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“An Ever-Ready Source of Inspiration and Information”: Ruth Blair and the Bicentennial County Historians

Cover Page Footnote

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“An Ever-Ready Source of Inspiration and Information”: Ruth Blair and the Bicentennial County Historians

David B. Parker

Georgia’s bicentennial county histories are full of facts and local lore. For historians, they have an added significance as historic documents themselves, a way of getting at certain aspects of life and thought in the 1930s—race relations, the pervasiveness of the Lost Cause, the role of religion and patriotic organizations, the meaning of local “heroes,” and so forth. This essay will examine the bicentennial histories from another perspective, as a reminder of the importance of archives and archivists—in this case, the work of Ruth Blair, the director of the Department of Archives and History.

On August 23, 1929, Georgia’s General Assembly approved a resolution calling on each of the state’s counties to compile its history for the upcoming bicentennial (1933, two hundred years after the founding of Georgia in 1733), “so as to perpetuate for our posterity and the records of the State and Nation the facts of the evolutions and progress of the commonwealth.” The resolution said the grand jury of each county should appoint someone “to prepare ... [a] history of the formation, development, and progress of said county from its creation up to that date, together with accounts of such persons, families, and public events as have given character and fame to the county, the State, and the Nation.” The histories were to be deposited in the state’s Department of Archives and History by February 12 (Georgia Day), 1933, and a number were published as well.¹

Of Georgia’s 159 counties, 102 followed the legislative directive and named an official historian.² These county historians varied; there were teachers and lawyers, preachers and journalists, school superintendents and county court judges. Many were chosen because of their role in local historical or patriotic societies (such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy or the Daughters of the American Revolution). The histories themselves varied as

¹ “Histories of Counties,” Law No. 36, Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, 1929, 1:1504-5.

² *Georgia’s Official Record: 1933-1935-1937* (Atlanta: Department of Archives and History, 1937), 530-32.

much as the people who wrote them. They typically included chapters on geography and natural resources, Native Americans, antebellum life, the Civil War, churches, schools, industries, newspapers, and so forth. Many included census records, military rosters, deeds, marriage records, lists of county officials, reprinted newspaper articles, and the like. Some had lengthy biographical sections, with histories of prominent individuals or families. As a result, these books tended to be long, averaging nearly five hundred pages. While fewer than three dozen of the histories were completed and published, the project succeeded in raising awareness of the state's history (or, more accurately, several versions of that history)—and it made Georgians more aware of the need to preserve state records and have them accessible.³

As director of the state's Department of Archives and History, Ruth Blair worked closely with the bicentennial county historians. Blair, born in Douglas County in 1889, had served for several years as a reference librarian in the State Library before going to the Archives as assistant to Lucian Lamar Knight, the first director, in 1921. When Knight's term ended in 1925, Blair was appointed director. Knight wrote that "she is not only trained to the work, but a born organizer."⁴ The Archives certainly needed an organizer. David Carmicheal, director of the Archives from 2000 to 2012, described how, prior to 1918, the state's "archives" consisted of boxes of old papers stuck in various corners of the state capitol—including in the basement, where a janitor sometimes used them as kindling to light the furnace! The General Assembly established the State Archives in 1918, but it was only in 1929, when the state was given Rhodes Hall, a "great stone mansion" on Peachtree Street, that Georgia had a permanent home for its historical records. At the time, those records consisted of a

³ A list of the bicentennial books can be found (along with other county history sources) in Wayne Stewart Yenawine, "A Checklist of Source Materials for the Counties of Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (September 1948): 179-229. A number of the county histories were unpublished but are available, as notes and compilations of data, in the Georgia Archives and local libraries.

⁴ Josephine Hart Brandon, *Pages of Glory: Georgia's Documentary Heritage* (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, 1998), 111-19 (quotation on 114). Directors also had the title of State Historian.

collection of ten thousand bound volumes and four hundred thousand loose pages, many of them still “in process.”⁵

Much of Blair’s time as director (she stepped down in 1937 to work more closely with the Atlanta Historical Society) was spent supporting the county history project. In March 1930, she hosted a meeting to discuss the “problems of writing the county histories of Georgia.” Twenty-five county historians attended the gathering at Rhodes Hall to hear Blair and others talk on such subjects as “How to Secure Facts,” “Arrangement of Data: Chronological or Subject,” “History Biographically Treated,” and of course “Unforeseen Problems.”⁶

As this was a time long before Google Books, Internet Archive, digitized records, and the like, Blair spent many hours each week answering questions from county historians and providing information—lists of judges, details of land grants, figures from tax digests, and on and on. Sometimes she could not help. “I desire to know the approximate number of soldiers in the Confederate army from Carroll,” wrote that county’s historian, “and I am requesting that you advise me if such information be available.” Those numbers were not available, Blair replied, because of incomplete records.⁷

Missing records was not the only problem. “The help I can offer is very limited at the present time,” Blair told the Baldwin County historian, “due to the twenty per cent cut ordered by the governor which has gone into effect,” a result of spending cuts necessitated by the Depression. (State money were so short that Blair herself paid for the building’s heat, light, and water bills for 1930.) When the Berrien County historian asked for lists of

⁵ David W. Carmicheal, “Building on the Past: Construction of the New Georgia Archives,” *Provenance* 23 (2005): 6; Franklin M. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of People and Events* (1954; reprint, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), 2:735.

⁶ “County Historians Hold Meeting Here,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 March 1930; Program, Meetings of County Historians, 1930-33, County Historians Files, Records of the Director, Department of Archives and History, Georgia Archives, Morrow, GA.

⁷ W. J. Millican to Ruth Blair (hereafter, “RB”), 19 April 1930, Carroll County Correspondence, County Historians Files, Records of the Director, Department of Archives and History, Georgia Archives, Morrow, GA (hereafter cited as “[County] Correspondence”); RB to W. J. Millican, 21 April 1930, *ibid*.

justices of the peace and other county officials, Blair complained that she had recently “lost four workers. For this reason, it is no longer possible, with my one assistant in historical work and a guide for the museum as my only helpers,” to offer the help that she wished to do. “We cannot type materials for the historians,” she wrote, “as so many histories are now being written and our office force is small.”⁸

Some county historians seemed to be in over their heads with this project. Minnie Shaw wrote to Blair “asking for any suggestions you may give me in writing the history of Cook County. I work all the time and it seems I have no time for this matter, but I know I must get busy at once.” The Echols County historian wrote, “Please give information concerning what is desired in county histories,” and one of the Dooly County historians echoed, “Am at a loss as to just what is expected of me. Could you help me by putting it somewhat in the form of a Questionnaire?” For these county historians, Blair had to take the additional roles of mentor and cheerleader.⁹

In August 1934, R. F. Beard told Blair that he was planning on writing a history of Colquitt County and asked if anyone else had ever written anything on that subject. Blair asked Beard if he had been officially appointed by the grand jury; he said the grand jury did not meet again until October, and he asked if he could gather all the material by then. “It is not possible for you to collect your material before October if your history is to be a satisfactory one. . . . Historical work is about the slowest thing I know of if properly done.”¹⁰ Beard disappeared after this last exchange, and then a year later, Blair received a letter from

⁸ RB to Mrs. S. A. Cook, 27 April 1933, Baldwin County Correspondence; Carmicheal, “Building on the Past,” 8; RB to Folks Huxford, 28 June 1932, Berrien County Correspondence; RB to Thomas S. Johnson, 21 January 1931, General Correspondence, County Historians Files, Records of the Director, Department of Archives and History, Georgia Archives, Morrow, GA. (hereafter cited as “General Correspondence”).

⁹ Minnie Shaw to RB, 7 February 1932, Cook County Correspondence; Annie Cannady to RB, 26 March 1930, Echols County Correspondence; C. T. Stovall to RB, 25 February 1933, Dooly County Correspondence.

¹⁰ R. F. Beard to RB, 13 August 1934, Colquitt County Correspondence; RB to Beard, 15 August 1934, *ibid.*; Beard to RB, 20 August 1934, *ibid.*; RB to Beard, 24 August 1934, *ibid.*

William A. Covington, a lawyer who reported that he was “commencing to write a history of Colquitt County.” (He did in fact finish and publish his history.) Over the next year, Covington sent Blair a dozen letters with requests for detailed information. In one of the last of these, “I now want to know the names of the judges of the Southern Circuit.” Blair’s response included a list of the judges, and then: “This morning’s mail brought an order from Mrs. Julian C. Lane, Statesboro, for the abstracts of 100 of the Colonial wills. Many of the Colonial wills are several pages in length and much of the writing is almost illegible, due to faded ink and bad penmanship. The abstracting and checking of 100 of these wills will be the work of several months.... Mrs. Lane is a county historian and should know this. Earlier in the week I had and declined to undertake a request for all local officers of Glascock County. The mail that has just reached my desk contains several requests, the shortest of which is ‘all data you have on [a particular legislator].’”¹¹

The files in the State Archives of the director’s correspondence with the county historians are fascinating. J. B. Driskell, assigned to compile the history of Forsyth County, told Blair that he appreciated her offer of help, but “I am a literary teacher in a rural school and can not get off just any time.... Could I get enough information on Saturday to pay me to come for the research or had I better wait until spring to begin in records down there.... I do not like to delay doing the work, but am a poor man and as you know there is no remuneration in it.” (Perhaps not surprisingly, the history was apparently never completed.) A woman from Campbell County wrote to Blair to ask for the name of the historian for Houston County. She wanted to make sure her family was represented well. “My husband was born in Fort Valley; his people were well-known for several generations; I should like to be sure the HOLLINSHEAD-HILEY-HARRIS families are given accurately. [A previous history of the area] is

¹¹ W. A. Covington to RB, 30 August 1935, Colquitt County Correspondence; Covington to RB, n.d. but apparently late July 1936, *ibid.*; RB to Covington, 28 July 1936, *ibid.*

most interesting; but [it] gives practically nothing of the history of our people.”¹²

County historians sometimes grew chatty in their correspondence. Blair requested from each a brief biographical note and a photograph. R. B. Whitworth, of Gwinnett County, sent the requested photograph with a letter in which he explained: “It is not so very recent—made about fifteen years ago. I was then fifty-five. The hand of Depression has hung so heavily over me that I have not felt justified on attempting a new one, but if F.D.R. and Will Rogers succeed in straightening out the kinks in the chaotic, recent past, I may be able to pose before the camera for a new one in the future.” Mr. Whitworth went on to talk about his process for putting words on the paper. “I am so old-fashioned that I have never been able to own a type-writer.... All my writing is done just as I am doing this [by hand], but I must say that I seldom try to use such a pen as this one. I have two boys who are in the midst of the sweetheart season—whatever that means and it takes a new one for each effort they make, and I am forced to resort to the scrap-heap for a pen for this occasion.”¹³

Mrs. Julian C. Lane, the woman who requested all those colonial wills, kept Blair apprised of her progress on Bulloch County. “My work is progressing slowly but surely, no rush,” she wrote in one letter. “I am getting facts, not fiction.” Lane discussed her approach to the task: “We want history, from every scrap of paper that contains one name. Dig, clear out, & dust out until every written word of Georgia’s past is found—that should be our aim—then glorify it as we please—but the facts must come first.” “Don’t see how other counties get their histories through so quick,” she wrote; “seems as if I am never to get out of these records. Guess mine will be the last out, but I am not going to rush my work.”¹⁴

One of the most frequent questions that Blair received dealt with pay. Judge William R. Smith, of the Alapaha Circuit in South Georgia, reported that in his search for a county historian, “I am

¹² J. B. Driskell to RB, 28 November 1930, Forsyth County Correspondence; Margaret B. Hollinshead to RB, 17 November 1933, Houston County Correspondence.

¹³ R. B. Whitworth to RB, 23 May 1933, Gwinnett County Correspondence.

¹⁴ Mrs. Julian C. Lane to RB, 4 April 1930, 1 March 1930, 17 February 1931, Bulloch County Correspondence.

often asked if any if any compensation has been or will be provided for.” Mrs. Lane told Blair that “in a few days I hope to make final agreement with my county as to compensation for my work.... [It is] no easy job, no matter how much you love the work. Some days I have worked ten hours, before I know it.”¹⁵

Annie Cannady, Echols County historian (and superintendent of the county schools), twice asked Blair about “reasonable compensation for getting up such a history.” When the county commissioners “failed to set aside an amount ... for remuneration for the work,” Cannady told Blair that “as much as I would like to ... give my service, I can not do it.” Mrs. Lamar Lipscomb, appointed historian of Stephens County, sent a similar message to Blair: “As I have no desire for the honor, I would have to receive compensation & would only be interested, in case I would be paid for my work.” Historians sometimes reported that county commissioners refused to even consider payment, claiming that they did not have the authority to pay for such work out of county funds. As he finished the work on his history of Hall County, William Hosch told Blair that “the present Board of Commissioners of Hall County have not the least conception of the value or merit of a literary work. They would not pay me fifty dollars for my history that I would not take less than ten thousand for, after all the time, labor and expense that I have put into it.”¹⁶

Some counties did in fact pay for their histories, and in some cases, publication was underwritten by local historical or patriotic societies or by private donors.¹⁷ But should such support

¹⁵ W. R. Smith to RB, 5 April 1930, General Correspondence; Mrs. Julian C. Lane to RB, 12 December 1930, Bulloch County Correspondence.

¹⁶ Annie Cannady to RB, 26 March 1930, 3 April 1930, and May 19, 1930 (quotation), Echols County Correspondence; Mrs. Lamar Lipscomb to RB, 10 November 1932, Stephens County Correspondence; Mrs. Julian C. Lane to RB, 18 December 1930, Bulloch County Correspondence; Helen Terrill to LH, [n.d., but probably January or February 1946], Stewart County Correspondence; William Hosch to RB, 2 October 1930, Hall County Correspondence.

¹⁷ Lamar and Marion Counties paid their historians \$50, and Irwin, \$65; at the other end of the spectrum, Cobb paid \$1,000 and Fulton paid \$4,800. Counties also sometimes helped with publication costs, usually with subsidies of \$300-500. Wilkinson County’s history was published by the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and Fulton County’s with the “generous aid” of Jack J. Spalding, attorney and (later) president of the Atlanta Historical

not be forthcoming, Blair told historians that they might finance the work themselves. To Abe Guckenheimer, Chatham County historian, she suggested that revenue to support work might come from charging \$10 a page for family biographical sections.¹⁸

As was mentioned earlier, many county historians were appointed; relatively few county histories were finished, and even fewer were published. Authors of the published histories usually singled out Blair, “an ever-ready source of inspiration and information,” for thanks: “I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Miss Ruth Blair, Georgia’s able state historian, for much valuable assistance and advice”; “I am indebted also to Miss Ruth Blair, state historian, for placing at my disposal much valuable material..., for answering my many questions, and for her interest, always so cordially expressed”; “Much use has been made of the unwearied and cheerful courtesy of Miss Ruth Blair ... in answering some fifty letters of inquiry as to pertinent facts of record”; “I acknowledge my indebtedness for [Blair’s] kindness in searching for matters of interest ... and for her valuable advice in the general preparation of the book”; and so on.¹⁹

In 1929, Georgia made a commitment to honor its upcoming bicentennial by preserving its local history. The efforts of the county historians over the next few years resulted in the creation of dozens of histories that continue to be used today. These histories not only preserve Georgia’s past, they also remind us of the importance of our state’s archives and archivists.

Society. “Appropriations for County Historians,” December 1933, General Information, County Historians Files; Walter G. Cooper, *Official History of Fulton County* (Atlanta: Walter W. Brown Pub. Co., 1934), vii.

¹⁸ RB to Abe Guckenheimer, 7 November 1929, Chatham County Correspondence.

¹⁹ Lucy Josephine Cunyus, *The History of Bartow County, Formerly Cass* (Cartersville: Printed by Tribune Pub. Co., 1933), xi; Rev. Lloyd G. Marlin, *The History of Cherokee County* (Atlanta: Walter W. Brown Publishing Co., 1932), xiii; Sarah Blackwell Gober Temple, *The First Hundred Years: A Short History of Cobb County, in Georgia* (Atlanta: Walter W. Brown Pub. Co., 1935), vi; W. A. Covington, *History of Colquitt County* (Atlanta: Foote and Davies Company, 1937), vii; Luke E. Tate, *History of Pickens County* (Atlanta: Walter W. Brown Publishing Company, 1935), 8.

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