

January 2003

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Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives

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Recommended Citation

Summers, Bill, "The Lord's Remembrancer: Lynn E. May Jr.," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 21 no. 1 (2003).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol21/iss1/5>

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The Lord's Remembrancer: Lynn E. May Jr.

Bill Sumners

Lynn Edward May Jr. never identified himself as an archivist, although he accomplished many archival-type functions. As a highly regarded Baptist historian, May served as a collector and preserver of numerous documents, publications, and other resources for the study of Baptist history and life. He served as the chairperson of the Religious Archives section of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) from 1977 to 1979. In 1978 he received the Sister M. Claude Lane Award from the Society. The Lane Award recognizes individuals who have made a significant contribution to the field of religious archives through involvement in the section, contributions to archival literature, and leadership in archival organizations. So why did this non-archivist become so active in the Society of American Archivists, and how did he win the recognition of the Religious Archives section for this award?

Lynn May Jr. was born in Wisner, Louisiana, on October 6, 1929, the third child of L. E. and Beatrice McKenzie May. His parents were schoolteachers and instilled in him a love and thirst for learning. His higher education began at Louisiana College where he earned a BA in 1950. He continued his edu-

cation with a BD in 1953 and a ThD in 1956 from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. His formal education concluded in 1968 with an MA in history from Vanderbilt University. May never received training related to archival procedures and responsibilities and considered himself a collector rather than a cataloguer or preservationist.

In 1956 he was named research director of the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The Historical Commission was created by the convention in 1951 to preserve, interpret, and communicate Baptist history to Southern Baptists. The commission was a modest enterprise with a small staff, small budget, and an enormous responsibility. May was named the executive director of the Historical Commission in 1971, and he served in that capacity until his retirement in 1995. He died in Nashville on July 24, 1996.

The work of Lynn May was preceded by that of Norman W. Cox and Davis C. Woolley. Both individuals set the stage for May's endeavors. Cox and Woolley began the work of collecting Baptist material on microfilm and making this material available to researchers. Neither of these men had the historical training of May. Cox was a retired Baptist minister, and Woolley had served as a Baptist student director in Alabama. Both had a keen interest in Baptist history and the dream of creating a research center that housed a significant collection of Baptist resources. Both influenced May in shaping the collection of the Historical Commission. They saw themselves as collectors of material and left issues of access and preservation to others. This lack of interest and knowledge in cataloging and preservation created a troubling legacy of the early pioneers of Baptist historical collecting.

During May's tenure as executive director of the commission, he directed a massive microfilming effort of Baptist material, acquired significant archival holdings, and in 1985 established the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives. As a church historian or "the Lord's remembrancer," the term Puritan pastor Cotton Mather used to describe a church historian, May was successful in all of these archival activities.

May came to the Historical Commission only a few years after its establishment by the SBC. Among other assignments, the newly formed agency was to "maintain an accessible up-to-date library for the systematic preservation of all historical

and archival material” and to “maintain the official convention archive.”¹ The library that housed the Historical Commission collection was the Dargan-Carver Library which was jointly operated by the commission and the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Sunday School Board employees staffed the library, but the role of acquiring Baptist historical materials belonged to the commission’s staff. Davis Woolley, May’s predecessor as executive director, was somewhat active in the Religious Archives section of the Society of American Archivists, in order to gain a better understanding of archival materials. In 1960 the commission acknowledged its lack of attention to the archival records of the SBC and expressed its concern for doing more in this area.² During May’s service as research director, the commission began to acquire some significant Baptist manuscript collections.

May’s role as research director demanded his extensive use and understanding of the resources in the Dargan-Carver Library and his recognition of the gaps of missing information in the collection. He had a major role in the production of all four volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* and served as managing editor for *Baptist History and Heritage*, the quarterly journal of the commission. Through his work in these enterprises and other projects as research director, he gained an unrivaled knowledge of Baptist history and Baptist historical sources.

Between 1953 and 1970 the commission staff microfilmed the records of 863 Baptist churches. This effort represented only a small portion of the filming projects, which included periodicals, rare books, hymnals, archival collections, and annuals (from regional, state, and national Baptist organizations). May reported that by 1971 the collection had microfilmed over two million pages of Baptist associational (regional) annuals.³

¹ *Annual* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1961), 35-36.

² *Historical Commission Newsletter* 1 (November 1960): 1.

³ Lynn E. May Jr., “A Baptist Research Center: The Dargan-Carver Library,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 6 (July 1971): 223.

Early in the 1970s the Historical Commission began to microfilm or acquire significant Baptist-related items on microfilm from Russia and Eastern Europe.⁴ This modest beginning led to the development of a major collection of Baptist and evangelical documents related to the larger Baptist family. The Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives is now an international center for the study of evangelicals and Baptists in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Lynn May sought to expand the work of the commission as a teaching agency. In 1973 the commission sponsored a series of oral history workshops to “stimulate interest in and enhance the understanding of oral history as a vital tool for collecting, preserving, and making historical information available for research.” Fifty-four individuals participated in this intensive two-day workshop.⁵

In 1974 under May’s leadership and direction, the Historical Commission launched the Baptist Information Retrieval System (BIRS), the computerized indexing tool for creating the *Southern Baptist Periodical Index* (SBPI). The SBPI indexed forty-eight Southern Baptist periodicals. In spite of difficulties in coordinating the indexing with the various SBC agencies, the project produced worthy research tools for accessing Baptist periodical literature. May’s commitment to this project was vital to its implementation.⁶ The electronic version of the *Southern Baptist Periodical Index* traces its beginning to the vision of Lynn May.

Beginning in 1977 the commission undertook a major microfilming project of African American Baptist material. This project included microfilming the proceedings of several African American Baptist national conventions and extensive runs of African American Baptist periodicals. At the same time, the

⁴ “Annual Report to 1972 Convention,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 7 (April 1972): 89.

⁵ “Annual Report to 1974 Convention,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 9 (April 1974): 87.

⁶ “Annual Report to 1975 Convention,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 10 (April 1975): 88.

commission was continuing its microfilming projects of Baptist material from Eastern Europe and England.⁷

May began to be actively involved in the Religious Archives section of the Society of American Archivists in the early 1970s. He was greatly influenced by such archivists of religious collections as August Suelflow of the Concordia Historical Institute, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, V. Nelle Bellamy of the Archives of the Episcopal Church, and William Miller of the Presbyterian Historical Society. By 1977 he was elected chairperson of what was then called a Professional Affinity Group, the Religious Archives section. He presided at the section meeting in 1978 and 1979. When SAA met in Nashville in 1979, the Historical Commission hosted the section meeting and coordinated tours of religious archives in the city. May also moderated a session on funding religious archives.

In 1980 the Society of American Archivists published *Religious Archives: An Introduction* by August R. Suelflow. The production of this manual was greatly supported by the Religious Archives section and Lynn May. The push for the publication of the manual came during May's chairmanship of the Religious Archives section.⁸

In 1980 the Acquisitions and Library Operations Committee of the Historical Commission gave its report and recommendations to the agency. The recommendations sought to clarify the collection policy of the commission's library and archives, but actually did little in that area. The recommendations did include a statement of support for an independent National Archives and Records Service agency and the appointment of an independent archivist as its director.⁹

May had a considerable interest in documenting the roots of Baptist mission history. In the early 1980s he negotiated the rights to microfilm the archives of the Baptist Missionary Society in London, England. The project filmed the cor-

⁷ "Annual Report to 1978 Convention," *Baptist History and Heritage* 13 (April 1978): 32.

⁸ August R. Suelflow, *Religious Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980).

⁹ "Minutes Annual Meeting," *Baptist History and Heritage* 16 (April 1981): 57.

respondence and reports of the society from its beginning in 1792 through 1917. This project resulted in ninety microfilm reels of Baptist mission materials that became available to numerous scholars through the duplication of this microfilm. The records included the missionary correspondence and reports of William Carey, the first Baptist foreign missionary.

In 1983 the Historical Commission began to make plans for the construction of new facilities in the new SBC building to be constructed in downtown Nashville. May was able to negotiate for space that included the entire fourth floor of the planned building. The lion's share of the space was to be allocated for the library and archives. The Dargan-Carver Library space had long been inadequate and presented severe environmental concerns. In January 1985 the materials belonging to the Historical Commission were transferred to the newly-completed Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives. For the first time in its existence, the Historical Commission's collection was becoming a denominational archive with the formal transfer of records from the Executive Committee, the Foreign Mission Board, the Home Mission Board, and other agencies of the SBC.

May planned the entire layout of the library and archives and supervised the installation of furnishings, equipment, and 3.5 miles of library and compact archival shelving. The Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives was managed with a part-time staff that included a four-fifth librarian and two-fifth archivist. May was concerned about employing adequate staff for the growing collection. In 1986 the librarian position became full-time, and two years later, the commission employed its first permanent archivist. With the presence of a professional archivist, even in a part-time status, May backed away from his direct activities as archivist and delegated them to his staff. He was no longer actively involved with the Society of American Archivists after 1983.

In the mid-1980s the Historical Commission developed a *Resource Kit for Your Church's History*. This kit was aimed at the local Baptist church, in order to assist with collecting, preserving, and communicating the history of the congregation to its members. The kit included numerous pamphlets on topics such as researching and writing church history, developing historical displays, doing oral history, and collecting and preserving local church historical material. Included in the kit

was May's manual for the church history committee. About the same time, the commission, with financial assistance from the SBC, developed a series of how-to tapes related to the work of the church history committee. The six video tapes on "Making History" were widely used to train church leaders to collect, preserve, research, write, and communicate Baptist history.¹⁰ At the heart of all these efforts was Lynn May's commitment to help churches preserve their heritage. Even though the kit and videos targeted Baptist churches as the primary audience, numerous non-Baptist congregations found these products useful.

May always had an interest in assisting other Baptist organizations with archival concerns. He sponsored and edited the publication of the *Manual for Developing a Baptist Archives* by Eljee Bentley. The manual was prepared through the Baptist World Alliance to provide help to small Baptist conventions and unions that needed to preserve and manage their historical collections. The manual was published in 1990 and is still available on the Baptist World Alliance website.

After Lynn May's death in 1996, Slayden Yarborough, the interim executive director of the commission, wrote of his predecessor:

He, more than any other person, has willed to us the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, a world center of collected Baptist contributions and thoughts. This treasure will stand for the generations that follow as a monument to his life, love, and labor for the cause of Baptist history.¹¹

Lynn E. May Jr., though not an archivist, set the stage for collecting and acquiring Baptist archival material. He made extensive contributions to the archival field through his leadership in the Religious Archives section of the Society of American Archivists, the publication of the resource kit of local church

¹⁰ *Book of Reports*, Southern Baptist Convention (Nashville: Executive Committee, 1986), 162.

¹¹ "Lynn E. May Jr." Baptist History File, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

history, the production of how-to video tapes on church history work, and the establishment of the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives as a major Baptist research collection in America. Trained as a Baptist historian, he served Southern Baptists as the "Lord's remembrancer." Lynn May lived out that calling with distinction and persistence, not only to his religious faith but also to the archival profession.

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