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Thomas County Historical Society

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COLLECTING FOR CLIO

THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN ARCHIVIST/CURATOR
OF A LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Tom Hill

The role of the local historical society in collecting is quite different from that of the national or state archive, even of a college manuscript collection, the former being the official depository of government and the latter having, at least, the prestige of the college or university to help in collection. Both also have the advantage of a trained staff, adequate budgets, hopefully, and outstanding facilities.

The same cannot be said of local historical societies. One can count, virtually on the fingers of one hand, the number of societies that have a full-time staff and an archival program. According to the Directory of Historical Societies and Agencies published by the American Association for State and Local History, there are only six historical societies listed in Georgia outside of the cities of Atlanta and Savannah, each of which have two. Two of the six are located in a college or university, another in the U.S. Army Infantry Museum in Columbus, and a fourth is Westville Historic Handicrafts, Inc., the largest historical village recreation in the state. The remaining two are local historical societies. Not all of these six even have archival programs.

There are many good reasons for the lack of archives on the local level, the main one being shortage of money. Undoubtedly, due to rather enormous costs, the average small, rural areas never will have the budget, staff, or facilities to start an archives. It takes hundreds of man-hours even to make an inventory of what material is available. After it is found, and owners are willing to part with it, there

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is the storage problem. A lot more is involved than finding a room in an old house. The collections must be protected, particularly from humidity, temperature, and fire. One prime consideration must be whether the collection is safer where it is than in the storage area the society might provide.

In order to better explain what the Thomas County Historical Society is attempting to save and not to save, it should be noted that the holdings are divided into six main divisions: (1) Official Files of the Society, (2) Visual Art Materials, (3) Newspapers, (4) Maps, Plats, and Land Abstracts, (5) Papers of Corporate Bodies, and (6) Papers of Individuals.

The Official Files of the Society include ledgers and annual audits, membership lists, reports to the members, newspaper clippings of actions of the Society, correspondence of the Director, the charter and by-laws, as well as the minutes of the Executive Board and the Society. These are files which will expand as the Society grows.

The Visual Art Materials include such items as paintings, slides, still photographs, and movies. Many pictures in this file were received independently, but most came from manuscript collections. Photographs are removed from manuscript collections only if they are not integral to the collection, and are always replaced by a separation sheet. About the only pictures the Society declines to take are those of unidentified people since 1920. Photographs of some unidentified people prior to that time are saved for costumes alone, but are filed separately. The Society always tries to obtain and preserve the original, although some pictures can be gotten only by copying. Therefore, the Society needs a good camera with a micro-lens.

One major collection that all societies should try to collect and save is the back files of the local newspaper. No other one source will give such a panoramic view of an area. Newspapers constitute by far the smallest area of holdings in Thomas County. With the exception of some few very important issues, such as the Golden Jubilee Edition of the Thomasville Times-Enterprise, put out in 1939, which contains an enormous amount of historical information, no newspapers of the twentieth century are collected. There is little need since the local library and the University of Georgia have nearly complete runs of the local paper from 1889 on microfilm, which is supplemented each year. The

Society does collect any local paper published anywhere in the county that is not on microfilm, most of which antedate 1900.

The Map division has virtually no limitation except geographical. Any map from the area will be preserved, even if found in Atlanta or elsewhere, mainly because there are so few. Of course, duplications are avoided, as are contemporary maps of Thomasville published by the Chamber of Commerce.

The Papers of Corporate Bodies include selected records of the various branches of local government, institutions, societies, business corporations, schools, and churches. Since official records rarely come to a historical society without solicitation, attempts have been made to make the Thomas County Historical Society the official depository of certain county and city records. The first step involves making a determination of what records are produced and which ones should be retained. Obviously, it is impossible to save all the records produced, even in one courthouse, much less seven municipalities. Three criteria have thus been set up. Are the records (1) historically important, (2) unsafe where they are located, and (3) not being saved already by the state or federal government. Once the decision is made to save certain records, the very last step is to go to the county Board of Commissioners. It is imperative to know what to ask for before going.

The Tax Digest is a very good example of a record not saved or solicited by the Society, even though every town in the county uses the same digest, the state archives receives a copy. For the Society to save the record, it must meet all three of the criteria, which the digest does not since a copy is preserved in the state archives. Voter registration information dates back before 1900, and for genealogical information it is invaluable. But it is kept in a fireproof vault in the courthouse. It is as safe there as where the Society would put it. Furthermore, the county intends to keep it indefinitely. Consequently, the Society has not asked for this type of information.

The only records at the courthouse not stored in a fireproof vault, or kept by the State, are in the office of the Clerk of the County Commission. That office contains: the minutes of the Commission, paving projects, payroll records, accounts payable and receivable, disbursements,

contracts, resolutions, tax digest, and general correspondence of the Clerk. Though no disposition has been provided for any of these records, the only ones the Society has solicited are the minutes of the Commission through 1945, paving projects, disbursement records (which comprise the other financial records), and the noncurrent general correspondence of the Clerk.

There are seven incorporated towns now in existence in Thomas County, plus one that no longer has a charter. The City of Thomasville has a separate clerk and treasurer, as well as a city manager. Their records are formidable. Many are now being placed on microfilm and saved by the City. Because of space limitations, the Society will not seek these records as long as they are maintained by the City. The only records the Society wishes to have for the sake of consolidation with the other city records are: the yearly budget and audit on four of the five main funds (one is federal revenue sharing), minutes of the city commission to 1945 with annual additions, business licenses through 1950 in increments of 50 years, some very old tax digests, cemetery records, the original paving assessments once they become noncurrent, as well as noncurrent correspondence of the city manager.

The other six towns have only a city clerk to keep all their records. The Society is very eager at this time to consolidate all the important papers of these towns, for they meet all the criteria. The State does not have copies, the files are important, and they are stored almost anywhere. As with Thomasville, the Society is seeking in each case minutes of the city commission to 1945 with annual additions, business licenses through 1950, receipt and disbursement books (either compiled or separately), cemetery lot records, and noncurrent correspondence of the clerk.

The state archives has evidenced an interest in these records, which causes apprehension. Experience has shown that consolidating the records, even within the county, will be a minor miracle, much less taking them to Atlanta.

Under Institutions and Societies, do not overlook the civic clubs, as well as other groups, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Moreover, inform them of the types of information needed, such as: press releases, minutes, reports of committees, telegrams, newspaper clippings, contracts,

financial reports, and any correspondence exchanged in setting up the yearly project. The Thomasville Entertainment Foundation scrapbooks, 1943-1971, for example, are an invaluable source of information on the cultural life of that city.

The single best place for information on the overall business life of the community is the Chamber of Commerce. Its annual report should be saved, as should newsletters and scrapbooks. Most important, the correspondence of the director should be preserved, since there one can find information on business moves or failures to move into a community.

There are two separate public school systems in Thomas County, the Thomas County System and the Thomasville City System. Both are storing their valuable records in fireproof vaults with humidifiers. Unless this policy is changed, the only public school records that the Society should save are the County Superintendent's personal correspondence file. To supplement the written record, however, the Society plans an oral history project to document issues settled "over the desk" in the two most important confrontations in which the superintendent has been involved--consolidation and integration. Five private schools operate in the County, and the Society is attempting to save their important records. The minutes of the executive boards and parent-teacher organizations, personnel files, financial records and correspondence will be, perhaps, one of the most important sources of information regarding integration in the South.

Churches are more than can be handled at this point. There are thirty-eight in Thomasville alone, with at least that many more in the County. The Society is considering taking a selected sample, including the largest city and rural church, smallest city and rural church, the oldest churches, and Black churches.

Papers of Individuals include any material acquired from an individual source. It is here, that the local archives differs more than in any other area from the other archival programs. The Society feels it more important to document the little man, the average man, than the important individual. Besides, the important collections will go to some college, as perhaps they should.

One last list of materials to collect, suggested by Robert S. Gordon in his very fine article on organizing the local society holdings ["Suggestions For Organization and Description of Archival Holdings of Local Historical Societies," American Archivist, 26 (January, 1963), 19-39--Ed.], includes:

1. Correspondence: letters received, copies or drafts, and letter books;
2. Personal Papers: birth certificates, school reports, diaries, scrapbooks, marriage certificates, death certificates, wills;
3. Land Papers: all documents pertaining to ownership and transfer of land;
4. Legal Papers: especially ones executed between two or more parties, as contracts, deeds, bonds;
5. Occupational Papers: items related to earning a living;
6. Civil and Military Offices: voluntary, elective, or appointed;
7. Societies and Organizations: papers relating to offices held;
8. Accounts and Receipts: vouchers, receipts, and commercial papers; and
9. Printed Matter: newspaper clippings, booklets, and pamphlets.

The most active customers of a local historical society will be genealogists, and the society must collect for them. Such things as family bibles and tombstone inscriptions are important for these patrons, as well as telephone books and city directories.

As Steve Gurr has said, finding local private collections is very hard, about the only thing harder is talking somebody out of one. Do not expect to win all the time. Every local society collector will come across situations, as happened in Thomas County, where one of the oldest families in town recently closed its ancestral home, lived in for over 100 years, sold all the furniture at public auction, and burned the papers because they were "too personal." No amount of pleading on the Society's behalf convinced the family that what was "too personal" today would not be 100 years from now.

In seeking private collections, the Bicentennial is made to order for stirring local interest in the past and future. A society administrator should get on the local history committee and make it a "Bicentennial Goal" to preserve the past. Secondly, he could start a local history course in the local high school. Students will come up with materials the society could find no other way.

If the society collects the right things and builds its program to the point that people will leave things on the doorstep, the organization will have not only the thanks of future humanity, but also an enormous pride in a work well done.