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What Would I Do Without Georgia Archives and Archivists: A Novelist's Perspective on the Use of Local Records

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The obvious answer to the question posed in my title is that, undoubtedly, I would not be writing historical novels laid along the southeastern coast.

With the possible exception of my first novel, The Beloved Invader (1965), a quick reading of the afterword of any of my other seven novels will give a clear idea of my deep dependence upon historical archives--both in Georgia and Florida. Back in the sixties, when I was working on The Beloved Invader as a rank newcomer to Georgia, I simply didn't know about the wealth of available material in our archives and historical societies. Sound ignorant? I was where historical research is concerned. Before 1961, I had written only nonfiction books. Captivated with both St. Simons Island and the story of Anson Dodge's quaint little church at Frederica, my friend, Joyce Blackburn and I set out to meet the oldest Islanders, hoping eagerly that among them and their remembered tales, we could piece together the actual story. They were all most cooperative and piece it together we did with the open-hearted help of the Goulds of St. Simons and from family and church records. We both feel a bit noble having done it, since there was no Coastal Georgia Historical Society in those early days and even the late Margaret Davis Cate's invaluable material was boxed up and unavailable. We leaned heavily on our friends at the St. Simons Library and the Brunswick Library and somehow we made it. You see, we hadn't even
heard of Hodgson Hall in Savannah and its fantastic collections kept, I now know, since the formation of the Georgia Historical Society back in 1839.

Between the publication of *The Beloved Invader* and my editor's decision that I should turn the vast amount of Island material into a trilogy, we both became charter members of the newly formed Coastal Georgia Historical Society. During its first or second year, I happened to be program chairman and invited the late Walter C. Hartridge of Savannah to speak to us. Meeting Walter, who, with his wife Susan, became our dear and valued friends, changed the direction of my entire writing life. Not only did Walter share freely with me from his own vast collection (now proudly housed at Hodgson Hall) he introduced me to the treasure-filled world of both Georgia and Florida archives. I met and came to love and respect Lilla M. Hawes, then director of the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah and from her, I further learned my way around the vast collections she knows so well.

I have done extensive research since--enough to have written seven more novels (with the third in the planned Savannah quartet begun)--but in no way do I consider myself an historian. I'm just a writer, who leans and leans and leans upon the expertise of Georgia's skilled archivists and researchers and records. A certain amount of Georgia history has become a part of my mental equipment rather by osmosis, but this in no way diminishes my need for the experts. Walter Hartridge and Lilla Hawes and my friend and fellow writer, Burnette Vanstory, taught me enough about how to research, so that when I reached the writing of *Lighthouse*, the third in the St. Simons trilogy, I dared one day to fly to Atlanta to do some research for myself on just where James Gould of Massachusetts, who built the first St. Simons lighthouse, might have lived before he built the light. Family records said simply that he'd lived and operated a sawmill on the St. Mary's River.

Feeling enormously brave to be delving all alone (without Walter or Burney or Lilla) into the awesome
state archives in Atlanta, I soon found out how helpless I was without an Atlanta expert to guide me. Luckily for me, I found Marion Hemperley, deputy surveyor general for Georgia. Marion and I had immediate rapport as people, but only his comfortable, warm-hearted manner prevented my being awestruck by the man's knowledge. He helped me pinpoint the exact spot where James Gould must have lived. We have remained in touch and our friendship has grown through the years. (I hope you will read the afterword to my novel, *To See Your Face Again*, dedicated to Marion, for some small idea of how much I feel Georgians owe this modest, knowledgeable gentleman.)

Once I saw that my story would, in the second novel of the Savannah quartet, move away from Savannah proper into the old Cherokee nation in middle and north Georgia, again Marion Hemperley became an essential part of my working life. One morning, for example, in the heat of writing one difficult scene for *To See Your Face Again*, I picked up the telephone, as I do so often, and called Marion in Atlanta with still another of my "crazy author questions." I needed to know the height of corn in a field near Cassville, Georgia at a certain time of year. "Why, darlin'," Marion said in the midst of whatever "busyness" occupied him, "that corn would have been just about knee high by then." Already, he had sent me a detailed summary of the exact routes my people would have taken from Savannah to Cassville back in the 1830s, what inns they slept in, the kind of beds, the meals they ate. Not often, but now and then, he'd even remind me that here, they would have eaten from a tablecloth, or there, they would have fought bedbugs all night. When Marion is unable to answer me off the top of his head, the mail, in a day or so, brings detailed material once he has had time to search the marvelous records at the Department of Archives and History. What would I do without Marion Hemperley and the Georgia Assembly's farsightedness in supplying funds to collect and preserve this invaluable material?
What would I do without Hodgson Hall in Savannah? What, oh, what would I do without my close friend, acting director, Barbara Bennett at Hodgson Hall? Without her cooperative, pleasant staff? Without the (to me) always surprising wealth of records? As with Marion Hemperley, I can call Bobby Bennett any hour of the day and get my answers. Bobby began to become "essential Bobby" to me back in the early stages of Savannah. To use another specific example, I needed to know in some detail what my main character, Mark Browning, saw as his ship from the North eased away from the Atlantic Ocean and up the Savannah River into the city proper back in the year 1812. I called Bobby Bennett, who returned my call within ten minutes and pages 38 through 42 in the novel Savannah show the result of her call. Not only did she tell me what Mark might have seen then, but, fortuitously, she slowed me down, since I would have had the ship sailing up the river and into the Savannah harbor in a time frame to match today's travel on Interstate 95!

In To See Your Face Again, Marion Hemperley (from the records in Atlanta) sent a careful description of the old Georgia town of Cassville in the 1830s. Before the railroads bypassed the town, Cassville was considered the coming city in that area so recently vacated by the Cherokees. In my novel, I was able, because of this material, to take young Burke Latimer on horseback into the then thriving settlement and these results are on pages 322 to 326 of the novel.

To See Your Face Again opens with the account of the ghastly wreck of the sleek steam packet, Pulaski. In order to study the mechanical and tragic details of the explosion firsthand, I hopped in my car and drove to Savannah for access, not only to Bobby Bennett's expertise and patience and good humor, but to the materials she'd assured me we had at Hodgson Hall. Our search turned up not only newspaper ads and information about the ownership and building of the Pulaski, but three--not one, three--narratives of the wreck itself by persons who
actually experienced it. One was by James Hamilton Couper, one by Rebecca Lamar (Mrs. Hugh McLeod) from an old issue of the Georgia Historical quarterly, and another was a firsthand account, via a grandson, Robert Walker Groves, from his grandfather, Colonel Downey Walker. The Walker account had been incorporated in a paper delivered to the Cosmos Club in Savannah in the year 1955. This paper also happily included an actual news account telling the story of a young man who rescued a young lady from the sea after the explosion and who later married her following five days and nights spent together on a makeshift raft in the Atlantic Ocean. Of course, I used this as the basis for my romance between Natalie Browning and Burke Latimer. Believe me, the truth, as made available through Georgia's archives, can be far more amazing than the wildest product of an author's imaginings.

From the Walter C. Hartridge Collection at Hodgson Hall, I was able to use the exact wording of the heart-breaking little account written on the flyleaf of Virginia Mackay's Bible by her bereft husband, William Mackay, in the midst of his grief at having lost not only his beloved wife, Virginia, but their two babies as well when the Pulaski went down. In the final two novels of the planned Savannah quartet, I will be making constant use of the Hartridge Collection, I'm sure, in writing about Andrew Low and the trouble he had getting along with William's sister, Eliza Anne Mackay Stiles, whose daughter Mary Cowper married rich, older Andrew Low.

This article is being written during the always difficult beginning chapters of the third in the quartet, Before the Darkness Falls, in which I will attempt to lead up and into the Civil War. Not an easy job! I mean to try hard to be objective, to show both sides of the conflict—perhaps even to alter a few continuing misconceptions in the South and in the North. The railroads began to spread across our state at this time and not only do I have access to the riches of the Central of Georgia Collection at Hodgson Hall, but, once more, Marion
Hemperley has sent me a detailed account of what a train trip was like from Savannah to the end of the line (at Gordon, just this side of Macon) in the year 1842. (and, oh, yes--another call to Bobby Bennett in Savannah told me the exact location of the old frame Central of Georgia station and that the military men from the Department of Engineers used part of it as a barracks.)

Many think me a touch insane for having signed a contract at age seventy for not one--but four long novels. And beyond the usual stage fright experienced by any novelist (if he or she is honest) at the start of any novel, I signed it without fear of finding in family letters and other records all the research material I'll need. The material I need will be there when I need it in one or another of Georgia's superb archives. Help will be there from Bobby Bennett, Marion Hemperley--and perhaps, before I'm finished with novel number four, other experts yet unknown to me. Materials do disintegrate, though--and my fear is that there will be insufficient monies and staff for their all important preservation and indexing. If I could, I'd go door to door all over the state of Georgia, begging citizens to urge preservation of what must be collections of historical treasures unsurpassed in any state of the union.

Author Eugenia Price is a resident of St. Simons Island, Georgia where she set her St. Simons trilogy of historical novels: Beloved Invader, New Moon Rising, and Lighthouse. She has since written other novels set along the Georgia coast and in Savannah, all of which are based on the lives of actual people and researched using primary sources.