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Present at Creation: The Founding of the Society of Georgia Archivists

Lee Alexander, James Morton, Edward Weldon, and Carroll Hart
Moderator: Sheryl Vogt

Spring Meeting, Savannah, May 19, 1989 (EDITED)

As we envisioned this session, our panel would discuss what brought them together; why they felt the need to organize; what they envisioned for SGA as a professional organization; how did they view its development; how they have viewed its development over the last few years; and what they would like to see for its future. Then, we thought that following some discussion about our beginning, it would be a very valuable exercise for those of us here to have a forum to explore development for SGA and what we, as a group, would like to have come from our organization.

I am going to begin by introducing our panel, all of whom are charter members of SGA. Then, I will spend a couple of minutes talking about creation, presenting our creation according to the official record as it has been recorded and put in our SGA archives.

Lee Alexander began her archival work as an assistant in the Manuscripts Department, 1941-46, at Duke University and continued in Atlanta with the historical society in 1954. She was curator of manuscripts there from 1965 to 1969, and then she became archivist at Atlanta University from 1969 until her retirement in 1983. She was a member of the advisory board for the Library Documentation Center at Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for 1974-75 and was a consultant for their archives project for 1976-1983. She was also project director for an NHPRC grant for processing the archives of the Southern Regional Council from 1978 to 1979, and she served on the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board from 1981 to 1983. Supposedly retired, Lee is now working as a volunteer archivist for three Savannah organizations.

Jim Morton began his archival work in 1965 at the state archives working with educational services. He was a liaison for the public in their introduction to archival services. In 1970-71 he was museum curator for the Atlanta Historical Society, and after that, he began doing freelance museum design all over the state, doing design for Madison/Morgan Cultural Center, exhibits for the Massey School, designs for the Thomasville Cultural Center, St. Simons Maritime Museum at the Lighthouse, and working with Historic Savannah Foundation. While he was doing this freelance design, he said he was earning his money from the Arthur Smith Antiques here in Savannah. Jim is also a resident of Savannah.

Ed Weldon was our first president of SGA in 1969, and he was also president for the term 1970-71. At that time, he was working with National Archives Regional Branch in Atlanta, and in 1971, he moved to National Archives in Washington, D.C., where he worked until 1975. During that time, he was editor

of *The American Archivist*. He left National Archives to go to New York State Archives for the next five years, and then he returned to Washington to become deputy archivist of the United States. We are very fortunate that in 1982 he came back to Georgia and became director of the Georgia Department of Archives and History at a time when he was also president of the Society of American Archivists. Ed was one of two former presidents of SGA to become president of the Society of American Archivists. We are very proud of that.

There has been a lot of mention made of a paper I did three years ago for the Society of American Archivists meeting about our relationship as a regional with the national society. One good thing, I think, that came out of that paper was a reflective look at where we have been as a society, and this has given us cause to think about what we are doing and where we want to go.

(See *The Society of Georgia Archivists: Twenty Years of Meeting Archival Needs in Georgia.*)

We had also hoped that Carroll Hart, a founding member, would be able to join us, but she was not. She did want to share some thoughts with you, and she brought to me a few pages of notes. Carroll Hart was director of the Georgia Department of Archives and History from 1964 to 1982. Carroll wrote:

I regret that I cannot be with you at this meeting. It would be such fun to reminisce about the early years of the Society of Georgia Archivists.

I would like to thank you again for the certificate of merit you gave me in May 1982. It hangs now in my study and reminds me of all the work the society is

continuing to do and the fine record you have made nationwide.

When the final story is written and you look back, it's the documentary legacy of our history which you have helped to save which lifts your heart. I remember when I became director in 1964, there was so much I felt I needed to know to move the archives into the new building and to serve the profession well in Georgia.

I had only attended the Archives Institute in Washington sponsored by National Archives and American University and the workshops sponsored by the regional office of the National Archives and Records Service in Atlanta.

I attended a national meeting of SAA in Texas carrying with me a list of questions I needed answered. I was overcome by the wonderful response I received from members. We held several small gatherings just to discuss my problems. It was amazing how much I learned in so short a time. I remarked that I had never dreamed the profession could be so sharing. One of the members said that we had to help each other, that most of our institutions were understaffed and our profession was still unknown, and there were few places where we could get down-to-earth professional training.

I remember the first meeting we held at Georgia Archives to discuss organizing the Society of Georgia Archivists. I don't remember the date, but we met in the auditorium and talked about what the society could mean to us and to the profession statewide.

There were three main reasons I felt we needed the society: (1) better communication and sharing of ideas; (2) more training to meet our individual archival needs;

and (3) greater emphasis on selling ourselves and our profession. I felt the latter was crucial at Georgia Archives. Our funding came through the legislature and the majority of the members had no idea what archivists really did. To build up the profession we had to sell ourselves and what we did.

I am proud of the Society of Georgia Archivists. I feel the society has certainly achieved its goals and moved far beyond the ones set in 1969. I wish you continued success as you move toward the twenty-first century.

Having come from the official record and Carroll's remarks, we would like to now move to the panel to have them discuss what their feelings were at the time they began our society.

LEE ALEXANDER: Twenty years and a few months ago, Ruth Corry called me at Trevor-Arnett Library at Atlanta University and said that several people at the archives and some of the archival agencies around were thinking of organizing a professional group. It just seemed that it was time that Georgia should have one and that we could perhaps be mutually helpful. My first impulse was to say thank you very much, but no thank you. I had an archival plateful at that point because I had just made a shift of work from a situation in which I was working wholly with manuscript collections—personal and family papers, usually small collections—into a situation in which I was working with archival collections—impersonal and coming in by the ton of paper it seemed to me. This took some adjusting and some learning. I thought, well, why not take this opportunity to be involved in something interesting and perhaps do some learning on the side as well. So, I became a part of the group, and it was a very interesting and very rewarding

experience; and sometimes it was a very grueling one because I was always typing up minutes at five-thirty on the afternoon of a meeting that was supposed to begin at seven. But, there were more rewards than chores.

When people my age begin to look back at things like that, their perspective gets a little weird, and it's always a good idea to wonder if one is seeing what was really there or if one is seeing what one wants to see. I may be seeing what I want to see in this instance. If I am, Jim and Ed will have a good opportunity to say that this is so. What I think I am seeing is that at the time we were a brand new organization, the archival profession was at a sort of watershed point in its history.

There had been up until that time many of us in the sort of situation that Carroll Hart just described for us. Many of us had no formal classroom training in archival work. I learned mine by apprenticeship—a very pleasant experience. I wasn't labeled an apprentice but, in fact, that's what it was; it was very effective, but it left some things to be desired. At the time the SGA was organized, we were beginning to move into the twentieth century, archivally speaking. Formal training in archival work was no longer unusual; it could be had in a lot of places. We were beginning to take cognizance of the existence not only of personal papers but of business archives, institutional archives, organizational archives, and how these geometrically increasing masses of paper could be dealt with. What was needed to help deal with them arrived on the scene as it usually does. Everybody who went to SAA meetings came home talking about SPINDEX I and, in a year or so, SPINDEX II. I got awfully tired of hearing about SPINDEX because in the first place I didn't speak computer and in the second place there was no possible way the agency that I worked for and

those that most of us, in fact, worked for were ever going to own a computer. We did well if we could buy folders and boxes. But, nevertheless, this was a straw in the wind, a great big straw in the wind, and, of course, it blew.

I remember with a lot of pleasure an event that now illustrates the combined direction that archival work was taking—that is, computerized operations—with the new excitement about corporate business archives. Mr. Wilbur Kurtz of the Coca-Cola Company invited the society to meet at Coca-Cola offices in Atlanta and see the museum collection of Coca-Cola artifacts that he presided over, and he also presided over a lot of the firm's historical records and those possibly of the Candler family—he never invited us to see so much as a scrap of one of those. He kept them safely behind the door of a safe and behind his rather capacious figure; he was always between us and where the papers were. But he had a lot of very interesting museum items which we enjoyed seeing, and then as a climax to the evening, he took us into the room where the computer operation functioned. It was about two-thirds the size of this room I would guess, and the computers were about the size of this bar over here. They were roaring away like concrete mixers, and the room was specially air-conditioned to take care of the extra heat that these monsters generated. It is hard to believe that it is now possible to hold a computer in one's lap! But, this was the direction in which things were going. It was exciting, it was scary, and there were a lot of things that a lot of us didn't know anything about.

SGA helped, too, I think, to move all of this growth and progress along. It also helped us to come along a little more rapidly than we would have if we had to go it on our own. For the friendships and good company that the society offered,

I am still grateful, but I am also, for reasons of learning and professional advancement, awfully glad I decided not to say no when Ruth Corry called me.

JIM MORTON: Twenty years is a long time, and I have some very good memories and some vague memories of the archival days. I wrote them down in a letter to Jane Weldon about a month ago, and with her permission—just a few minutes ago, she said certainly I could read from the letter. I will read from the letter because it expresses what I felt was going on at the time and how that affected my professional life later:

Dear Jane, I was pleasantly surprised by your letter to the old-timers and your kind invitation to attend the twentieth anniversary. Twenty years is a generation and who remembers vice-presidents? I am old enough to forget what happened yesterday and not yet old enough to recall in minute detail what took place twenty years ago; however, I do generally recall that it was a time in the archives business of great exploration and discovery, of youthful expectations, and the reward of influence on a rapidly expanding archival system.

I remember how fortunate I was to be where literally the world was coming to Atlanta seeking answers to preservation, restoration, and retrieval programs. No one should forget the expressions on faces of young and old when seeing for the first time the most historical documents of the state brought to light and displayed for viewing in a new world class facility.

It was a time when being objective was difficult, if not impossible. In a decade, 1960-1970, of great subjectivity and polarization such as the death of the Kennedys, the

civil rights movement, the death of Martin Luther King, the Vietnam war, hippies, the Cold War, the dissolving traditional family. Within that arena, try holding fast to the idea that "What is past is prologue" and the accurate documentation of events, be they large or small, unencumbered by lack of funds on the campus. Lord knows, when the funds and the mechanics were no where to be found, there seemed to be great dare and inventiveness lurking in the wings. Call it frontier mentality, if you will. We met the enemy and it was us: big brother, bureaucracy, the white tide. Does that sound familiar today?

I treasure the great comradery and forget the sometimes less than healthy divisions in the ranks, and there were those occasionally. All of this was in an era in which the Society of Georgia Archivists was envisioned. It was to become a mission attempting with fluctuating degrees of success to formulate guidelines for the individual archivist whether in Atlanta or St. Simons Island; a diverse forum brought together in the hope of standardization of techniques; a brain trust of trial and error, keeping in mind the needs of even the smallest of units—the individual archivist.

After leaving archives I regret not having maintained an association with the Society of Georgia Archivists; however, I did carry on in the related field of museum work. As I said, in 1974, I moved from Atlanta to Savannah where after all preservation seems to be a way of life.

That was the letter I wrote to Jane. In thinking back on from 1965 to 1970 when I left archives, the last year I was at archives was when we started developing the Society of Georgia Archivists. I do treasure those memories and that training because we were all learning, and learning from each other. And those (lessons) have helped me in the museum work, just going from records to objects. There's a difference, but in a way they are the same: they have to be documented, they have to be preserved, and they have to be presented.

ED WELDON: It seems to be testimonial time. I'm glad that we did start with a personal note, because each of us is probably reflecting on how we happen to be in the job situation and place where we are now. There was not much individual career planning, I'm sure.

In the spring of 1968, I was at Georgia State in my sixth year of college teaching and working on my Ph.D. Jane and I had gone to Spartanburg, South Carolina, where I taught at Converse College for a couple of years, and then came back to Emory. I had some sleepy students there—one of whom was Ken Thomas (one of my first really good students, who forgot everything I taught him, so he went on to become a very significant person in the historical profession). Then, I went to teach at Georgia State, intending to remain in the classroom.

Jim mentioned the events of the sixties. The assassination of Dr. King was a traumatic one for our whole society. It certainly was for me and my career—being right downtown Atlanta and being involved in the community. The funeral in Atlanta was a real small town "coming together"—emotion, feeling, family, and church. We all took part in that tragedy, and, as we always do in an event of this magnitude, we see ourselves as part of the firmament. I walked in the procession

from Ebenezer Baptist Church over to Morehouse, a very moving experience, a reaffirmation of community. I went back to class at Georgia State and found a different perspective on the part of some of my students. They were not sorry, and they had some disparaging things to say about the whole situation and Dr. King. It was a traumatic time for me. I said, "I don't know if I really want to teach history any more."

So, I walked into Carroll Hart's office in that brand new building across the tracks from Georgia State, and I said, "What's an archives?" "What's a state archives?" I was about to be a new Ph.D., but I hadn't been in an archives. I had just used microfilm and other sources in special libraries. So, she gave me about an hour of her time. You all know how generous and enthusiastic Carroll is. And sitting across the desk from where I sit now, she talked to this estray and said, "I've got this institute. It started last year. We're having another one this summer. Why don't you come take it?" So, I did, that summer of 1968, and we came down to Savannah on a field trip and met some fine folks, including Mrs. Lilla Hawes, who was Georgia Historical Society director then. It was my entry into a new set of archival associations.

I met A. K. Johnson. At that time he was starting a regional archives program in East Point; his boss, the new Archivist of the United States Bert Rhoads, was trying to reach out to new constituencies. A. K. wanted to hire the first Ph.D. to direct a branch. I took the job in the spring of 1969. About a month later, A. K. said, "There's something going on down at the state archives. Go down." That was July, and that was our SGA organizational meeting. You know, that's how you often find yourself. No design, no plan. Most of us happen into this profession by chance. I personally was having an identity crisis

as a former academic who had lost caste by becoming a "custodial historian." I was feeling pretty isolated.

Our SGA gatherings provided support and frequent fellowship. I remember that we ate a lot of steak. We went to restaurants to talk, have a few drinks, and eat. Other months we went to visit one another's shops. We sequestered for communion, communication, and comradery. I pulled the 1970 sign-up list when we went to Coca-Cola so you can see some familiar names. Somebody called Sally Weaver, I think, was there. She signed up.

SALLY W. MOSELEY: We ate, didn't we?

WELDON: We did--or drank Coke. Jane was there. So was a fellow named (Dick) Eltzroth, the father of a practicing archivist herself in our audience today (Lee). You know, those are important ties, very personal bonds that continue and give us support.

Forces were at work, as Jim said, in society. You mentioned SPINDEX. That system emerged from the fertile brain of Frank Burke, first described in a speech he delivered in Atlanta at the 1966 SAA meeting. Simply inputting information from the box labels from the Library of Congress holdings. . . . It's funny to go back and read now about some of the quirks that they got with the computer mixing names and what it couldn't sort. That, too, was a beginning, and it happened in Georgia.

A lot of other things archival were happening here in the late sixties: the new archives building has to be a major event in our history; the Georgia Historical Society became a branch in 1966 through an arrangement between the folks down here (Savannah) and Mr. Ben (Fortson, secretary of state). There was the Georgia League of Historical Societies that Carroll had helped organize. It was like the confederation that they now

have in South Carolina and the federation in North Carolina, but a little premature for Georgia. Individuals and their organizations were beginning to cluster, to look for common interests and ways they could share. The Georgia Genealogical Society (GGS) started about that time—again, Carroll Hart taking a leadership role in that as she did with the Archives Institute. Governor (Jimmy) Carter's reorganization of state government broke up the old history commission and moved the historical preservation function to the new Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Carter added records management to the state archives with the advice of federal neighbors. Our regional tri-state organization begun in the mid-sixties evolved into SARC (first South Atlantic Archives and Records Conference and now Southeastern), as Florida and other states came in. These were some of the events and forces surrounding the birth and early years of SGA.

In all this activity, you saw missionaries like Carroll Hart and A. K. Johnson constantly working the territory. They were significant to the origins of our organization. They gave their personal participation, outreach in a broad sense, and a sense of sharing. One of the first assignments A. K. gave me was to organize a training institute for new college and university archivists. Ruth Helmuth came down from Case Western to teach, and Dick Lytle, who was then in St. Louis at Washington University, assisted. A. K. had no business doing that; he was running a federal regional records program, but typically, he was reaching out to help an allied community. The regional cooperation and training you see in SARC today began in the sixties with Carroll, A. K., H. G. Jones in North Carolina, and Charles Lee in South Carolina.

When we left Atlanta and went to Washington in 1971, SAA was being radicalized. ACT—I never could remember—Archivists Concerned for something or other—was a caucus of some archivists in the Midwest and the East looking to create a more active, open, participatory SAA. Many were college and university archivists, influenced by campus activism and opposed to the National Archives and state archives leadership then dominating SAA politics. Interestingly, many of those same old radicals today are now advocating certification to close those professional opportunities they were once seeking. The Committee on the Status of Women in the archival profession, the Committee on the 70s, these were the liberalizing efforts and influences. Go back and read their reports and that of the 1972 SAA Columbus (Ohio) meeting. People elsewhere were starting to organize as we had in Georgia. I was also a founding member of MARAC (Mid Atlantic Archives and Records Conference). They were protesting SAA and its leadership, but we didn't have that purpose here in Georgia. We built on that partnership between state and federal archivists, and broadened our base.

Those events have been replicated themselves, and we now find fifty-one archival organizations listed in SAA's latest directory of regional and state groups. There are over eight thousand individual members listed. We in Georgia were among the first. Our early quest was for local, community participation, professional support, simple friendship in our isolation, and social and political involvement. Our profession is comprised of people who are not always powerful in their larger institutional structures. We therefore seek political expression and opportunities within our professional organizations. At least, that seems an important purpose for

many. In SGA we are still an organization of individuals. Many of us are also members of other state groups: the GGS, the Georgia Association of Historians, the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, the Georgia Historical Society, the Georgia Association of Museums and Galleries, the Georgia Library Association, Georgia chapter of Government Management Information Sciences (GMIS), and the Atlanta ARMA chapter. These other groups also serve varied and special aspects of archival life and they themselves have members with archival responsibilities and needs.

SGA has not formally pursued relationships with these organizations and allied interests. We have not had the entangling alliances that I have hoped to see formed. We have not sought many cooperative ventures with other Georgia organizations. We've tried to be regional. We have a national journal. But where is our focus? What did we find in the 1981-82 state needs assessment about the possible mission for the Society of Georgia Archivists? That's something we really ought to review. Are we too comfortable now? Are we socializing new, isolated individuals? At our twice-a-year meetings, we are providing education and training opportunities. And there are also alternative networks available, electronic ones and those involving governmental organizations. But what is SGA doing formally in projects to share our particular corner of experience with needy neighbors in our own state? Genealogists are doing many of our finding aids and using electronic information systems. Our museum colleagues hold lots of documentary materials, but they're often in isolation and need assistance in proper technique. We should seek to fashion new alliances and continue to build on what has been a very strengthening and nurturing organization for ourselves for twenty years. We are

still a Georgia-based organization, and we need to look at Georgia's needs and be sure we serve them.

SGA is a wonderful organization. SGA is where we have our roots and our ties, and where we come back to friendships that support us. But, there are others who are also in need, and we have talent to share. That's part of the existential nature of our professional lives and our organizing efforts. The memories of supportive friends made it easy for Jane and me to come back to Georgia, knowing all those good people who were there at the beginning, at the birthing of this fine organization. Let's open up to discussion now and have some suggestions about where SGA is to go in its next twenty years.

VOGT: I think this--what Ed has mentioned--is one of the things that came out of my looking at our files. We have had a lot of good ideas over the years, and we have done some things moving in the direction that Ed is suggesting. We have, on two occasions that I know of, worked with Georgia Library Association to give some archival training to librarians, merely an introduction. We've had lots of ideas. We haven't always brought them to fruition, and I think part of what we've been discussing in recent years is how do we get off neutral, how do we move ahead? Does the society really want to do this? I think this is one of the things that Kaye (Minchew) mentioned this morning when she was saying, "Have we really asked you as a group: Do you want to meet with another organization (Georgia Association of Historians)?" So, it was very good to see this morning that that was an option that you chose to do. Does anyone have any remark about things that we might do?

(The panel and members of the audience then discussed what the Society of Georgia Archivists ought to be doing. A brief summary of comments follows.)

KEN THOMAS: We could organize an archival "swat" team to help with emergencies and with new archives just getting started. The museum association does this.

AUDIENCE: We could work more closely with groups like GAMG (Georgia Association of Museums and Galleries) and with other groups and institutions that happen to have archival collections—such as, local libraries, preservation groups, historical societies—and the Georgia Humanities Council, etc. The problem is letting others know that SGA offers this service. We could work with the leadership of other groups; we could put information packets in local historical societies and public libraries. We could also offer workshops on various aspects of archival work in different areas of the state.

TONY DEES: We should pull out the Archives and Society Committee file from 1984 and see how people responded to the questionnaire sent at that time.

VOGT: We should also look at the needs assessment report from 1982. The goal is to give the executive board a clear sense of direction about where we should be headed for the future.

JANE WELDON: The actual planning would be better done at the board level. It would have to be a small action group to work effectively.

VOGT: I appreciate Lee and Jim coming to talk with us today—and, of course, Ed. We pulled two people from archival retirement here; we are keeping them involved. I think that's a good thing because I was noticing on this list that Ed has of our first members that there are a lot of these people still around. We have a lot of experience to draw from in this group.

I thank you for your attention.