

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Price Saffold, Vivian and Olson, Elizabeth S., "Georgia Archives Advocacy: Organization, Communication, Education," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 31 no. 1 (2013).

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol31/iss1/8>

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Georgia Archives Advocacy: Organization, Communication, Education

By Vivian Price Saffold and Elizabeth S. Olson

Essay/Opinion

To meet the required cuts, it is with great remorse that I have to announce, effective November 1, 2012, the Georgia State Archives located in Morrow, GA will be closed to the public.

~Secretary of State Brian Kemp, September 13, 2012

After the announcement that the Georgia Archives would close, archives supporters around the state began to rally and get organized. The Georgia Genealogical Society (GGS) was one group of supporters that performed numerous activities to advocate for the Georgia Archives. Other organizations such as the Friends of Georgia Archives and History, the Society of Georgia Archivists, and the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board conducted activities but the GGS wanted to be sure the message also came directly from researchers and active users of the Georgia Archives.

Then-Georgia Genealogical Society (GGS) President Linda Hughes appointed Elizabeth Stewart Olson and me co-chairmen of the society's Campaign to Save the Georgia Archives. Between us we have more than 40 years' experience with legislative and advocacy campaigns. Our plan had three parts: 1) organize; 2) communicate; and 3) educate. Each part done well required a good bit of time, but all had to be accomplished quickly. We had only a few months to get the word out and to urge the Georgia General Assembly to support the Georgia Archives.

Elizabeth and I began by rallying the support and aid of the GGS's 800-plus members and Georgia's more than 100 genealogical and historical societies – from the Northwest Georgia Genealogical Society to Huxford in South Georgia's Wiregrass country. Valdosta's Elizabeth Dill created a Facebook page, [Georgians Against Closing State Archives](#), and accompanying petition through [Change.org](#). These efforts launched a show of support from around the world and demonstrated the power of contemporary communications options.

GGS harnessed a variety of publicity opportunities. We kept in touch with Archives supporters throughout the campaign using Facebook, Constant Contact, email and a new blog – [georgiaarchivesmatters.org](#) – as well as through traditional media including the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Clayton News Daily, radio, television and the GGS newsletter. With the help of the DeKalb Champion newspaper and the Georgia Press Association, we placed a letter to Georgia citizens in every legal newspaper in the state, often the only newspaper in small counties and always read by legislators.

The crowd at the 2012 Archives Month proclamation signing in the governor's office was just the beginning of the protest over the Secretary of State's decision. Large numbers, including GGS members, attended the Oct. 3 rally at the state capitol. I designed a publicity flyer and a handout explaining "Why the Georgia Archives Should Be Open to the Public" and "Why the Seven Terminated Employees Should Stay."

Archives supporters were pleased with the Governor's intervention that restored \$125,000 to the Archives budget and two additional employees to the staff. The announcement actually had a slightly negative effect in that many supporters believed that the Archives crisis had been solved. The governor also proposed that the Georgia Archives be moved from the Secretary of State's control to the University System of Georgia (Board of Regents).

Education – of Georgia citizens, the public and members of the Georgia legislature – was key to our effort. The approach was especially sensitive due to restrictions concerning political activities placed on non-profit organizations. We also worked under the mandates provided by the GGS board.

Campaign organization is best accomplished by understanding the strengths, abilities, experience and willingness of supporters. The state's genealogy and research community proved that they not only had the ability, but also the willingness, to make a difference. We asked that every person contact his or her own legislator by phone, email, and letter. The message was to be simple: why the Archives is important. Along with other determined volunteers, Elizabeth and I concentrated on key legislators: members of the House and Senate Appropriations committees and Higher Education committees.

We realized from conversations with citizens and lawmakers that few people understood much about the Georgia Archives – from its location to what it does. Working with a volunteer public relations professional, we developed a strategy that included creating an educational packet for state legislators. The GGS board approved funding for the printing of a special Georgia Archives edition of society's Quarterly journal, which was included in the information packet along with fact sheets and a letter of support from all the societies in Georgia. GGS members always can be counted on to respond when needed and so many volunteers showed up for packet-stuffing that kits for 236 legislators were compiled in less than 30 minutes. GGS also sponsored a second rally on opening day of the legislative session.

Although the Recession officially was over, state revenues still had not recovered to pre-2007 levels. Every state agency went through budget cuts, and the governor had asked for three percent more. However, due to the Secretary of State's actions, the Georgia Archives had taken a cut four times larger than what it should. The budget submitted by the governor did not restore the funds taken away by the Secretary of State. Following research into the Secretary of State's budget recommendations, we came up with a figure of \$320,000 more that we believed should be restored. This figure was the basis for in the Fair Funding message, which caught on and gained momentum throughout the campaign.

The legislature agreed to restore \$300,000 to the Archives budget. Thanks to the added funding, Georgia Archives Director Christopher Davidson opened the facility an additional two days a week and is in the process of hiring three new staff. The legislature's action does not restore the Georgia Archives to its previous status, but it is a start. Since the end of the legislative session, the Georgia Genealogical Society has sponsored a public celebration at the Archives. After some

punch and cake, we are back to the job of promoting the Archives and getting ready for the 2014 legislative session.

This accomplishment would not have been possible without the contributions of many people and organizations around the state, all working toward the same goal. As the Archives' great friend Morrow Mayor J. B. Burke said, "This is a victory for the people, by the people of Georgia!"

Vivian Price Saffold is the newsletter editor for the Georgia Genealogical Society, the author of two books on DeKalb County history and a retired newspaper editor, where she covered the Georgia legislature. She also is a veteran of community legislative campaigns. She writes the [georgiaarchivesmatters](#) blog.

Elizabeth Olson is vice president of the Georgia Genealogical Society, the GGS liaison to the national Records Preservation and Access Committee (a joint committee of the Federation of Genealogical Societies, the National Genealogical Society and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies). RPAC provided valuable support and assistance to the Campaign to Save the Georgia Archives. Elizabeth also is a member many genealogical associations and a veteran of several legislative campaigns.