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ARCHIVAL PROGRAMS IN THE SOUTHEAST: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT*

Edie Hedlin

In February of 1981, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), a small federal funding agency located within the National Archives and Records Service, made a large bet on what Jimmy the Greek would surely have declared to be an archival longshot.

The commission decided to set aside \$600,000 of its \$2 million in records program grant funds that year to support one type of project to be conducted only by one type of applicant. Making grants of up to \$25,000 available to its own State Historical Records Advisory Boards (SHRABS), the commission encouraged an intense information gathering and planning effort on the state level that would culminate in a published report of findings and recommendations. The commission titled these grants "assessment and reporting projects." Through a competitive process, twenty-seven states--including North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi--received funding for this yearlong project.

In spite of the modesty of the grant award, the commission's goals in supporting assessment and reporting projects were ambitious. NHPRC hoped, first of all, to encourage the creation of an information base about needs and conditions within

*This article is an expression of the personal opinion of the author. It does not represent a consensus and is not an official position of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, its staff, or the National Archives and Records Service.

each state that would allow the SHRABs to identify priority areas of concern for the archival community. Second, the commission hoped that through the process of conducting these projects, archivists within the state would develop stronger internal communications links, develop a set of mutually agreed upon goals, and persuasively articulate these to the non-archival public. In short, NHPRC sought to change the way archivists within a state related to each other, to their state board, to their major constituencies, and to society at large.

Throughout 1982, twenty-seven states carried out assessment and reporting projects. By spring of 1983, twenty reports were either complete or in draft stage. Taken as a whole, the reports documented the dire circumstances of archival programs throughout the country. Questions of process aside, the reports are a litany of archival woes. Although some states could report progress in some areas, the most common theme was one of great need and few resources.

According to grant procedures each state board was to investigate, report, and plan in four areas of archival endeavor: state government records programs, local government records programs, historical records repositories (which included all nongovernment archives), and statewide services and functions. This last category was intended to cover those activities that were of such broad interest to all archivists, like training or conservation services, that they cut across institutional or repository lines.

In order to assist both the project grantees and the commission itself in digesting the contents of the assessment reports, NHPRC asked four consultants to analyze each of the four sections respectively. Their comments shed light, offered insight, and suggested common themes. The consultants also pointed to deficiencies which were not articulated in the reports and suggested priorities for action.

Edwin Bridges, in his analysis of state government records programs, noted that the reports painted "a bleak picture of resource deficiencies on

one hand and program deficiencies on the other." He termed this condition a "cycle of poverty," akin to the plight of many underdeveloped nations.¹ The cycle of crippling programs and undermining efforts toward improvement characterized far too many state archives.

In Bridges's view, the reports affirmed that state archives lacked appropriate legislation, authority, budget, and imagination. Most of all, perhaps, they lacked vigorous leadership. The problems generated by weak legislation, poor control over records in agencies, large processing backlogs, and narrow program bases were immense. Weakness in one area led to performance failure in another, creating a continuing cycle.

Problems of this magnitude, he believed, were susceptible to solution only through good administration. Bridges saw the shortcomings of archivists as administrators to be a major cause of their plight. He urged greater attention to the "basic managerial responsibilities" of planning, organizing, and leading as the ultimate solution to the problems of state archives.²

The condition of local government records programs was no better. Richard Cox, who reviewed the local records portion of the assessment reports, noted that they uniformly identified "poor local storage, insufficient staff at both local and state institutions, and a poor legislative footing" as major problems.³ Citing the history of neglect of local government records, Cox urged greater attention to and concern for this part of documentary heritage.

Again, state archives leadership was needed but often not forthcoming. Cox identified the "unifying feature of the recommendations [to be] the understanding that state archival institutions must provide revitalized or new leadership in rectifying the neglect of local government records."⁴ He called particularly for strong efforts by state archivists to mobilize support among local government professional organizations.⁵

The broad range and scope of repositories which

fall outside of government records programs was the focus of the third assessment area mandated by NHPRC. William Joyce, in analyzing this section of the reports, saw a "prevailing pattern...in which the majority of historical records repositories are barely capable of providing even the most rudimentary and basic maintenance of their holdings."⁶ Lacking public support, visibility, clear program goals, and adequate resources, historical records repositories are caught in their own cycle of poverty. Joyce alluded to a "circular effect" created by process of low use, which perpetuates "low funding which prevents repositories from upgrading the management of their collections."⁷ The extremely weak staffing level (often volunteer and untrained), caused by woefully inadequate funding and the absence of an institutional base of support, such as state or local government, may make the plight of historical records repositories the most dire. At minimum, the remedies seem more complex.

In considering cooperative approaches to the solution of their problems, the reports reflected an intense interest in education and training for archivists, in technical manuals and professional literature, in statewide guides and directories, in more and better conservation services, and in better communication links between and among repositories.⁸ Consultant Margaret Child, who analyzed this portion of the assessment reports, noted that in spite of the underlying assumption of the need to seek common, cooperative solutions to these problems, the reports reflected a lack of knowledge of what others had done or a desire to join hands with those outside their state to develop jointly what they might not be able to do alone.⁹

Child noted particularly the profession's unwillingness to use standard formats to describe holdings and predicted a forced change in this behavioral characteristic. Insisting that "unique" materials do not demand unique "descriptors, procedures, and mystique," Child noted that "in many respects, the archival community is a cottage

industry on the verge of an industrial revolution...." The need for standardization if the profession is to develop commonly shared communications networks "will impose many of the requirements of the assembly line on what has heretofore been a remarkably idiosyncratic profession."¹⁰

As has been noted, four southeastern states--Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia--participated in the first round of assessment and reporting projects. Do they fit the pattern described above? Are archives in the Southeast better off than, representative of, or falling behind the deplorable norm described by the consultants? Can these reports be used as the basis for assessing the problems and prospects for archives in the region served by Provenance?

Unfortunately one state, South Carolina, has yet to submit a report, which leaves a base of only three reports from which to generalize about conditions in seven states. Clearly, any assessment at this time would have to be preliminary. However, by blending general knowledge against the more detailed information in the available reports, some tentative evaluation can be made. The following must be viewed in this light.

State and Local Government Records Programs

In many respects the southeastern states' assessment reports reflect the traditional concerns of state archives. The most commonly articulated problem, for instance, is the shortage of storage space. The Mississippi report very specifically calls for the addition of two floors to its current structure as a short-term solution to an acute problem, and declares that the long-term solution is an entirely new building.¹¹ The North Carolina report is less specific in citing solutions, but the need for additional space is forcefully stated.

More importantly, other themes of the reports as a whole apply to the Southeast. One can find evidence that state archives need better legal authority to take vigorous action, that the backlog

of unprocessed materials is mounting, that record schedules cover only a portion of the records generated or maintained by state agencies, and that those services the archives can provide are often not known to or used by government officials. Only Georgia, however, directly addressed the question of internal administration, citing the need to examine the organizational structure, to question the department's philosophy of records management, and to develop clear internal priorities.¹²

In comparing the Southeast's state archival programs to those of other regions, one should ask whether problems that are common elsewhere necessarily should characterize state programs in this region. Are there circumstances peculiar to the Southeast that set it apart from other state archives and that should, or could, affect their performance, perspective, and progress?

One significant distinction is the age of most southeastern state archival programs. The Alabama Department of Archives and History, founded in 1901, can rightfully boast of its status as the first state archives in the country. Tennessee and North Carolina, both of which trace their origins to 1903, closely follow suit. Only Florida, which did not pass legislation creating either a state archives or records management program until 1967, can claim relative youth.

Second, the overall size and scope of programs in this region tend to set them apart. Not every southern state archives carries program responsibility for records scheduling, record centers, microfilming services, field services, and conservation labs in addition to the core functions of acquisition, arrangement, description and reference, but most of them do. This differs significantly from many states where there is a split between the archival and records management functions, where there are few or no support services and where other related programs, such as historic preservation, are placed elsewhere.

With these programs go substantial budgets. The

North Carolina report cited a budget of almost \$1.5 million for the Archives and Records Section in fiscal year 1982.¹³ Georgia, Florida, and other southeastern states appear to have roughly comparable figures. This contrasts sharply with resources of many state archives, especially in different regions of the country. North and South Dakota combined, or Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire combined, cannot approximate the budget of either North or South Carolina, or Georgia, or Alabama.

Similar observations can be made about local records programs. On the one hand, there is distressing uniformity between and among the states in this area, suggesting that no region excels in local records program development. On the other hand, historically, the South appeared to be ahead of the nation in this arena. One might question why such acute problems remain.

The Southeast began providing services to local governments long before many state archives even acknowledged a need for such activity. In North Carolina, for instance, legislation in 1959 and 1961 resulted in the establishment of a comprehensive local records program including records management, within the Archives and History Section.¹⁴ Tennessee focused heavily on microfilm services for county records in the 1960s and 1970s, a fairly common activity for state programs of the region. This early attention to local records, however, appears to have created more abundant accessions and rolls of microfilm, rather than systematic local records program development.

Ironically, one possible cause of this might be the willingness of the larger southeastern programs to assume too much of the burden for preserving local records. Many state archives traditionally accepted select series of local records into their repositories, developed strong microfilm programs for county records, housed the security copies in state archives' vaults, prepared manuals, reviewed disposition schedules, and laminated or rebound ledgers. In short, they retained the primary

responsibility for local records. When the state government resources were insufficient to support these ongoing services, the quality of service declined and progress ceased.

This pattern does not fit all southeastern states (some lacked the resources to attempt an ambitious program), but it is accurate for many. The impulse toward centralization argued against the need for program development on the local level. Concomitantly, as local government grew and state archival budgets failed to grow apace, the quality of service lessened. Of particular importance was the rapid emergence of municipal government. At a time when state programs were focused almost entirely on services to counties, the discrepancy between municipal government needs and the state archives' ability to meet these needs widened significantly.

The consequence of these trends was the Southeast's loss of ascendancy. Other states, many with fewer resources but with a philosophy that emphasized shared responsibility, cooperative approaches, and self-help for localities, sought other solutions. They developed regional network systems or model local records programs. Some states more vigorously addressed the question of municipal records or nontextual media such as computer files. In spite of their early lead, the southeastern states are now following examples, admittedly isolated, set elsewhere. More unfortunately, the region's approach to local records failed to develop a constituency within local government that would advocate stronger service programs on the state level.

At this time it appears that in both state and local records, the Southeast has most of the same problems faced by other regions. In spite of larger budgets, substantial holdings, imposing structures, and multiple programs, their progress recently has been unremarkable. The problems faced by state archives elsewhere are mirrored in the reports of state and local government records programs in the Southeast. The region is certainly no worse off, but unfortunately, it seems to be better off in

surprisingly few areas.

Historical Records Repositories and Cooperative Approaches

The litany of woes outlined in the state and local government portions of the assessment reports is even more evident among historical records repositories and statewide services and functions. North Carolina reports that "at the typical small repository a staff person is assigned part-time to archival matters and may well be a volunteer."¹⁵ Worse yet, the volunteer is unlikely to have any prior training or experience in the administration of historical records, and the institution is probably lacking a collecting policy, adequate storage facilities, or even rudimentary finding aids.

Two factors seem to be consistent throughout the Southeast: the absence of strong state historical societies and the lack of ties among the private, smaller repositories. Unlike the Midwest where large state historical societies often anchor a loose coalition of smaller local repositories, there is no natural leader for this segment of the archival community. Noteworthy also is the importance of university-based repositories within this context of poverty and isolation. Although often without adequate resources themselves, their condition is relatively prosperous compared to their non-academic colleagues.

Of some importance in the development of this pattern is the role of state historical agencies. Almost every state department of archives and history includes a manuscripts collecting function. Some have reduced their focus and the intensity of their acquisitions programs over the years, but their very existence has undoubtedly had an impact. Because the relatively wealthy state archives were also collecting private manuscripts, there was little chance that the smaller repositories could successfully compete for collections. On the other hand, the state historical agencies of the Southeast focused primarily on their government records responsibilities and neither sought nor accepted a

leadership role among private repositories.

The region's colleges and universities did not leap to fill this gap. Focusing on subject areas that were national in scope and operating within the framework of higher education, these programs often failed to identify with the state's archival community. Some excellent collections and well-managed repositories emerged from these efforts, but their leadership was by example only.

While these patterns are worth noting, they merely suggest how the problems for archival programs in the Southeast developed rather than connote substantially different results. The recommendations issuing from southeastern assessment reports are of a piece with the nation. Calls for archival education programs, short-term workshops, statewide guides to holdings, and improved conservation services are common. Other, less universally stated recommendations include the establishment of formal networks, microfilm cooperatives, written collecting policies, and disaster preparedness training.

The third and fourth areas of assessment are inexorably intertwined. Because of the diffuse nature of historical records repositories, their needs can be addressed only through cooperative action. A review of the section on statewide services and functions is almost always a recapitulation of those activities, recommended in earlier sections, that require inter-institutional cooperation.

Indeed, cooperation and leadership are basic themes for NHPRC and tenets of the records program. Although the fourth assessment area deals with specific activities requiring leadership and cooperation, the underlying intent of the project is to foster these concepts in all areas. The reports, then, and the process of identifying problems and formulating recommendations are successful in the degree to which they were cooperative efforts intelligently led by the projects' administrators. Any review of the archival condition in the Southeast through the perspective of the assessment projects

requires attention to these themes. Inevitably, one is brought back to the state archives and its role.

In almost every instance the dominant program on the state's archival horizon is the state-funded historical agency. Due to the efforts of cultural politicians like Thomas Owen in Alabama, H. G. Jones in North Carolina, Mary Givens Bryan and Carroll Hart in Georgia, and Charles Lee in South Carolina, substantial resources in traditionally low income states have been allocated to documenting and preserving the state's heritage. With diverse responsibilities and budgets far in excess of any other archival program in the state, these agencies appear as skyscrapers among a city of low-lying buildings.

In earlier years, many of these state agencies led both their state and the nation in the development of ambitious, professional archival programs. They were models against which others could measure progress and define goals. As they added new programs and provided new services, however, they grew as bureaucracies and developed an institutional approach to records preservation that was instilled in daily routines.

The need to fight for sustained resources during recessionary times and, therefore, to focus internally within state government rather than outwardly toward the profession came to characterize many of these programs. Eventually, the focus on internal operations and the belief that their problems were unique led many state archives into professional isolation. By the mid 1970s this process had gone full course in many southeastern states.

A series of events at that time, however, would eventually work against the trend. The establishment of NASARA (the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators) and the addition of the records program to NHPRC created new roles for administrators of state archival agencies. The former provided a common meeting ground for all state archivists and unequalled opportunity to act in

concert. The latter created a defined role for the state archives within the state's archival community by designating the state archivist as coordinator of the State Historical Records Advisory Board (SHRAB).

In fairness it should be noted that neither NASARA nor the records program had an immediate or dramatic effect. In some states there has been relatively little change in attitudes or activities. Over time, however, several state programs have experienced a broadening of concern for and an interest in the welfare of all repositories within its boundaries. These factors, coupled with the growth of state and regional professional organizations, has created a climate that is conducive to change. The formation of SAARC (South Atlantic Archives and Records Conference) and especially the development of state archival organizations in Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee have greatly aided this process.

Moreover, the trend toward better cooperation and communication is continuing. Florida has just established a professional society, providing that state's archival community with an unprecedented opportunity to work jointly toward mutual goals. The North Carolina assessment report, noting the needs of historical records repositories and the absence of mechanisms to address them, recommended that a statewide professional organization be established. That recommendation is now in the process of being implemented.

Benefits have emerged already from the growth of archival organizations in the Southeast. They have established a framework for leadership by archivists in small repositories, have fostered a spirit of cooperation among institutions that previously had not communicated at all, and have provided a much needed program of education and training. In addition, they have demonstrated the commonality of interests that exist among archives, regardless of size, and permitted the exploration of a range of subjects. Perhaps most importantly, they have allowed the archival community to assert opinions as

a defined constituency. This has led to an understanding of the need for archivists to voice concerns and articulate goals to the non-archival public.

Finally, the assessment projects themselves should contribute to an improved situation for archives in the Southeast. Florida and Alabama are currently conducting projects, leaving only Tennessee without any experience in this process and South Carolina with a final report to write. Tennessee's failure to apply for an assessment grant is particularly distressing. Given the recent transfer of its archival functions to a more highly political agency, one responsible to the legislature, Tennessee may be the least likely state to make significant progress in the near future.

On balance, however, the situation for the Southeast appears to be hopeful. It is by no means an archival mecca. Indeed, quite the opposite. Just as repositories in other part of the country are trapped in a cycle of poverty, so are the archives of this region. The exception is the state archival programs, but as has been noted, even they have major problems and can be found lacking.

The challenge facing this region remains the same challenge issued by NHPRC. Will the southeastern states define, articulate, and work for goals established through a rational process of gathering information, seeking opinion, and analyzing findings? Will this process be inclusive, resulting in the building of constituencies within the archival community and the identification of allies who support archival goals? Will leadership roles be defined--and accepted--by those in the best position to lead? Will imagination and energy characterize future action rather than defensiveness or ambivalence?

Early indications suggest positive answers for Mississippi, which maximized the opportunity presented by the assessment projects, and for Alabama, which has embraced the challenge of the project fully. Georgia's somewhat stronger tradition

of cooperation between the state archives and the archival community bodes well for continued progress. The strengths of individual states aside, however, the Southeast as a whole is in a position to make great forward strides. With a surging economy and a strong sense of heritage among its citizens, the Southeast has an enormous opportunity to assume again the leadership role it once had. The results of such initiative would not only bring NHPRC a handsome return on its investment, it would benefit everyone.

NOTES

1 Edwin C. Bridges, "Consultant Report: State Government Records Programs," Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States, ed. Lisa B. Weber, Consultant Reports Presented at the Conference of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission Assessment and Reporting Grantees, Atlanta, GA, 24-25 June 1983 (New York: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, New York State Archives), p. 8.

2 Ibid., p.12.

3 Richard Cox, "Consultant Report: Local Government Records Programs," Documenting America, p. 22.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 29.

6 William L. Joyce, "Consultant Report: Historical Records Repositories," Documenting America, p. 41.

7 Ibid., p. 39.

8 Margaret Child, "Consultant Report: Statewide Functions and Services," Documenting America, pp. 47-49.

9 Ibid., pp. 50-54.

10 Ibid., p. 53.

11 H.T. Holmes, ed. The Management and Preservation of Mississippi's Historical Records: Problems and Potential A Report of the State Historical Records Assessment and Reporting Project, Vol. I: Findings and Recommendations, pp. 28, 34.

12 Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board, State Assessment and Reporting Grant: Final Report (Atlanta, 1983), pp. 9-14.

13 North Carolina Historical Records Advisory Committee, Archives and Records Programs and Historical Records Repositories in North Carolina: An analysis of Present Problems and Future Needs (Raleigh, North Carolina Historical Records Advisory Committee, 1983), p. 13.

14 Ibid ., p. 26.

15 Ibid ., p. 43.