

January 1973

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Gayle Peters

Federal Archives and Records Center

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Recommended Citation

Peters, Gayle, "The Regional Archives System and its East Point Branch," *Georgia Archive* 1 no. 2 (1973).

Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol1/iss2/5

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THE REGIONAL ARCHIVES SYSTEM
AND ITS EAST POINT BRANCH

Gayle Peters*

The Regional Archives System, begun in 1968, is one of several programs run by the National Archives and Records Service (NARS), General Services Administration, as part of a long-range effort to provide more complete and responsive service to the nation's heritage in records. In effect, it is part of a network of specialized depositories that NARS has constructed to help care for the ever-increasing volume of records, and to assist the growing numbers of researchers in their quests for the quicksilver truth in history. The National Archives in Washington for records of national interest, the Presidential Library System for records of recent chief executives, their cabinet officers and their staffs, and the Federal Archives and Records Centers (FARCs), of which the regional archives are a branch, for records of regional interest--all play their part in protecting the colorful and interwoven threads of the nation's historical tapestry. The regional archives, located in FARCs in eleven cities--Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Kansas City, Fort Worth, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle--provide to researchers away from Washington easy access to government records.

The regional archives collect government documents on the basis of geographical areas. The records from the states served by the eleven FARCs reach the archives through the records management program begun by the federal government in the early and middle 1950s. Under that program for efficient, low-cost storage and retrieval of records, federal courts and executive agencies have retired non-current records, some generated a century or more ago, to the FARCs serving their region. The decentralized locations of the centers, the ongoing records-control program and the potential archives ob-

*Mr. Peters is the Chief, Archives Branch, Federal Archives and Records Center, East Point, Georgia.

tained through that program, all make the centers the logical locations for the regional archives. The regional archives for most of the South (GSA's Region 4)--Georgia, North and South Carolina, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi--is located in Atlanta. Roughly 22,000 of the 660,000 cubic feet of records in the FARC, or some 3 per cent, are maintained in the archives branch.

Each regional archives branch has responsibility for identifying, preserving, arranging and providing for research the records created by federal installations in the several states of the region it serves. In many respects, the regional collections parallel one another closely, since courts and other agencies create basically the same records throughout the United States. But in important ways the regional holdings mirror the history of their separate regions, from a preponderance of maritime and immigration records along the east coast, to documentation on Indians in the West and Southwest and records concerning Alaska in the Seattle branch.

Administratively, NARS provides professional and technical guidance to archives branches through a Regional Archives Coordinator, who funnels reports, directives, questions and answers between the regional branches and the Office of NARS. In this way, standards and direction of all the regional activities can be molded into one viable and useful system. The archives branches are responsible to the Office of NARS in carrying out their programs.

In addition to the professional and administrative structure, each region has its Regional Archives Advisory Council to make recommendations for the more responsive and useful operations of the branch. The regional councils act much like the National Archives Advisory Council, which evaluates the overall operation of the national organization. The regional council for the South has twelve members, located throughout the region, who meet annually. The membership includes professional historians, archivists, and librarians--persons with a competency and an interest in history, as well as a dedication to improving the archival profession.

Very few of the records destined to become archives move directly from the creating agency into the archives branch, since nearly all federal records are now produced

and stored under records retention plans. Records are classed as temporary or permanent, with both NARS and the creating agency participating in the decisions. Yet there is no automatic procedure in making records archival. The process involves review both by the regional archives and by the Records Appraisal Division of NARS in Washington, and can be initiated by either unit. While in most cases the recommendation for archival accessioning, wherever it originates, will concern records classed as permanent, it is possible for records scheduled for destruction to be re-evaluated and placed in archives. The absence of automatic procedures for determining what records should become archives requires the regional archives branch to re-examine FARC holdings periodically, in order to better meet changes in research trends. The process also involves a basic change in ownership. Creating agencies may send records to FARC for storage, but the records remain in the legal authority of the agencies. For those records to become archives, the agency must transfer legal custody of them to the Archivist of the United States.

In preparing descriptive materials, the regional archives branch adheres to the standards, style, and format established by NARS. However, preliminary inventories, the descriptive workhorses of the National Archives, are rarely produced in regional operations. Instead the regional archives branch relies on the shelf, or box list, prepared either by the creating agency or by FARC personnel prior to moving the records from agency space to the records center. The shelf list, a "Records Transmittal and Receipt," consists of two parts--controlling information and listing of contents. The controlling information shows an accession number, record group title and number, date received at the FARC, and name, address, and responsible official of the agency transferring the records. Total volume is shown, along with a statement of space cleared in offices, cabinets, and storage areas. The list of contents details the records in each box, plus the location of the box within the center, according to a shelf-space numbering system.

When records are made archives, the archives branch relies on the shelf list for information as to the nature of the records and their relationship within the accession. This reliance may not always be wise.

An accession is an arbitrary creation, consisting of from one box to several thousand. It reflects only the amount of records an agency wished to remove from its files at one time, and has little relationship to the structure of the files, especially over a long period of time. Though the archives branch in Atlanta must rely on the shelf list, it constructs other finding aids when possible. A card catalog has been prepared for speedy retrieval of the 10,500 court volumes in the holdings, which lists for each volume the nature, title, and location of the creating court, and the nature, time-span, title, and location of the volume. Examination and retrieval now require minutes instead of days.

Preservation, another activity for which the archives branch has responsibility, is becoming an ever-larger concern, because of the American attitude toward records. The American people never have been preoccupied with creating records of what they have done; they were too busy doing it. In those instances where records were required, such as in legal matters or bureaucracy, their maintenance held much less moment than their creation. So it was in the federal establishment in the South. Courts and agencies created records as they needed them, and left them where they would not interfere with the important business of the day. Whether in damp, chilly basements, in hot, humid attics, in dark closets, where insects, worms, mold, and vermin held carnival, or in high-ceilinged offices where sunlight danced upon the pages daily and lamps and candles laid a gentle mist of soot and carbon black nightly, the records of the United States Government were treated carelessly. Cheap paper, highly acid folders, and the creases of the trifolded file only made matters worse. The archives faces a preservation problem.

During the last few years, the majority of records from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been moved to the climate-controlled archives stack area in the Atlanta FARC. Beyond that, the National Archives is instituting a program to microfilm all important federal court records in the country generated before 1840. This project promises to be as long-term and thorough as needed to complete the task. Three months were required for an analysis of the volume of material to be filmed from the Atlanta regional archives alone. The study indicated that eight man-years would be required to flatten,

clean, repair, arrange, describe, and film the 250,000 pages involved. The work has begun.

Lamination, microfilming, rebinding of volumes, photographing and other reproduction methods have all been used at the regional archives, none extensively or methodically. The cost is simply too high for large-scale preservation by any method, especially since the holdings of this branch are but one of eleven such groups throughout the country. At present, some "glamour" records, such as suits brought by Eli Whitney to protect his cotton gin patent, and the oldest records in the holdings, 1716 and 1732 admiralty journals from Charleston, are well-preserved. The Georgia Department of Archives and History has been most gracious in laminating and rebinding single volumes, but the problem cannot be solved on a single-volume basis. A basic commitment to proceed with an ongoing program of preservation is needed. The microfilming of court records is a step in the right direction, hopefully a first step, not an only step.

Reference work constitutes one of the most enjoyable and important activities of the regional archives branch, as it does in most archival institutions. The branch everyday answers at least one mail request and furnishes nearly two reels of microfilm through inter-library loan, plus assisting one visitor every other day.

A visitor's request for records, made after an initial discussion with the archivist, is written on a three-copy standard form, which contains the name of the researcher, the date of the request, and the records desired, identified by title, record group number (or microcopy number for microfilm), and accession and space number for location. The archivist retrieves and serves the records, initials the form, then asks the researcher to sign for receipt of the documents. The original copy is filed in a chronological file, for compilation of statistics both as to reference load overall, and with some analysis, for the use of any specific record or record group over a period of time. The second copy, which stays with the records during examination, is utilized as a refiling guide, after which it is placed in an alphabetic users' file as a record of the materials a researcher has seen. The third, charge-out card copy, is filed on the shelf in place of the documents, until

the records are refiled, when it is discarded.

This "retrieved-records control procedure" is employed both for textual records and for the branch's ever more heavily used microfilm collection. Some two years ago, the National Archives began utilizing the new regional archives as depositories for copies of certain of its extensive microfilm publications. Policy decisions governing circulation were made by panels of advisers--historians, professors, authors, and librarians--charged to consider the needs of students, established scholars, and genealogists. The branches were authorized to make the microfilm available to libraries and similar institutions within their region using the A.L.A. Interlibrary Loan program. Only if a roll is held exclusively by a particular branch will a request from outside the territory be honored.

The deposit-and-loan program for microfilm has proven popular and useful. Each branch now has some 7,500 rolls of film, with 4,500 or so rolls more expected in the next 2 years. The regional archives may loan up to 4 rolls to a researcher at any one time for 21-day library use. Both academic and genealogical researchers have made extensive use of the microfilm resources through the interlibrary loan program. Original textual records, of course, are not available on loan.

In addition to the basic archival duties of appraising, accessioning, arranging, describing, preserving, and referencing their holdings, the regional branches carry out certain peripheral activities. These include designing and constructing exhibits which reflect research potential in the records, as well as advising other federal agencies in creating their own displays. The Office of NARS occasionally calls for special studies and projects to aid both in controlling the vast amount of documentation and in responding to trends in research. Projects have included determining the volume of records in the FARC that could be made archives within five years, the volume of court records generated before 1840, the number of archival series from all record groups now under adequate description, and the volume of records concerning American Indians.

The archives branch of the FARC at East Point holds, basically, two separate and distinct collections

of government records: (1) 7,500 rolls of microfilm deposited by the National Archives, covering records of national importance created and maintained by federal courts and agencies in Washington, D.C., throughout the nation and around the world, and (2) 23,000 cubic feet of textual records generated by U.S. courts and agencies of the executive branch located throughout the South.

The voluminous film collection includes the records of the Continental and Confederation congresses and of the Constitutional Convention; general records of the United States government, such as Indian treaties and enrolled bills; boundary and claims commissions records; U.S. Senate records; records of the General Accounting Office; Supreme Court papers (including Revolutionary War prize cases and cases heard by John Marshall as a circuit court justice in North Carolina); certain U.S. district court records; records from the Department of State, including diplomatic despatches before 1906 from U.S. envoys in several countries; records of the Bureau of the Mint and the Bureau of Customs; records from the Secretary of War in the nineteenth century; Revolutionary War service lists; Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs; Freedmen's Bureau records; records of the departments of Justice and Interior; Bureau of Indian Affairs correspondence; papers of the Geological Survey; the National Archives's collections of World War II war crimes records; the seized enemy records from 1945; records of the Federal Reserve System, the War Production Board, the Office of Price Administration and the Office of Price Stabilization. While the archives branch in the Atlanta FARC now has film of the 1850 and 1880 census schedules for eight southern states, in the coming months film for the censuses of the entire nation, 1790-1880, will be received.

The textual records, which pertain to the South, are the heart of the archival operation. Those of the federal courts, which occupy 22,000 cubic feet, include bankruptcy, criminal, civil, equity and law cases, recorded naturalization entries, and copyrights. Many courts held jurisdiction in admiralty causes, the records of which reflect actions against loss, crime, and disagreement on the high seas.

At first, each state held one federal judicial district, with several states grouped into one circuit. As population increased and shifted, however, the states

were subdivided into two, and sometimes three, districts, so that over the years different courts handled actions from the same locations. For the Southern states, the regional archives holds the following court records:

ALABAMA

Southern District, Mobile, 1820-1943. 629 cubic feet.
Middle District, Montgomery, 1839-1943. 988 cu. ft.
Northern District, Birmingham, 1866-1943. 1,646 cu. ft.

FLORIDA

Southern District, Miami, 1828-1943. 717 cu. ft.
Northern District, Tallahassee, 1837-1943. 429 cu. ft.
Middle District, Jacksonville, 1888-1945. 762 cu. ft.

GEORGIA

Southern District, Savannah, 1789-1943. 1,021 cu. ft.
Northern District, Atlanta, 1847-1942. 1,881 cu. ft.
Middle District, Macon, 1879-1943. 1,798 cu. ft.

MISSISSIPPI

Southern District, Jackson, 1819-1943. 1,442 cu. ft.
Northern District, Oxford, 1838-1943. 750 cu. ft.

NORTH CAROLINA

Eastern District, Raleigh, 1789-1942. 1,212 cu. ft.
Western District, Asheville, 1870-1943. 938 cu. ft.
Middle District, Greensboro, 1872-1942. 558 cu. ft.

SOUTH CAROLINA

District of South Carolina, Columbia, 1716-1942.
1,265 cu. ft.

TENNESSEE

Middle District, Nashville, 1797-1943. 1,654 cu. ft.
Eastern District, Knoxville, 1852-1943. 1,575 cu. ft.
Western District, Memphis, 1864-1942. 1,258 cu. ft.

In addition, the archives maintains records of the Civil Commission established by the U.S. Army in Memphis after that city was returned to Union control in 1863, as well as thirty cubic feet of the records of U.S. attorneys and marshals from Mobile, Columbia, S.C., and Raleigh, and twenty-six cubic feet of records from Confederate courts in eleven locations throughout the South.

Beyond the outcome of individual actions, the court records hold wealths of information on the growth and sweep of the American people in the Southeast. This potential, though largely ignored thus far, promises to be more fully realized as more useful finding aids are produced and as researchers become aware of the documents.

A variety of agencies and departments are represented among the 1,000 cubic feet of executive branch records. The records of the Cherokee agency in North Carolina, established in the 1870s, and of the Florida-based Seminole agency, begun in the 1890s, reflect the growth and the day-to-day operations of the agencies, the Cherokees from 1886 to 1953, the Seminoles from the mid-thirties to 1952. The archives has assessment lists from the Internal Revenue Service for South Carolina, 1866-1917, and the six other southeastern states, 1909-1917. The Soundex cards for the 1880 population census in the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Kentucky (as well as Mississippi, for initials A-C) are also available. These cards, arranged by state and family name for all households having children under ten years of age, can be used as a finding aid to the microfilmed 1880 census schedules.

The National Archives has instituted a policy of placing in the regional branches certain original records, pertaining to regional activities, that had previously been housed in the National Archives building in Washington. One such body of records is 238 cubic feet documenting the Corps of Engineers's activity with fortifications, waterway improvements, harbor and dredging operations, and other daily activities, 1807-1943, in eight southeastern districts and divisions.

Other returned records, which date from the era of the New Deal and World War II, include 13 feet from the National Recovery Administration, 30 feet from the Soil Conservation Service, 1934-1942, 373 feet from the Office of Price Administration, 1942-1947, 82 feet from

the War Manpower Commission, 1942-1945, 8 feet from the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946, and 3 feet from the Oil Enforcement Branch of the Secretary of the Interior's office, 1933-1935.

Lastly, the publications of the National Archives, including preliminary inventories, annual reports, brochures, the periodical Prologue, guides to German records filmed in Alexandria, Virginia, and catalogs are on microfilm available for researchers to use as finding aids or for information on the National Archives program itself.

The regional archives is a young program, as federal programs go, entrusted with preserving and making available for research records in some cases older than the federal government itself. It is another facet of the National Archives's effort to serve more completely the needs of many different researchers, indeed, the needs of history itself. More and more the regional archives program promises to open new paths for the study of America's past, exploring and charting trails in an historical wilderness for researchers to widen and harden into much-traveled highroads. In its effort to preserve and protect the heritage of the American people, the team of archivists, librarians, manuscript curators, scholars, historians, records managers and authors has a new member in the regional archives program.

The Atlanta Regional Archives Branch may be visited at 1557 St. Joseph Avenue, East Point, Georgia 30344, or telephoned at (404) 526-7477, five days a week between 8:00 A.M. and 4:30 P.M.