the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase, a special train was booked from New York to take par-
ticipants to the meeting. The train planned a stop in Montgomery with the express intention of visiting Tom Owen and his new agency. According to contemporary accounts, his “spirit” won him and his “plan” many friends during the visit in Montgomery and at the meeting in New Orleans.48 R. D. W. Connor, responsible for founding and implementing the program in North Carolina, visited Owen in 1907. Waldo Gifford Leland, who had co-authored *The Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington* (1904), had written a letter to Connor, suggesting that he look at the Alabama model, though Connor had already been in touch with Owen.49

Thirty-three years later, Connor, by then the first archivist of the United States, dedicated the new Alabama Department of Archives and History building. In a speech at the dedication, he remembered his visit to Owen in 1907, stating:

My visit to him was one of the most profitable of my life. It was not what he had done, nor what he said that dwells with me today; it was what he was. He was energy, he was enthusiasm, he was courage, he was vision, he was faith, he was inspiration, and when I reluctantly bade him good-bye I knew in my heart that someday he would build here in Montgomery one of the great archival institutions of our country.50

Owen had great expectations that the Alabama Department of Archives and History should serve as the cultural institution of the state. It would not only be the state archives but also the state history museum, the art gallery, and the state library. It would identify and mark historical and archeological sites and be the repository for private manuscripts and all other materials that documented the history of the state. He envisioned for

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the state an institution that would combine the present-day functions of the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the National Trust, and the Smithsonian Institution.

Owen and the Alabama Department of Archives and History would continue to lead the country until his untimely death in 1920 at the age of fifty-three. That same year saw his wife Marie take the helm of the archives, where she would remain until 1955. The ADAH celebrated its 100\textsuperscript{th} anniversary in 2001, and the legacy of Thomas Owen—the importance of a government-supported, independent archives—remains as viable today as it was a century ago.

\textbf{Alden Monroe} has been employed by the Alabama Department of Archives and History for over twenty years. He is currently the head of Collection Management for Government Records. Prior to coming to Alabama, he was employed for nearly seven years with the Cincinnati Historical Society. Alden received his BA and MA in history from Michigan State University and his MPA from Auburn University at Montgomery.