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The Society of Georgia Archivists: Twenty Years of Meeting Archival Needs in Georgia

Sheryl B. Vogt

Three years after the Society of American Archivists (SAA) held their thirtieth annual meeting in Atlanta in 1966 and three years after the establishment of the Georgia Archives Institute, twenty-one archivists gathered in Atlanta. This meeting on 25 July 1969 marked the first meeting of what would become the Society of Georgia Archivists (SGA)—the third state or regional archival group formed in the United States. The forefathers of SGA stated that its purpose was "to bring about a closer communication among people in archives, manuscripts, special libraries, and other historically oriented professions; to increase knowledge in the theories and practices of archival administration and records management; to promote the preservation of archival resources of the state; and to strive for the establishment of sound archival standards in the handling of records from their creation to their disposition."¹ They felt

¹ Marvin NeSmith, Jr., 25 July 1969, President's Correspondence, 1969-70. Officers' and Business Records, Series II, Society of Georgia Archivists Records, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, GA (hereafter cited as SGA Records).

the society would aid the individual, advance the profession, and make Georgians more aware of the rich archival resources which document their history.² Membership was open to any interested persons residing in Georgia.³

In 1969, Georgia had twenty individual members in the Society of American Archivists.⁴ Of those twenty, ten were charter members of SGA. They recognized that there were local and state archival issues which could not be addressed by a national organization.

Although the necessity for bringing in members on a statewide basis was stated at the third organizational meeting, membership remained in the Atlanta area for the first four years. At an executive board meeting in May 1971, SGA President Edward Weldon stressed "the society's need to expand its membership and activities beyond the Atlanta area so as to become, in truth, a Georgia-wide organization--to involve itself, in the archival frame of reference, in as many 'entangling alliances' as possible."⁵ In actuality, only when services expanded did membership grow.

The first newsletter of the society appeared in January 1970; meetings were originally monthly, then five times per year. The leadership intended "that programs would be aimed at the

² *Ibid.*

³ Richard T. Eltzroth, Membership Letter, President's Correspondence, 1969-1970, Series II, SGA Records.

⁴ Diane Dambach to A. K. Johnson, Jr., 15 October 1969, *ibid.*

⁵ Minutes, 20 May 1971, Records and Papers, 1970-1971 (second year), Series II, SGA Records.

stimulation of professional growth, and that, ideally, the society would serve as a clearinghouse for professional information and the solution of problems.⁶ Under David Gracy's presidency, 1972-73, the society "adopted an ambitious program of public service and publication."⁷ To get more members and more people involved, the executive board accepted Gracy's proposal to publish a journal.⁸ In 1972, *Georgia Archive* (now *Provenance*) became the first journal published by a state or regional archival group. An aggressive membership campaign followed, and the first fall workshop and annual meeting was held in 1973.

The Society of Georgia Archivists rapidly evolved as a strong role model for state and regional groups. Membership continued to grow as a pattern of stability in services developed. The reciprocal support of the society and its constituency provided a secure organization. SGA provided its members with some of the same services already offered by SAA—professional support, publications, and periodic meetings.

In the ensuing years, the journal was published biannually and the newsletter quarterly; meetings and workshops were held each fall in Atlanta and elsewhere in Georgia each spring. *Georgia Archive* received an award of merit from SAA in 1975. The following year a grant awarded by the National Historical

⁶ Minutes, 15 October 1969, Records and Papers, 1969-1970 (first year), Series II, SGA Records.

⁷ News release, November 1972, News releases, 1972-1973, Series II, SGA Records.

⁸ Notes by David B. Gracy, II, June 1972, Executive Board, Series II, SGA Records.

Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) enabled the society to produce a slide/tape show entitled "A Very Fragile Resource: Our Documentary Heritage." Members could attend meetings which required only a small expenditure of funds and time (unlike SAA meetings often held in distant cities), individuals could see one another on a regular basis, and opportunities for participation and leadership were plentiful.

Almost from the beginning, SGA members expressed concern about the relationship with SAA. Organizational minutes from a 12 November 1969 meeting note that while SAA had declined the acceptance of the Ohio society as a state chapter, SAA wished to be kept informed of the group's progress for future consideration.⁹ On 25 October 1972, David Gracy wrote A. K. Johnson that SGA values to SAA were spreading the word and promoting professionalism. Gracy noted that one thing SGA wanted from SAAⁱ was a forum in a national publication for exchange of information and ideas.¹⁰ This has evolved without formal affiliation with SAA.

In February 1973, SGA polled its membership on the question of affiliation. This was in preparation for President Gracy's attendance as a delegate at the April 1973 meeting of the SAA Council, where members would discuss the rise, development, and future of regional archival associations.

At the executive board meeting on 13 December 1973, affiliation was again discussed. Gracy's handwritten notes reveal that the board ruled out suggesting a southeastern

⁹ Minutes, 12 November 1969, Records and Papers, 1969-1970 (first year), Series II, SGA Records.

¹⁰ Notes by David B. Gracy, II, 25 October 1972, President's Correspondence, 1971-1972, Series II, SGA Records.

regional organization and querying members about SAA dues. Board members expressed concern over the makeup of SAA's Committee on Regional Archival Activity (CRAA)—the board wanted to appoint their own representative rather than just a liaison person. As Gracy wrote J. Frank Cook, chair of CRAA, "If the SAA expects relevant input from regional organizations, it should provide means for the regionals to have a voice in their representative on your committee, not just a liaison person."¹¹

With the exception of SAA's award of merit to *Georgia Archive*, formal written contact with the national does not appear in SGA files again until 1977. Ann Morgan Campbell wrote urging regional involvement in planning for state conferences on libraries and information science.¹² This form of correspondence—soliciting support for some activity or legislation and requesting assistance with surveys, nominations, or program—was sporadic for the next decade. Cooperation with the national depended on SGA's leadership's energies and inclinations.

In the planning committee minutes for the 1975 fall workshop, a discussion was held on whether the workshop should be basic or technically oriented. Consensus of the committee was "We still must concern ourselves with the SGA membership and their needs," indicating a leaning toward more

¹¹ Notes by David B. Gracy, II, 13 December 1973, Executive Board and David B. Gracy, II to J. Frank Cook, 31 January 1974, President and Georgia Archive editor correspondence, Series II, SGA Records.

¹² Ann Morgan Campbell to State Archivists and Regional Association Officers, 27 May 1977, General Correspondence and Business, Series II, SGA Records.

basic, hands-on workshops.¹³ Nonetheless, speakers of national prominence and issues of national import have continually appeared on SGA meeting programs. They represent only a small portion of the program—generally a keynote speech or one session, such as a wrap-up on current issues.

Essentially, SGA was evolving somewhat independently in carrying the professional message to those individuals not involved with SAA. Relying on its own members, resources, and local contacts, SGA looked to cooperate with related groups, such as local historical, library, and informational associations, and with other state and regional groups. These activities manifested in cosponsored meetings, an attempt at copublication of the journal, and a series of polls for a southern confederation of archivists. A look at these outreach attempts reveals much about SGA's history during the 1970s and 1980s.

Copublication of the journal was a predominant issue for four years. *Georgia Archive* was originally conceived as a small publication serving archivists, curators, librarians, and researchers in Georgia. Under the direction of David Gracy, the journal quickly drew a much wider audience. In succeeding years, editors Ann Pederson, Linda Matthews, Ellen Garrison, and Sheryl Vogt fostered the continued expansion of the publication in both content and format. Articles and features on both archival theory and practice form the basis of the journal. Today the majority of the contributors and over half the subscribers are from outside the state. Yet, as in most success stories, the journal had its period of uncertainty.

By 1978, the journal had begun to drain the financial resources of the society. Increased publishing costs caused a dip into other society revenues. This, added to editorial burnout

¹³ Minutes, 13 February 1975, Planning Committee, Fall Workshop Records (Series III), SGA Records.

and the need for ongoing institutional support similar to that enjoyed by *The American Archivist* brought an evaluation of the society's commitment to the journal. A poll of the membership in the spring of 1979 gave a clear mandate to continue publishing and strengthen the journal. The idea of broadening the journal's acceptance by a name change was approved, as was the idea of exploring cooperative publication arrangements with other archival groups.

Initially, several other state organizations in the South were approached. None felt able to undertake the venture at the time. Soon after, Mid Atlantic Archives and Records Conference (MARAC) and New England Archivists (NEA) approached SGA about possible copublication. Despite lengthy negotiations, a copublication agreement among the three groups was never signed. In 1982, SGA's executive board found the society to be in healthier financial condition, and its membership reaffirmed support of the journal. Under the new name of *Provenance*, editorial staff and board members have been selected to bring a broader regional identification.¹⁴

From the beginning, the idea for a southern or southeastern regional has been tied closely to the copublication issue. In minutes from a *Georgia Archive* staff meeting, 24 January 1978, consideration was given to SGA's merging "into a new and larger body, a federation of some type" with discussion following on how this would relate to the South Atlantic

¹⁴ Minutes, 19 November 1982, President's file, Series II, SGA Records.

Archives and Records Conference (now Southeastern Archives and Records Conference, SARC).¹⁵

In succeeding years, SGA planned programs and services with an eye toward exploring cooperation with other southern state organizations. A southeastern archival organization was an almost continual agenda item for the board from 1978 to 1987. In addition to the makeup of the journal editorial staff and board, there have been cosponsored meetings, discussions on the possibility of such an association, and even a vote of the membership on joining a regional.

In a memorandum from SGA President Les Hough's meeting with the executive committee of the Society of Alabama Archivists, 13 February 1980, possible creation of a southeastern group was one of three suggestions for cooperation. It would encompass Georgia and Alabama initially and later include Mississippi and Tennessee and perhaps other states. It was noted that SARC was not an adequate substitute.¹⁶

SARC was the first regional, formed in 1966 primarily for the staff members of state archives to get together. It is said of SARC that it exists to meet and meets to exist. There are no officers, no dues or services, only a spring meeting. Could it form the basis for a larger organization in the Southeast? Repeated attempts to interest SARC failed.

At the direction of the SGA board in 1980, President Hough pursued having a session at the 1981 SARC meeting on the concept of a southeastern archival organization. His efforts

¹⁵ Minutes, 24 January 1978, President's files (Georgia Archive), Series II, SGA Records.

¹⁶ Memorandum, 13 February 1980, President's files (correspondence), Series II, SGA Records.

were not encouraging. In April 1981, Hough wrote the president of the Society of Alabama Archivists: "I hold out little hope for the creation of a regional organization through a broadening of SAARC. . . We can begin to explore other avenues to closer cooperation."¹⁷

The most recent approach to SARC was in the spring of 1986. In the last few years, Tennessee and Alabama were included in its organization to make a total of seven states. Interested parties again made a bid to broaden SARC; the decision was not to take a step at the time. The general consensus is that SARC is already meeting its purpose to serve government archivists and records managers and sees no need to broaden its scope.

Les Hough reported on the 1986 SARC meeting to SGA members at their spring meeting. This marked the first time the regional concept was a topic with the membership at large. A discussion ensued on the benefits of regionalization—publications, training, preservation, clout—both locally and nationally. The sentiment was expressed that there is underrepresentation in the national organization for the amount of archival activity in the Southeast. In SAA's fifty-three years, only a half dozen or less members from southern states have held any given office in the national organization. (Notable exceptions are two former SGA presidents who have served as president of SAA after leaving the Southeast: Ed Weldon and David Gracy; in 1988, Linda Matthews was elected to SAA Council.) In recent years, more have appeared on the program committees and as leaders of sections.

In 1987, the year following SARC's affirmation of its original goals, Alabama and Mississippi archivists invited SGA to join a conference of southern archivists. Following joint meetings in

¹⁷ Leslie Hough to Bill Sumners, 13 April 1981, *ibid.*

the spring at Columbiana, Alabama, and in Atlanta in the fall, SGA's membership narrowly defeated the idea of joining the conference.

For almost ten years, cooperation and copublication had been discussed, but when the idea to join a regional was put to a vote among the members, it was turned down. An SGA colleague has suggested that it is a typically southern trait to rely upon the state individually. This seems to have merit. Another reason may have been opposition to change. SGA had been a strong, active organization for eighteen years, why change what was working well? Yet, another reason may have been that the leadership misjudged the interest among the membership in a formal cooperative agreement.

Despite its outreach attempts, SGA may be characterized as a close-knit group. Unlike its regional colleagues, the services SGA offers tend to be less structured, more personal, more basic in nature. Its constituency has generally been concerned with the how-to. Publications and programs have featured practice over theory.

Nevertheless, SGA has been evolving—evolving even as it makes an effort to meet the needs of a profession which is itself growing and changing. In the last eight years, the society has promoted cooperation with common interest groups by cosponsoring receptions, programs, workshops, and meetings. These groups have included information science organizations, state historical and library associations, SOLINET and SAA. The society was involved in administering the NHPRC needs assessment grant for Georgia. SGA served as the financial agent for the grant which was directed by the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board. In 1988, SGA served as co-host for SAA's annual meeting. SGA members from across the state and elsewhere in the South helped with local arrangements. Members have also been active in expressing opinions about the

appointment of the archivist of the United States, funding for NHPRC, and independence for the National Archives.

The Society of American Archivists has demonstrated change, too, by developing programs and services which recognize the strengths of the regionals. The Committee on Regional Archival Activity has been reorganized; sessions at annual meetings have promoted national themes for the profession; various task forces address grassroots issues; and SAA is actively seeking regional and state cosponsors for beginning and advanced workshops. For the first time, with concerns like education and certification of individual archivists, goals and priorities for the profession, and the archivist's image in society, SAA is looking for concrete input from the regionals in decision-making.

In recent years, the Society of Georgia Archivists has moved along lines of concern similar to those of the national. As with most organizations, SGA's successes and failures have depended upon the energies and inclinations of the leadership. Planning and development committees were appointed several times but never took hold. Now, in its twentieth year, the society's leaders are taking a critical look at the current and future status of the organization.

Following a session on the creation of SGA at the 1989 spring meeting (see edited transcript of session), those attending expressed a desire to put action to ideas—to give direction to the next decade. Executive board members have an obligation to respond. The 1982 needs assessment report and the Archives and Society Committee report may be used to structure programs and services. The board has appointed a standing committee on education to administer the recently established Carroll Hart scholarship and to promote services for professional development. An Archives and Society award will be given on occasion to a nonarchival person for promoting the use of archives, and members may also look forward to even more, though informal, cooperation with SAA and with neighboring

archival and allied associations in pursuing workshops and issue-oriented programs. Building on the strengths of its twenty years, the Society of Georgia Archivists will meet the needs of its membership and welcome the challenges of a rapidly evolving profession.

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