

January 1998

Fresh Focus: Before Archives: Margaret Cross Norton's Childhood, Education, and Early Career

Donnelly Lancaster

University of Alabama Birmingham

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



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lancaster, Donnelly, "Fresh Focus: Before Archives: Margaret Cross Norton's Childhood, Education, and Early Career," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 16 no. 1 (1998).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol16/iss1/6>

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.

Fresh Focus

Too often the pressure of the present-day work environment lures archivists into ignoring their professional past or advancing shortsightedly into the future. To encourage such reflection on the archival enterprise, *Provenance* includes this section, Fresh Focus. We invite contributors to explore neglected chapters in archival history or to share an original, especially historical, perspective on the current world of archival affairs. *Provenance* particularly encourages submissions for Fresh Focus from new or student archivists who are, after all, the future of the profession. Following is the second in a series of occasional essays or papers meeting these criteria.

The Editors

Before Archives: Margaret Cross Norton's Childhood, Education, and Early Career

Donnelly Lancaster

The most fundamental influence on Margaret Cross Norton's career choice came not from a progressive history professor or experienced archivist but instead from a decidedly unique childhood. Looking back on her childhood after more than fifty years, Norton believed that the home

environment created by her parents made the most significant contribution to the direction of her archival career. Norton claimed "the major influence on my archival philosophy was absorbed unconsciously, but most emphatically, from my family background."¹

Norton grew up in a family of government employees who imparted to her a knowledge of and respect for archives. Her early understanding of the value and definition of archives did not mean, however, that from youth she consciously prepared herself for a career in archives. Uncertain of what career she wanted to pursue, and influenced by the era, she selected a traditionally feminized career and entered the library profession. As she matured, she became interested in history and eventually completed the courses for a Ph.D. in history. Disheartened by her chosen profession, in 1915 Norton discovered a career that would utilize the appreciation of records she had developed in her childhood. Her appreciation of records came to fruition in the 1920s when she began to expand the Archives Division of the Illinois State Library and as she presented her ideas to colleagues in national organizations.

Born in 1891 Margaret Cross Norton was the only child of Samuel and Jennie Adams Norton. Her parents lived in Rockford, Illinois, until her father's death in 1926, and they had both lived in Rockford for some years before their marriage.² Both her parents and an uncle held positions in county offices. When they married, Jennie Adams was the deputy county treasurer and Samuel Norton was deputy

¹ Margaret C. Norton to William Birdsall, 18 June 1973, *Margaret Cross Norton Working Papers, 1924-1958* (Springfield, Ill.: Illinois State Archives, 1991) (hereafter cited as *MCNWP*), microfilm, reel 3, frame 1234 (hereafter cited in the form 3:1234).

² Mrs. John Irvine to Margaret C. Norton, 13 March 1953, *MCNWP*, 3:1153; Margaret C. Norton to Mrs. John Irvine, 16 March 1953, 3:1154.

county clerk. After the birth of their daughter, Jennie Norton resigned from her position. Margaret Norton's uncle, Marcus Norton, was county clerk. Elected in 1889 Marcus Norton retained the position until his death in 1917; her father then served as interim county clerk for the remainder of the term. At that time in Illinois, the county clerk was the chief executive officer in the county and was responsible for a variety of records.³ In this environment Margaret Norton "saw how and why records were being created, and how they were being used."⁴

Norton vividly remembered the times when her mother, rather than hiring a sitter, left her in her father's care at his office. Instead of leaving the child in his office where she might interfere with his routine, Samuel Norton encouraged young Margaret to play in the records vault.⁵ Although this was an unusual location of play for a child, these times gave Norton early impressions of the importance of records creation and keeping. Norton remembered a cartoon in the stacks that depicted a harried records clerk among an enormous stack of record books with the caption, "Put that book back where it belongs!"⁶ Norton learned early in life that a record's value to government depended on its authenticity and order.

Margaret Norton's introduction to these truisms came not only from time spent in her father's office; she also absorbed this knowledge of the importance of records in government administration in her home "for unlike most men, my father

³ Norton to Birdsall, 18 June 1973, *MCNWP*, 3:1234.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:1235.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:1234.

⁶ *Ibid.*

talked shop at home.”⁷ Margaret Norton was privy to many discussions of county business during her childhood. Norton’s father also continued to use his wife’s mathematical skills for the benefit of the county when for many years she kept the assessment books for the county collector. Thus, the entire Norton family acquired knowledge of the daily proceedings of county offices.

Although Norton’s childhood experiences provided her a basic knowledge of government records, her decision to pursue an archival career came later in life. After she graduated from Rockford High School in 1909, Norton attended Rockford College for three years. In 1912 she entered the University of Chicago, and by 1913 she had completed an undergraduate degree in history. She continued her education at Chicago, and by 1914 she had completed a Master of Arts in history.⁸

Norton entered college during the Progressive period, which began in the late nineteenth century and lasted until the early twentieth century, from perhaps 1880 until 1920. During this period, the United States experienced significant growth, both in its population and industrial sector. This growth brought intolerable living and working conditions for the nation’s poor, especially in the crowded cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Americans from varied social, political, and economic backgrounds concentrated their efforts to improve living and working conditions and check the power of industrial magnates. Attempts at reform during this period focused on improving the country’s social, economic, and legal systems.

Many young women in the Progressive era found their time at college exciting and challenging as they enrolled in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Register of Illinois Librarians,” 24 March 1944, *MCNWP*, 3:1138.

demanding courses, joined social organizations, and developed often intense relationships with other women. This was particularly true for daughters of urban, middle- and upper-class, white, Protestant families such as Margaret Norton.⁹ Women of this privileged group at the University of Chicago lived in the more expensive campus residence halls, belonged to social organizations, and enjoyed sundry gatherings with other female and male students.¹⁰

Historians have characterized the group of women who entered college after 1890 as "frivolous and socially preoccupied, contrasting them unfavorably with the serious and dedicated pioneer generation of 1865 through 1890."¹¹ These women were more interested in heterosexual relationships, marriage, and children than the earlier generation of college women.¹² Around 1900, marriage rates for graduates of "select women's colleges" were as low as 50 percent.¹³ Although marriage rates increased for female college graduates in the Progressive era, for various reasons many remained single. Between 1877 and 1924, only 25 percent of women who earned the Ph.D. ever married.

No evidence explains Norton's single status or indicates that she was ever involved romantically. Norton did doctoral

⁹ Barbara M. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women. A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 107-09.

¹⁰ Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), 95, 104-05.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

¹² Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987), 148-49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 148.

work at the University of Chicago, but she did not complete her dissertation.¹⁴ Her marital status conforms with the prevailing trend: as a woman's education level increased, the probability that she would marry decreased. In her later years, she jokingly described a former employee who left her position to get married as not "fully emancipated."¹⁵ This comment implies she gave credence to feminist views on marriage, suggesting that she chose to remain single to pursue a career. Many educated women of this period had decided at an early age to forgo marriage and romantic relationships with men. As a general rule, professional success and avoidance of marriage went hand in hand for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹⁶ Ida Tarbell, "Muckraker" journalist, felt a complete aversion to marriage from an early age, for marriage "would interfere with my plans; it would fetter my freedom. . . . When I was fourteen I was praying God on my knees to keep me from marriage."¹⁷

Women of both generations—the nineteenth-century pioneers in college education and the "new women" of the Progressive era—shared one common concern: all had to

¹⁴ Margaret C. Norton, "Archives in Illinois: The Pioneer Period," *Illinois Libraries* 63 (1981): 231.

¹⁵ Norton to Birdsall, 31 May 1973, *MCNWP*, 3:1216.

¹⁶ Penina Migdal Glazer and Miriam Slater, *Unequal Colleagues: The Entrance of Women into the Professions, 1890-1940* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 4-8.

¹⁷ LeeAnne G. Kryder, "Self Assertion and Social Commitment: The Significance of Work to the Progressive Era's New Woman," in *History of the Women in the United States: Historical Articles on Women's Lives and Activities*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (New York: K. G. Saur, 1992-1994), 8,1: 326.

answer the question, "After college, what?"¹⁸ This question not only related to marriage, for even those who chose to remain single often had to choose between entering the paid work force or making the "family choice" by fulfilling family obligations.¹⁹ During her time at the University of Chicago, Norton faced the problem of answering for herself "After college, what?" Norton's family made no impositions on her following her graduation. She planned to pursue a career immediately after the completion of her education, but she first had to choose that career.

In an age of professionalization dominated by men, women like Norton understood the obstacles in their quests for professional careers. Although she held a graduate degree from a prestigious university, Norton realized the barriers she would face as a woman, and she believed that she had only three options: teacher, nurse, or librarian.²⁰ She considered three of the four "female-intensive" professions of this period, omitting social work from her list of possibilities. By excluding social work, she dismissed an obvious option for a woman student in the Progressive period at the University of Chicago, which was a pioneering center for social work training.²¹ Norton, nevertheless, considered only traditional, feminized careers even though some women of the early

¹⁸ This popular question comes from the title of an 1898 pamphlet by Helen Starrett, *After College, What?*, that encouraged parents to allow their willing daughters to enter the professions.

¹⁹ Joyce Antler, *The Educated Woman and Professionalization: The Struggle for a New Feminine Identity, 1890-1920* (New York: Garland Press, 1987), 136-37; Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education*, 30-1; Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 115-40.

²⁰ Norton to Birdsall, 24 May 1973, *MCNWP*, 3:1204.

²¹ Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 66-92.

twentieth century were pursuing nontraditional careers. For example, by 1920 women in the United States constituted 5.9 percent of all medical students and 5.6 percent of all law students.²² Women scientists were abundant in the Progressive period, but these women seldom found employment in their field beyond women's academic institutions.²³ Apparently when Norton searched for a career, she chose the path of least resistance which at the same time seemed reasonably interesting to her. Nevertheless, she subsequently found that this feminized career offered her little satisfaction.

Norton was not alone in her desire for a feminized profession. In 1920 in the United States there were 640,000 women teachers, 145,000 women nurses, 27,000 women social workers, and 14,000 women librarians. The percentages of women in these professions ranged from 60 percent of the total in social work to 97 percent of the total in nursing.²⁴ Despite their differences, these professions shared one common characteristic: they offered women of the Progressive period few opportunities for advancement and little prestige. Teaching had attracted large numbers of women since the early nineteenth century when the "cult of true womanhood" had marked female teachers as inherently

²² Patricia M. Hummer, *The Decade of Elusive Promise: Professional Women in the United States, 1920-1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1979), 57.

²³ Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 160-61.

²⁴ Barbara E. Brand, "Librarianship and Other Female-Intensive Professions," *Journal of Library History* 18 (1983): 391.

equipped to shape the lives and educations of children.²⁵ The Civil War stimulated the extensive development of the American nursing profession. As members of the medical community, nurses, natural care givers according to Victorian thought, always took positions subordinate to physicians; they were merely assistants to the physicians, worthy of little respect.²⁶ During the Progressive period, women continued to enter the nursing profession, but "as alternative occupations opened to women, fewer middle- and upper-class women chose nursing."²⁷ Social work developed as a paid occupation in the late nineteenth century with social reformers such as Jane Addams and Grace Abbot leading the way. For many educated, Progressive era women, settlements represented both an "opportunity to continue the collective female life they had enjoyed in college" and "the chance to feel that they were applying their knowledge in a socially useful way."²⁸

The idea of a career in social work, teaching, or nursing failed to entice Norton. She apparently had little interest in aiding children, the sick, and the less fortunate in society. Despite her graduate education in history, Norton also expressed no interest in pursuing a career as a professional historian. Instead, she chose to enter the fourth feminized profession, librarianship, in what seems a rather simple decision-making process: "On no better authority than a

²⁵ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966).

²⁶ Susan M. Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 131.

²⁷ Brand, "Librarianship and Other Female-Intensive Professions," 396.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 399.

teacher's suggestion that 'Because Margaret likes to read, she should become a librarian,' I therefore took the two year graduate course in Library Science at the old New York State Library School at Albany, taking the B.L.S. in 1915."²⁹

Like teaching in the earlier half of the nineteenth century, librarianship evolved as a feminized profession in the late nineteenth century as industrialization, immigration, and urbanization increased, and national and community leaders sought to preserve social order. Some of these leaders believed education and universal literacy were means of maintaining that order and that public librarians would reinforce these positive social values.³⁰ Melvil Dewey, founder of the Columbia College of Library Economy and its successor, the New York State Library School, was an outspoken proponent of women librarians' inherent abilities to provide this missionary service: "Is it not true that the ideal librarian fills a pulpit where there is service every day during all the waking hours, with a large proportion of the community frequently in the congregation? . . . [The library is] a school in which the classes graduate only at death?"³¹ Contemporary literature supported these ideals of librarianship.³² Educated women of irreproachable character seemed the ideologically sound choice to work in these libraries and benefit larger society. Furthermore, administrators could pay women librarians lower salaries than

²⁹ Norton to Birdsall, 24 May 1973, 3:1204.

³⁰ Wayne A. Weigand, "The Development of Librarianship in the United States," *Libraries and Culture* 24 (1989): 101-2.

³¹ Dee Garrison, "The Tender Technicians: The Feminization of Public Librarianship, 1876-1905," *Journal of Social History* 6 (1972-73): 135-6.

³² Joanne E. Passet, "Men in a Feminized Profession: The Male Librarian, 1887-1921," *Libraries and Culture* 28 (1993): 388.

men.³³ As women entered the library as professionals they filled some of the reference and most of the technical positions, but men invariably held the administrative positions. This pattern "quickly stratified the large library institutional bureaucracy by gender. At most large libraries, directors were male, cataloguers female, and reference librarians about an even split between the sexes."³⁴

Even though Norton chose a library career through a simple process of elimination, she evidently sought for herself excellent training for the position. With male enrollment at 19.5 percent between 1887 and 1921, the New York State Library School boasted the highest figures for male enrollment in library schools in the United States.³⁵ The New York State Library School was one of the few library schools in the country that required a bachelor's degree for admission.³⁶ In addition, the educational program that Dewey designed with its "attention to mechanics and apprenticeship within the training school, to the neglect of theory or general learning" prepared its majority female enrollment for their future in technical positions in libraries.³⁷ Norton obviously believed the school at Albany offered a superior education since she did not stay in her own state and enter, for example, the library school at the University of Illinois.

³³ Weigand, "The Development of Librarianship," 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Passet, "Men in a Feminized Profession," 393.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 391.

³⁷ Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 168.

After she graduated in 1915, Norton held a series of library posts. Her first position was at the Vassar College Library in Poughkeepsie, New York, as an assistant cataloguer. Norton remained at the Vassar Library for almost three years, but she grew increasingly disenchanted with librarianship. As a cataloguer, Norton performed perhaps the dullest task in library work. In fact, the consensus among librarians at the time was that "because women had greater ability than men to bear pain with fortitude, women had stored great reserves of patience and thus could perform the most monotonous tasks without boredom."³⁸ When in 1973 a researcher asked why she left library work, Norton responded:

I do not care to discuss my disillusionment with the library profession. Among other things, I felt it too "cut and dried," inflexible, too much infused with the missionary spirit—people ought to be made to read, whether they want to or not; the work monotonous with little opportunity for originality, etc. I do not care to go into personalities as I would have to do to explain why I left Vassar after three years, the ostensible being to accept a fellowship at Chicago.³⁹

Dissatisfied with her profession, Norton described herself as a "misfit" in the Vassar College Library.⁴⁰

During her time at Vassar, Norton maintained an interest in academic endeavors. Although Norton's decision to become a librarian might suggest that perhaps her interest in

³⁸ Garrison, "Tender Technicians," 137.

³⁹ Norton to Birdsall, 18 June 1973, 3:1231.

⁴⁰ Norton to Birdsall, 24 May 1973, 3:1204.

history had waned, she nevertheless continued her work in the field. Her position at Vassar left her summers free, and Norton used the time to begin doctoral work in history at the University of Chicago. Her continued interest in history during her time at Vassar perhaps changed the future course of her life and professional career.

In December 1915 Norton attended the national meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA) in Washington, D.C. Years later Norton called her attendance at this meeting "the turning point in my career."⁴¹ Because the AHA leadership believed, incorrectly, that Congress would soon pass an act establishing a national archives, they planned programs around the subject. Waldo G. Leland and Leo F. Stock of the Carnegie Institute offered a presentation on European archives and the dismal condition of American federal archives.⁴²

This presentation stimulated Norton's interest in the care of American records. While a student at Albany she had seen the disastrous consequences of improper storage of government records: a fire in the New York State Library in 1911 had destroyed enormous amounts of Dutch colonial records.⁴³ More importantly, this presentation grabbed her attention because as a child her parents taught her to respect records. Having grown up in a family whose livelihood depended on the creation, use, and care for government records, Norton knew what the loss and neglect of records could mean to a business or government agency. Consequently, the field of archival work seemed worthwhile and essential to Norton. Certainly, archival work captivated

⁴¹ Norton to Birdsall, 24 May 1973, 3:1205.

⁴² Norton, "Pioneer Period," 231.

⁴³ Norton to Birdsall, 24 May 1973, 3:1204.

her interest more so than library work. She had only entered the library profession as a last resort, and she became bored with the work in the first year. An archival position would allow her to use the understanding and respect for records she had developed since childhood. She determined then in Washington, D.C., to become an archivist.

On the return trip to Poughkeepsie, Norton discussed her dream with Vassar faculty member Lucy Maynard Salmon. Salmon, head of the Vassar history department, was a distinguished and respected professor.⁴⁴ Known for her views on educated and professional women, Salmon believed women should receive recognition for their works only if their work had merit; gender alone did not warrant praise. In correspondence with a friend, Salmon confided, "I am intensely interested in all good work, but not specially because it is done by women."⁴⁵ Lucy Salmon was, however, realistic. When the young librarian Margaret Norton expressed her interest in an archival career, Salmon advised her, "Get ready for it. Read everything you can on the subject, and if the opportunity comes you will be ready."⁴⁶ After this advice, Norton "read everything about archives [she] could get [her] hands on."⁴⁷ During the next few years, however, no opportunities in the archival field arose for her, and Norton

⁴⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 187-89.

⁴⁵ Louise Fargo Brown, *Apostle of Democracy: Lucy Maynard Salmon* (New York: Harper and Row, 1943), 256.

⁴⁶ Norton to Birdsall, 24 May 1973, 3:1205.

⁴⁷ Norton, "Pioneer Period," 231.

continued to work at Vassar, even though she believed she might find more fulfillment at a historical library.⁴⁸

She left Vassar in 1918 when the University of Chicago awarded her a two-year fellowship for doctoral studies in history. During those two summers, she calendared manuscript collections at the Indiana State Library.⁴⁹ By 1920 Norton's fellowship ended, and she had completed the residency requirements for a Ph.D. in history. She found a position as a cataloguer for the State Historical Society of Missouri, located at the University of Missouri at Columbia. When she accepted the position she delayed the completion of her doctoral thesis. Nevertheless, she enjoyed her first full-time position in an historical setting. Her starting annual salary of \$1500 was an improvement over her ending salary of \$1000 at Vassar. These were normal salaries for a woman in a female-intensive profession. For example, in 1913 female librarians earned an average salary of \$1081 per year. Nurses that year earned comparable salaries, while public school teachers earned almost \$500 less.⁵⁰ Although some librarians felt this salary was too low, Norton never expressed displeasure concerning the nature of the work rather than the salary.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Norton to Birdsall, 24 May 1973, 3:1204.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Joanne E. Passet, "You Don't Have to Pay Librarians!: Women, Salaries, and Status in the Early 20th Century," in Suzanne Hilderbrand, ed., *Reclaiming the American Library Past: Writing the Women In* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Company, 1996), 211.

⁵¹ Ibid., 209-10.

Norton continued her work, "happily located" in Columbia, Missouri.⁵² She enjoyed the work, and apparently she had a good working relationship with her supervisor, Floyd Shoemaker. Late in 1921, Shoemaker had "with great difficulty" arranged for her a salary increase and promotion to Head Cataloguer.⁵³ At the same time, Norton applied, with only slight interest, for a position as superintendent of the Archives Division of the Illinois State Library. Content at the State Historical Society of Missouri, Norton claimed "the only reason I would consider leaving was the fact that [Shoemaker] was only two years older than I and I realized there was a limit to how far I could go there."⁵⁴ With ambition and curiosity, Norton agreed to meet with Illinois Secretary of State Edward Emmerson. After several mishaps, Norton arrived in Springfield, Illinois, hungry, excited, tired, and suffering from a severe headache. On 10 January 1922 Emmerson faced a bewildered Norton when he said, "Miss Norton, I have decided to appoint you the first archivist of the state to organize the new department."⁵⁵ Until then she had assumed the position involved supervising a small, established department; she was "appalled" to think she would have to create a division herself.⁵⁶ In fact, she "felt like crawling under something." At that moment, however, she "braved up" and told herself, "You cannot do anything worse than fail.

⁵² Norton to Birdsall, 18 June 1973, 3:1232.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3:1233.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Norton, "Pioneer Period," 231.

Take the job."⁵⁷ After her acceptance, Norton wanted more time to prepare for the position. She decided to visit older archival repositories in the eastern states and seek advice from archivists there.

Perhaps Norton did not realize at the time that experiences before 1922 had laid a strong foundation for her successful career as an archivist. As the years progressed, however, her actions, successes, and dedication to her archival career compare favorably to successful men who were "efficient, objective, and devoted to service" in their careers.⁵⁸

Donnelly Lancaster is a Master's degree candidate at Auburn University in the history department's archival studies program. A former Library of Congress Junior Fellow, she works as an archivist at the University of Alabama at Birmingham Archives. This article was written originally as a chapter of her Master's thesis on Margaret Cross Norton's career.

⁵⁷ Norton to Birdsall, 18 June 1973, 3:1233.

⁵⁸ Glazer and Slater, *Unequal Colleagues*, 13.

