

January 1998

## Documenting Industry and Labor in Alabama: Can a Documentation Strategy Model Help?

Martin T. Olliff  
*Auburn University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Olliff, Martin T., "Documenting Industry and Labor in Alabama: Can a Documentation Strategy Model Help?," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 16 no. 1 (1998) .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol16/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

## **Documenting Industry and Labor in Alabama: Can a Documentation Strategy Model Help?**

**Martin T. Olliff**

As early as 1997 the Society of Alabama Archivists (SALA) identified a number of topics in Alabama history and culture that were not well documented in the archives in the state.<sup>1</sup> Some of these topics, for example North Alabama's aerospace industry, were just beginning to appear in archival collections. Alabama archivists took note of such fields early enough that the volume of accumulated records did not become a problem. On the other hand, archivists in the state faced enormous problems in coping with the mass of records they already knew existed in other underdocumented fields like labor and industry.

Why try to document industry and labor?<sup>2</sup> They are two

---

<sup>1</sup> Forum at the annual meeting of the Society of Alabama Archivists, 7 November 1997, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.

<sup>2</sup> These terms are broad and difficult to define. Manufacturing and transportation are basic industries, but the further one goes back in time, and the closer one gets to the margins of industrialism, the vaguer and more difficult the division between industrial and non-industrial activities becomes. The title of Wayne Flynt and Michael Thomason's 1987 work, *Mine, Mill, and Microchip* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications), suggests a focused geographical and chronological expanse that would enable Alabama

of the oldest but most poorly recorded aspects of life in Alabama. This is especially unfortunate in view of new academic and popular interests in reevaluating the role both played in Alabama. Scholars of antebellum Alabama have discovered that manufacturing, transportation, and support businesses played an exceptionally vital role in shaping the state's history. Historians have shown a keen interest in postbellum industrial development as well. The literature on this topic for the past decade provides tantalizing hints that the New South owes its character to industry much more than previously thought.

In these significant, and significantly underdocumented, areas of life in Alabama records, creators and users, independent of each other and with no archival involvement, were already considering ways to improve access to existing research resources. The Southern Industrialization Project (SIP) focused on identifying relevant archival collections and on assembling a central set of metadata on industrialism throughout the South. The Alabama Organized Labor Awards Foundation (AOLAF) was working towards collecting the records of labor unions and working people in the state. Neither organization had incorporated the expertise of archivists in their plans, but both had opened the door to such participation.

These projects offered enormous opportunities for building strategic alliances within the archival community and with records producers and users as they dealt with these problems. Archivists first had to determine, however, what their role vis-à-vis these projects should be. How could archivists in Alabama and, by extension, archivists in similar circumstances, work with these groups to achieve a common goal? Did archivists have compelling theoretical and practical models to follow in these situations? Documentation strategy



offered one blueprint that Alabama's archival community could use to define and enhance its service role in both the SIP and AOLAF.

When the advocates for documentation strategy first appeared in archival literature during the 1980s, they considered it to be one of the most innovative concepts in archival theory, and they explored it with gusto. In its short life, however, documentation strategy encountered many practical problems in moving beyond its exciting theoretical formulations. If Alabama archivists could differentiate between the workable characteristics of documentation strategy and its problems, they might find a powerful tool for coping cooperatively with large quantities of documents, for working with nonarchivists, and for recording underrepresented histories.

### *SIP and AOLAF*

The Southern Industrialization Project began as the brainchild of Emory University graduate student Michael Gagnon and University of Genoa (Italy) professor Susanna Delfino, who had been disappointed by the seemingly haphazard way that scholars of industrialization presented their work at the 1996 Southern Historical Association meeting in Little Rock, Arkansas. There were no panel presentations on southern industrialism; rather, individual papers were joined to other panels as afterthoughts, or so it seemed to Gagnon and Delfino. To give their area of interest more thrust and import at future meetings, they decided to organize a meeting of like-minded scholars at Emory on 5 December 1996.

The agenda was simple—to establish a permanent but informal discussion group of scholars interested in southern industrialization. Gagnon's particular interest lay with the nineteenth century and Delfino's with comparative analysis between the southeastern United States and southern Italy. The specialties of meeting attendees, however, spanned the

chronological length and topical breadth of the subject. There would come a time, all agreed, when natural divisions would appear and the original group grow too large, but until then the Southern Industrialization Project would remain as eclectic as possible.

Besides deciding on a name and an inclusive membership policy, this first meeting set three goals for the group. The first was to create an electronic discussion group to coordinate activities and to debate scholarly issues. Under the leadership of Michael Gagnon the listserv virtually exploded its first year, with debates ranging from analysis of the course of events in history to the very construct of the terms used to address southern industrialism. SIP's second goal was to coordinate panels at various historical conferences. This, too, has been successful. The group arranged for panels on various aspects of southern industrialization at the Business and Economic History Society meeting in 1997, the Economic History Association meeting in 1998, and the Southern Historical Association in 1999.

Most important from an archival perspective was SIP's third goal: creation of an annotated union list of archival collections that document southern industrialization broadly defined, which would be maintained as a website. Project co-chairs Suzanne L. Summers of the University of Texas at Kingston and Steven Reich of the University of Alabama at Huntsville adopted a four-step strategy to create the list. First, they asked SIP members to forward information about collections they themselves have used for research.<sup>3</sup> Next, Summers and Reich asked the few archival members of SIP to inventory their collections and provide similar information.

---

<sup>3</sup> Summers and Reich did not specify what type of information they sought, but metadata such as that used in USMARC records would be most beneficial. The co-chairs did request annotations concerning the scholars' impressions about the content and usefulness of the collections.



Once they establish the list, they intend to solicit nonmembers chosen by the membership to direct SIP to other potential collections. Finally, Summers and Reich will ask the archival community itself for information about extant collections in southern industrialism.<sup>4</sup>

The size and scope of this project and the professional demands placed on the co-chairs by their respective institutions have prevented much forward progress on this goal, and the union list has floundered. It is precisely this vacuum that gives archivists in Alabama and other southern states an opportunity to provide expert advice and service to a project begun by researchers who are knowledgeable about the subject and who anticipate using the results of the project. Archivists who choose to work with SIP can adopt parts of the documentation strategy model to make this project and its heirs successful.

Labor in Alabama, which has no collecting institution comparable to Georgia State University's Southern Labor Archives, is also woefully underdocumented. Creators of labor records have recently begun to champion this cause, working through the Alabama Organized Labor Awards Foundation (AOLAF), a committee of the Alabama AFL-CIO. The primary mission of AOLAF is to provide information to the public about the activities of AFL-CIO unions in the state and to honor organized labor's friends, but it is charged also with preserving Alabama labor's heritage, thus making it the perfect body to build the labor archives.

The structure of the AFL-CIO, a giant federation of 178 different-sized bodies in locations ranging from major metropolitan areas to small towns, makes it difficult to coordinate this kind of "top-down" project. The question of who could provide the archival expertise necessary for such a

---

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Summers, conversation with the author, 19 November 1997.

tremendous job has been critical for AOLAF, which has few contacts within the archival community, and the answer to the question has eluded the foundation since its establishment. Several recent events changed the contours of the task and made it possible for AOLAF to resume serious consideration of establishing a labor archives. First, records creators—in this case, local union headquarters—lacked storage space. Documents poured out of file cabinets, and boxed records were stored in halls and closets, under stairs, in basements and attics, and at the homes of former officers and current members. Local officers pressured the state organization to help them find a way out from under the mass of accumulated paper.

The state organization itself had designated part of its new headquarters building in Montgomery as a museum where local unions could display their memorabilia. The opportunity to make the public as well as their fellow unionists aware of their existence and accomplishments further motivated members concerned with the history of their unions to think about the records they possessed. They are interested particularly in how to find the right materials, from unarranged records, to display in the new museum.

A third impetus was a happy coincidence. Under the leadership of Dr. Frank Borgers, an AOLAF board member, the Center for Labor Education and Research (CLEAR) at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, also took a renewed interest in pushing the archival charge of AOLAF. Dr. Glenn Feldman, a recent Auburn University graduate, suggested to Borgers that he contact the archives at his alma mater for help. Within two months the archivists at Auburn constructed a mail-in records survey for local organizations, which AOLAF planned to test through a pilot project at a



local union office.<sup>5</sup> When the state AFL-CIO granted AOLAF \$50,000 towards financing a repository, the focus of the board shifted from surveying and gaining control over the records to housing them, and AOLAF contacted the Birmingham Municipal Archives about working together to preserve labor records.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, AOLAF like SIP opened the door for archivists to help in achieving the goal of preserving its documentary heritage. Taking up that challenge gave Alabama archivists an opportunity to articulate an intellectual infrastructure that they had practiced informally but had never stated clearly. The greatest leap they faced, then, was to convince resource allocators that cooperating with and assisting groups such as SIP and AOLAF promoted their own institutional mission.

### *The Documentation Strategy Experiment*

No single archives in Alabama could collect the records of the 178 unions in the state, nor did the state have a specialized repository for industrial records. In fact, records

---

<sup>5</sup> Meeting of AOLAF, Birmingham, Alabama, 18 May 1997. AOLAF consultants arranged to conduct their onsite, pilot examination through the United Auto Workers' district office in Birmingham. A misunderstanding led AOLAF to publish the records survey questionnaire before the local officials could be informed of the project, and no local returned its questionnaire. At about the same time, Dr. Borgers left CLEAR, severing the tentative connection between the Auburn archivists and the committee.

<sup>6</sup> Those who have worked with AOLAF have recognized the Birmingham Municipal Archives (a division of the public library) to be one of two "natural" repositories for the Alabama AFL-CIO unions' records. The other is the archives of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Until recently, Birmingham Municipal Archives did not have enough space to consider housing these records, but through deaccessioning some collections and transferring others, it has acquired 700 linear feet of space. Jim Baggett, interview with the author, Alabaster, Alabama, 6 September 1999.



documenting both these topics were already distributed throughout the state. While a cooperative project offered the best hope of documenting industry and labor in the state adequately, no cooperative model could integrate records creators, records users, and archivists as thoroughly as documentation strategy. Questions persisted, however. What aspects of documentation strategy worked and what did not? How could costs be shared and resources equitably allocated? Would computer technology, particularly the World Wide Web, make collaborations easier or more difficult? Clearly, the state's archival community needed to undertake an examination of documentation strategy to delineate its usable components.

Beginning in the 1970s some archivists called on the profession to develop unified appraisal theories and proactive collecting policies and to abandon its traditional, passive, haphazard collecting methods. In 1974 Gerald Ham challenged archivists to abandon the traditional selection process, which he described as "so random, so fragmented, so uncoordinated, and even so often accidental,"<sup>7</sup> and to adopt instead "imaginative acquisition guidelines" to document the human experience.<sup>8</sup> The next year David Gracy assailed what he called the "spilt milk" philosophy of collecting, based on the idea that archivists simply had only to wait for residual records to reach them.<sup>9</sup>

Archivists initially responded to this challenge by devising better appraisal techniques and improving the ways they shared collection metadata and appraisal decisions through

---

<sup>7</sup> F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> David B. Gracy, "Peanut Butter and Spilt Milk: A New Look at Collecting," *Georgia Archive* 3 (winter 1975): 20.

national databases. Then, in 1986 Helen W. Samuels, spurred by the concern of social historians for the voice of the powerless, brought together different strands of thinking about cooperation, appraisal, and service that had existed in archival thought since Schellenberg published *Modern Archives*<sup>10</sup> and defined the concept of documentation strategy. In her seminal article "Who Controls the Past?" Samuels answered the question posed by her title unambiguously: archivists control the past when they select records for permanent retention. If, as she argued, the decisions archivists made were important, then she proposed in documentation strategy a powerful tool to improve those decisions. She urged archivists to go beyond cooperating with one another to include records creators and users and to seek actively those records that delineated the lives of the great mass of humanity. Samuels also suggested steps for creating a documentation strategy. Archivists were to choose and define the topic, select advisors, structure the inquiry, examine the available documentation, then collect and place the newly discovered records.<sup>11</sup>

Within a year Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett built on Samuels's original design in a pair of articles emphasizing meticulous planning and recruitment of participants in a documentation strategy. Hackman's model began with a core group of archivists who defined the topical area to be documented, drafted its strategy, then selected a

---

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Garrison, "The Very Model of a Modern Major General: Documentation Strategy and the Center for Popular Music," *Provenance* 3 (fall 1989): 22-24; Margaret Hedstrom, "New Appraisal Techniques: The Effect of Theory on Practice," *Provenance* 7 (fall 1989): 12, 15; Terry Abraham, "Collecting Policy or Documentation Strategy: Theory and Practice," *American Archivist* 54 (winter 1991): 47-48.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Willa Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?" *American Archivist* 49 (spring 1986): 109-24.



group of advisors to study and refine the strategy. Each step in this process had its own bevy of procedures, so that only after an extensive period of planning and committee work did participants finally seek the documentation their strategy targeted. Warnow-Blewett's account of the long-running American Institute of Physics (AIP) project to document its profession through the papers of its high-visibility members offered a model of this strategy.<sup>12</sup>

Even before these articles were printed, the New England Archivists constructed a project to collect the documentation needed to write a complete social history of New England. Members organized themselves into teams, defined the specific subject areas each team was to treat, and sought the available universe of documentation to complete the task. Of all the projects planned, the consortium finished five: the built environment, religious life, rural life, recreation and tourism, and the emergence of a high-tech research area in Massachusetts. *Finished* was a relative term; the end product was not a written social history but a model for massive, comprehensive documentation gathering.<sup>13</sup>

Following Hackman's adage that documentation strategies "may be developed at levels ranging from worldwide

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study," *American Archivist*, 50 (winter 1987): 18-29.

<sup>13</sup> Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," 30-47; Eva S. Moseley, "Introduction," *American Archivist* 50 (fall 1987): 468-72; Nancy Carlson Schrock, "Images of New England: Documenting the Built Environment," *ibid.*, 474-98; James M. O'Toole, "Things of the Spirit: Documenting Religion in New England," *ibid.*, 500-17; Philip N. Alexander and Helen W. Samuels, "The Roots of 128: A Hypothetical Documentation Strategy," *ibid.*, 518-31; Samuel A. M. Reynolds, "Rural Life in New England," *ibid.*, 532-48; T. D. Seymour Basett, "Documenting Recreation and Tourism in New England," *ibid.*, 550-69.



and nationwide to statewide and community wide,"<sup>14</sup> Richard Cox chose a regional rather than topical approach in attempting to document the history of western New York state. Though funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), Cox could not produce a "full documentation plan," and his project like that in New England became a model rather than an precedent.<sup>15</sup> Cox's results, along with the high rate of dropouts encountered by the New England Archivists, illustrates one of the problems with many initial documentation strategy projects—they were simply too large. The planners tried to accomplish more than their available resources allowed. Implementing a documentation strategy requires funds to support a number of archivists, records managers, records creators, and other interested parties. Money is not the most important resource required, however, time is, including the time of records creators and scholars who are needed to carry out the project.

Institutional interests also restrained archivists who wanted to construct documentation strategies. They had a difficult time justifying to resource providers and allocators the exceptional expense of money and time required to succeed, and even among archivists who welcomed documentation strategy, collaboration foundered on competing institutional priorities. Frank Boles strongly argued that "documentation strategy must function within the limits imposed by institutional goals and priorities," and so accurate was his assessment that by 1996 Stephen Sturgeon could

---

<sup>14</sup> Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," 14.

<sup>15</sup> See Richard J. Cox, "A Documentation Strategy Case Study: Western New York," *American Archivist* 52 (spring 1989): 192–200; Abraham, "Collecting Policy or Documentation Strategy," 49–50.

characterize documentation strategy as "little more than archival non-aggression pacts."<sup>16</sup>

Above all, for documentation strategy to succeed, participants themselves—archivists and nonarchivists—must believe that the documentation team can actually accomplish its goals and that those goals are worth the expense and time required to carry out the project. This requirement, which Terry Abraham attributed to the theory itself rather than to its implementation, made documentation strategy a "Holy Grail"—an ideal to be pursued rather than a real-world solution to appraisal problems for many archivists.<sup>17</sup>

Critics suggested scaled down documentation projects as a more viable alternative to complex documentation strategies. Abraham, for example, advised archivists to strike a compromise between their reality and the documentation strategy theory through "carefully written collection development plan[s], an appraisal policy, knowledge of—if not full cooperation with—other repositories in the region." Gould P. Coleman illustrated this point in his report of the Cornell Farm Family Decision Making Project, which worked primarily because it was exceptionally relevant to Cornell's stated mission.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Frank Boles, "Mix Two Parts Interest to One Part Information and Appraise Until Done: Understanding Contemporary Record Selection Processes," *American Archivist* 50 (summer 1987): 359, 366–67; Stephen C. Sturgeon, "A Different Shade of Green," *Archival Issues* 21,1 (1996): 40. On opposition to archival activism and documentation strategy, see Gregory A. Stiverson, "The Activist Archivist: A Conservative View," *Georgia Archive* 5 (winter 1977): 4–14.

<sup>17</sup> Sturgeon, "A Different Shade of Green," 40–41; Abraham, "Collecting Policy or Documentation Strategy," 52.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Boles, "Mix Two Parts Interest to One Part Information," 366; Abraham, "Collecting Policy or Documentation Strategy," 52. Gould P. Coleman, "Documenting Agriculture and Rural Life," *Midwestern Archivist*



The message was clear. Archivists were not in position to champion an entire documentation strategy and could not afford to lead those components of projects that fell outside their institutional priorities. The AIP model publicized by Joan Warnow-Blewett succeeded precisely because it had been tightly focused, relatively small, and intimately connected with the parent institution's mission. Special subject archives and discipline history centers ranging from the University of Minnesota's Immigration History Research Center to the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University reported similar success by tying their participation in a documentation project to their repository's own priorities.<sup>19</sup>

Documentation strategy did encourage archivists to develop better appraisal and collecting theories and to reconsider their relationships with both scholarly and general users.<sup>20</sup> The AIP program, for example, was championed by

---

12, 1 (1987): 21-27.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas H. Kreneck, "Documenting a Mexican-American Community: The Houston Example," *American Archivist* 48 (summer 1985): 272-88; Susan Grigg, "A World of Repositories, A World of Records: Redefining the Scope of a National Subject Collection," *ibid.*, 286-95; Jacqueline Goggin, "Carter G. Woodson and the Collecting of Source Materials for African American History," *ibid.*, 261-71; Garrison, "The Very Model of a Modern Major General," 22-32. Avra Michaelson and Jeff Rothenberg reported the use of similar strategies in the emerging electronic environment in "Scholarly Communication and Information Technology: Exploring the Impact of Changes in the Research Process on Archives," *American Archivist*, 55 (spring 1992): 286-315.

<sup>20</sup> Abraham, "Collecting Policy or Documentation Strategy," 52; Boles, "Mix Two Parts Interest to One Part Information and Appraise Until Done," 361, 363-64; Mark A. Greene, "Store Wars: Some Thoughts on the Strategy and Tactics of Documenting Small Businesses," *Midwestern Archivist* 16, 2 (1991): 101; Michael Nash, "Small Business, Manufacturing, and Flexible Specialization: Implications for the Archivist," *American*



records users and creators who, concerned about their own professional knowledge, created a demand for archival expertise and service. Archivists in turn provided leadership in those areas where their expertise was greatest. It is these aspects of documentation strategy—impetus from records creators and users, involvement by archivists closely tied to their institutional mission—that proved to be its viable essence.<sup>21</sup> Programs that follow this model are likely to succeed.

#### *A Proposal for Documenting Alabama Industry and Labor*

Where does this leave Alabama archivists and the documentation of industry and labor in the state? What facets of documentation strategy can be applied to either the SIP union list or the AOLAF records collection project? How can archivists combine the intellectual infrastructure provided by documentation strategy theory with the needs of these groups of records users and producers?

The larger archives within the state of Alabama have already established a web of informal connections, though none have engaged in cooperative collecting ventures. These are personal connections among members of this relatively small community that provide a starting place to build more formal agreements. There is substantial agreement in the state archival community that both the SIP and AOLAF projects are worthwhile, and many larger archives in Alabama hunger for opportunities to perform community service. In fact, a number of archivists desire to work on joint projects like these.

---

*Archivist* 58 (summer 1995): 292–93.

<sup>21</sup> Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," 18–29.

Interinstitutional cooperation may be easier now than it was in the past. Universities in the state, the archives of which make up a substantial bloc within SALA, have access to the Internet as well as the personnel expertise to use it for communications, data storage, and information display. Six of every ten SALA members subscribe to the organization's electronic listserv and an additional 15 percent use e-mail. The myriad of archival websites in the state further attest to archivists' abilities to use this new medium.<sup>22</sup> This communications revolution qualitatively changes cooperative projects and gives archivists the ability to bring together information about distributed collections on a particular topic and to make such information available to the public from a single location.

The development of this infrastructure in the last decade increases the ability of archivists to help the SIP and AOLAF projects succeed. So far archivists' relations with the SIP and AOLAF projects have been slow to develop, however. Neither project has good networks within the archival community, though both are striving to develop such links. For their part, archivists in Alabama are as yet unsure how to fit themselves, their repositories, and their institutional interests into these undertakings.

In the existing model of documentation strategy, archivists direct the entire project. They choose the topics and participants and, because they are familiar with the universe of documentation, lead the project through design and execution. This scenario has not worked well in the past and will not work here. Both the SIP and AOLAF documentation projects are already directed by individuals for whom the

---

<sup>22</sup> Special Collections and Archives, University of Idaho Library, "Repositories of Primary Sources: Eastern United States and Canada." Updated November 1999. <<http://www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/east1.html>>; accessed 6 November 1999.



projects directly fulfill an institutional interest. The place of archivists in these projects is still one of leadership, but only within areas of their professional expertise that match their own institutional priorities.

The SIP union list of collections in Alabama and the South has very different parameters from the AOLAF goal of collecting and providing access to the records of labor unions. Both offer Alabama archivists an opportunity to employ parts of documentation strategy theory to good advantage, but they must pick and choose the components of documentation strategy that fit the individual needs of these projects

For example, helping build the SIP database requires archivists to agree to cooperate across institutional lines. They must survey the universe of documents currently held in the state's repositories and seek collections held by small repositories that might not even consider themselves part of the archival community. This group includes county historical societies, genealogical societies, businesses that keep their own records, and a variety of other organizations. Another area within the SIP project where archivists can provide leadership is in planning ways to collect and display the accumulated collection data. SIP members, for the most part historians without information management training, do not realize what options they have available, particularly in the electronic environment.

AOLAF has different needs. No one on its board is sure of the quantity of documents and other materials held by Alabama's labor unions. Implementing basic systems of physical and intellectual management—appraisal, arrangement and description, providing access—falls within archivists' expertise. Gaining such control over these records is an obvious task suitable for a cooperative project in which archivists lead within their areas of knowledge.

Suggesting ways archivists can work with SIP and AOLAF still begs the question of how such projects fit within the archivists' institutional interests. Answering that question



begins with the collecting policies of individual repositories. While most repositories in the state do not address industry and labor in Alabama in their collecting policies, many do approach those topics obliquely. For example, the repositories in and around Birmingham, where union concentration is highest, have a commitment to documenting their geographical area. So archivists there can justify bringing in regional labor union records under their geographic rubric. Other repositories in other regions have a history of formal or informal cooperation; the Mobile County Archives, the City of Mobile Archives, and the University of South Alabama Archives are a good example. If one of these repositories cannot participate in a collecting project, another can accept records for the sake of "professional courtesy," especially in small to moderate quantities.

Sometimes institutional interests that justify participation in documentation projects fall outside the repository's collecting policy altogether. Neither the Auburn University Archives and Manuscripts Department nor the University of Alabama W. S. Hoole Special Collections Department mention labor records in their collecting policies. The institutional missions of both universities, and of many other colleges in the state, do include outreach along with instruction and research, however. Demonstrating to resource allocators that doing their part in collecting the records of labor or industry in Alabama meets the needs of their constituents might not be particularly difficult, especially if union officials or SIP leaders addressed letters of thanks and support to university administrators and state legislators.

Information technology also supplies a concept that both SIP and AOLAF project leaders and their archival partners can use: *chunkable*. This neologism comes from the language of the World Wide Web, where webmasters and designers speak of chunks of information—succinct pieces that fit well onto the visible part of a single screen. The key to chunking

a cooperative project is to make sure that each segment is complete in and of itself rather than designing a linear progression of steps that depend on earlier steps. By accomplishing stand-alone parts, chunked projects do not fail completely when resources dry up. There still stands a completed body of work, available for use as is, ready to be the starting point for continuing the project at a later time. Building in stopping points also enables participants to point and say, We have successfully completed this part.

Chunking the SIP and AOLAF projects would provide the same psychological satisfaction to resource providers who demand a start and a finish to information gathering. The SIP union list, for example, has ready-made breaks. Project managers could ask Alabama archives to provide information about their collections that document the iron industry in the state. As each repository finished, it could take satisfaction in accomplishing an outreach project. When all known archives complete that portion of the survey, the SIP managers could canvas each repository again, this time on another industry. And so on, and so on, until SIP had covered all industries.

The greatest advantage of this chunking approach to project management is that it enables archives to participate at the level allowed by their institutional imperatives at any given time and allows greater success to coexist with lesser success. The project itself will not fail if every component does not fully succeed, just as the New England Archivists' documentation strategy succeeded in producing a set of articles that were discrete units of production even though the participants' original vision of documenting the social history of Massachusetts foundered.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Moseley, "Introduction," 468-72; Schrock, "Images of New England," 474-98; O'Toole, "Things of the Spirit," 500-17; Alexander and Samuels, "The Roots of 128," 518-31; Reynolds, "Rural Life in New England," 532-48; Basett, "Documenting Recreation," 550-69.



### *Conclusion*

There is no doubt that industry and labor in Alabama are not well documented in the archival record, and no Alabama archives has the institutional mandate to lead either of these projects. The archival record of completing such large projects anywhere in the United States also does not bode well for such an effort. Fortunately, in the Alabama situation, records producers and users have stepped in to design, and are beginning to execute, such documentation projects. Both the Southern Industrialization Project and the Alabama Organized Labor Awards Federation recognize the need for archival expertise and have invited archivists to engage the issues with them.

Alabama archivists are preparing themselves to handle their roles in these projects and have reached out to the leaders of both groups. Documentation strategy offers a well-articulated model that archivists can adapt in responding to these invitations and defines ways in which archivists can contribute to these efforts. Documentation strategy also demonstrates the importance of planning in such projects. If Alabama archivists are to play leadership roles in these projects, they must stay within their areas of expertise—specifically, information management and the universe of documentation—and must fit their efforts within the repositories' institutional imperatives. This is the lesson of a decade of implementing documentation strategy.

**Martin T. Olliff** is assistant archivist for electronic media in the Archives and Manuscripts Department, Ralph B. Draughon Library, Auburn University, Alabama.



