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Barbarians at the Doorbell

Tales from the Archives

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In the 1970s, archivists throughout the South felt the pressure from invading hordes of researchers, many of them hell-bent on breaking down the barriers that kept women's issues, women's lives, and women's records buried in a past that undervalued female experience. If women's papers were interpolated in historical collections, then they might not even be catalogued in detail, instead lying dormant in file boxes. A new generation of librarians and archivists forged alliances and created initiatives that would change American history, with an outpouring of guides and bibliographies.¹

Female scholars were becoming increasingly adamant that they would mine the buried riches—with or without permission. They would storm the bastions of Southern history and change the narrative. Multiple voices began to ripple across the historical landscape, calling for changes. These protests might have been disruptive, but these were barbarians who used the doorbells—ringing persistently and loudly to announce their arrival and being unwilling to take the litany of “nos” for their answer.

During my first year of graduate school back in 1975, I decided to visit an archive during the fall break so that I could research some primary material. I was working on an abolitionist woman, Maria Weston Chapman, and was thinking she might be good material for a biography.² I trekked north from Princeton to Boston. Nearly forty-five years later, I am glad my plan got derailed by my encounters with a chilly manuscript librarian and a manuscript access policy that left me cold. I spent three days cooling my heels, waiting for a special delivery letter from James McPherson, my graduate advisor (who claimed my research was preliminary work on my dissertation) so that I could

be granted access to women's abolitionist society papers held in special collections at the Boston Public Library.

Without this letter, gatekeepers denied me entrance: the doors were closed. When I did gain entrance, I was still greeted with suspicion: my requests for collections appeared to be an irritation, if not an imposition. The print guides gave little indication of material on women, and even less on women of color. After I finally got my hands on a file folder of documents, a desk attendant would carefully search *each* folder to make sure all pages were returned—even though I had sat no more than a few feet away and she had watched my every move as I examined these papers. I experienced the slow *drip-drip-drip* of bureaucratic delay as I fetched new folders and returned perused ones.

Besides setting my teeth on edge, this roadblock taught me valuable lessons: always call ahead and try to get the name of a person who might be knowledgeable and/or helpful. Despite the technological developments of the past half century, *calling* and finding a contact continues to be solid advice. I emphasize phone contact to current students who are overly fond of the internet. Email might appear equally time-saving, but a conversation can pave the way to not only getting answers to what you want to know but also obtaining information you didn't even know you needed.

I sensed during my first semester of graduate school that Southern history might prove compelling. I had already been on a wild ride: earning a master's abroad, in the United Kingdom, then following a detour, teaching in North Africa, before settling down in Princeton for my doctorate. I warmed to the intensity of Southern history. Southern sources would lure me away from New England or mid-Atlantic affinities: Southward Ho!

Shortly after my encounter at the Boston Public Library, I attended my first Southern Historical Association (in Washington, D.C.) and met up with women who had recently organized the Southern Association of Women Historians (SAWH, later renamed the Southern Association *for* Women Historians).³ This propelled me on a winding path that has led to my current commitment to celebrating the past half century of exploring Southern women's stories and working within the SAWH.

American women's history was just taking off then, and many of us were eager to catch the wave, to be swept up in the growing crusade to create a new social history—a history that includes women and men, black and white, native and immigrant—a holistic approach that included a renewed focus on the underrepresented, the unlettered, the lost but not forgotten. Disruptions in the flow of ideas and books about great white men and their big doings were glacially slow.

Female protestors, hoping to change the historical curricular landscape, launched assaults on patriarchy and the politics of exclusion. Female professors began to stoke the imaginations of legions of students, eager to recognize women's voices within and contributions to the past. In the early 1980s, the textbook market caught on, and Mary Beth Norton was the first female lead author on a major American history textbook. The effect of women's history was just beginning to be felt in department after department, classroom after classroom, campus after campus. Over forty years later, *A People and a Nation*, by Norton et al. (with three other women on the masthead), is in its eleventh printing, and in 2019, Norton is the 133rd president of the American Historical Association.⁴

My colleagues will be chronicling some of the transformative changes within key fields of Southern history, surveying some historiographical developments and significant organizational renovations. I want to share my thoughts about those people and places that have made so much of our work possible over the past five decades: libraries, archives, and those who have helped to transform Southern women's histories.

I want to pay tribute to the unsung agents of change who have made a difference and to highlight the grinding work that goes on behind the scenes. The stories of scholars who championed the cause of women's histories, who demanded access and accountability, remain unchronicled. The strike force dedicated themselves to reshaping accessibility within the archives; scholars began multiple campaigns—a steady barrage of suggestions and demands—to create a larger, more diverse body of materials available to archival sleuths. This web of Southern scholarly investigations created a network of collegiality and sisterhood that fueled several generations of doctoral students, which energized a field in which a hundred flowers bloomed.

Following this transformation, state archives would no longer list material on women as “not of political interest”—the heading under which I had first found collections of materials that included valuable records that assisted me in excavating the voices of early-nineteenth-century plantation mistresses. This research became the basis of both my dissertation and my first book. In the earliest days of the feminist resurgence, I met up with so many colleagues on the research trail, all with similar tales to tell. Sandy Treadway (former SAWH president and current librarian of the State of Virginia) recalled for me an example of scholarly activism:

In 1991, when I was working as an editor and historian in the Publications Department at the Library of Virginia, I received a call from the archives research room telling me that a graduate student from Yale University

was doing research at the Library and was wondering if she could talk with me. She was hoping to write a dissertation on women in public and political life in antebellum Virginia but was having trouble finding source material. In describing her research topic, the archivists she spoke with explained to her that since women could not vote in the nineteenth century, we would not have anything in our collection that documented what she was looking for. Our archivists thought about politics and political expression in very traditional ways—in terms of voting and office holding—and they were correct that women could not do that in the nineteenth century. But this student knew that antebellum Virginia women did care about the important issues of their day and her instincts were correct—she just needed to figure out where to find the evidence. In the course of my own research, I had come across a tantalizing article in a Richmond newspaper from the 1840s about Lucy Johnson Barbour, widow of one of Virginia's governors, who was trying to enlist women in a fund-raising effort to commission a statue to Henry Clay, longtime standard bearer for the Whig Party, and place it in Virginia's Capitol Square. I was certain there was an important story there and suggested that she find out more. I also suggested the Library's collection of petitions sent to the General Assembly by citizens seeking assistance or redress that only the legislature could provide. I had seen many from women among the hundreds of petitions filed in the antebellum period and suspected that these might serve as windows into women's thoughts and activities in the public sphere. The student in question was Elizabeth Varon, now a distinguished chair professor of history at the University of Virginia.⁵

Sandy goes on to explain that not only do archivists assist researchers but scholars enable archivists to reframe their ideas and assist in making collections more transparent to a wider range of investigators. The push-pull effect of the 1970s and 1980s created an awareness that more needed to be done to reframe archival resources.

This give-and-take remains transformative. But now, clearly the archivists have taken the lead. Several generations of researchers have been given a comfortable berth, a seat at the table—thanks to the spirited engagement of Southern archivists, librarians, and curatorial staff across the South.

Not all places seem to have caught up, though, and a few might even be drifting backward—for years I relied on Wylma Waites to assist me in finding just about anything I could imagine in the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. She has retired, and when I inquired about any manuscript

or archival guide to South Carolina women in their holdings, a recent staffer wrote: “Thank you for your interest in South Carolina history. Our agency collects the permanently valuable colonial, state, county and municipal government records for South Carolina 1671 to ca. 2010. I checked our hardcopy finding aids but could not locate any guide to women’s records in our collection. Best wishes on all your research projects.”⁶ Such a cursory response seems remarkably out of step.

I cannot begin to mention all those who have made such crucial differences in our research lives, but I hope to track some contributions that made a difference during these crucial decades when we began to speed the plow and forge new pathways into the past. Frances Pollard was a welcoming presence for waves of researchers at the Virginia Historical Society, and she rescued many of us from mistakes and connected many of us on our quests. She was a dynamic and important friend to generations of SAWH members who were passing through Richmond.

As former SAWH president and current head of the Library of Virginia, Sandy Treadway, has suggested: “Historians rely on and owe a great debt to archivists and librarians, who identify, acquire and preserve the documents they need to understand and interpret the past. But archivists also rely on the work of historians to help them anticipate the questions and topics that researchers may be interested in, which informs how collections are organized and described so that they meet researchers’ needs. The questions that researchers ask also help archivists to see their collections in a new light.”⁷

It might seem alphabetical to begin with Alabama, but I think not. There have been women—white gloved and not—who pioneered historical archives in this state. Alabama was one of the first places within the United States, second only to Wisconsin, to collect and organize archival material on *Southern* history. (How many women were behind this effort, we likely will never know.) It was also perhaps one of the first southern archives to drop the color line, as John Hope Franklin recalled being admitted for research without incident.⁸

But I do recall when I arrived on their doorstep in the late 1970s that the Alabama archivists were very apologetic that they did not have any guides to women available, but they nonetheless were excellent stewards of the material. Of course, revisiting Montgomery in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the former Confederate capital now supports the Equal Justice Initiative’s Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice—one of the most heralded commemorations established in the modern era: “America’s first major effort to confront the vast scope of the racial-terror lynchings that

ravaged the African-American community in the South.”⁹ So it has been a long journey from Confederate bastion to anti-racist commemoration capital.

When my assistant wrote to the Alabama State Archives to ask about their guide to women within their collection, an archivist wrote back: “I’m not sure what kind of list Catherine Clinton was given when she first visited the department, but my guess is that she contacted us beforehand and we compiled a list specifically for her. If so, it might be in the director’s papers, but that would be a stretch.”¹⁰ However, after my request made the rounds, I was sent a guide that had been compiled in the 1990s—perhaps in response to my initial request. This remains an invaluable resource: a snapshot with an annotated list of more than 150 collections—“Women’s History Research Sources: Private Records.” This report is now buried within the organization, but it represents the heroic efforts of archivists who responded to the needs of scholars seeking buried treasure within Southern archives. And without this highlighting, how would novice scholars discover the important lives that lay within the five cubic feet on Inez Jesse Turner Baskin, “a reporter with the Negro section of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, as well as a social worker and teacher. Her papers document her life as an African American woman in Montgomery, Ala. before, during, and after the years of the Civil Rights movement.” Or who would explore the four cubic feet on Lela Legare, a pioneering pharmacist and graduate of Auburn? The Alabama State Archives also offers Mary D. Waring’s Civil War diary, as well as Civil War diarist Kate Cumming and Confederate memorialist Sophia Bibb. This guide highlights women within the civil rights movement and women’s suffrage, as well as female participation in education, writer’s groups, sororities, and many other key aspects of Southern women’s experience.

The 1980s was a time of renovation and awakening, not least because the University of Arkansas Special Collections created a handbook: *Manuscript Resources for Women’s Studies*. An NEH grant supported this effort to create a guide in 1989, which was completed under the supervision of the head of research services, Andrea Cantrell. Dr. Cantrell retired in 2010, but her guide lives on, updated and online, hosted by the University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections.¹¹ This invaluable resource highlights the more than seven linear feet of Daisy Bates’s papers, the more than fifty linear feet collected in the Folklife Collection assembled under the direction of pioneering collector Mary Celestia Parler Randolph (1904–1981), and the trial records of Sara Jane Smith, who was accused of sabotage against the Union during the Civil War. Although convicted and sentenced to be hanged, her execution was delayed and she was released after the war. All of these fascinating women and their work has been not just preserved but showcased in this guide.