

Patrick L. Tomlin. *The Archival Unconscious: Thomas Owen and the Founding of the Alabama Department of Archives and History*. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. April, 2008. 70 pages. Advisor: Dr. Cal Lee

This paper examines the origins of the first American state archive, the Alabama Department of Archives and History, founded in Montgomery in 1901. Appearing more than thirty years before the establishment of the National Archives, the ADAH proved an important source of emulation for other state archives. It also played a fundamental role in constructing Alabama's collective memory in the wake of post-Reconstruction social tumult. Focusing on the practices of the Archives' first director, Thomas McAdory Owen, it places the initial decade of his directorship at the center of two intertwining dynamics: the political ambitions of the state's white, anti-Populist government, and the growing emphasis in academic history on close and "objective" study of archival documents in the production of historical scholarship. The paper demonstrates how contemporary thought impacted the collection policies of the ADAH and argues for Owen's importance for understanding the complex nature of the relationships archivists forge with the societies around them.

Headings:

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THE ARCHIVAL UNCONSCIOUS: THOMAS OWEN AND THE FOUNDING OF
THE ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

by
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Introduction

The title of this paper owes a recognizable debt to Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, a work of literary criticism that, *contra* Freud's dictum "the unconscious knows no history," employs the methods of historicization to recover the repressed or internalized ideological preconditions of a text's creation. The following paragraphs argue that archives, like the literature Jameson analyzes, are equally wrought with a politicized, and just as frequently foreclosed, "unconscious." Every archive contains within its form, cutting across its grain, buried narratives and social experiences that are capable of imparting a powerful message about the ideological power of the repository.

An archive is born of specific if diverse circumstances. It is a concrete response to ideological needs realized in terms of identifiable practices and pre-existing forms of representation. Through these forms it creates for itself a purposeful bond with, but also a necessary distance from, the overall social relationships of its time. The repository, in other words, fulfills a particular function at a given point in history, a task necessarily conditioned by an array of regnant interests, values, and purposes. It is the product of stakeholders, record-makers and -users, those who have a vested interest in its existence and continuing survival. It is the product, moreover, of self-conscious activity on the part of these who identify themselves, within and through it, as archivists—a designation itself the token of a professional middle class emerging in near contemporaneous fashion

during the last decades of the nineteenth century. It has practical, material uses; it obscures as much as it makes visible.

As a term, however, “archive” is multifarious: in general usage it can refer to a place, to the people who work within it, or to the assorted records contained on its shelves and in its files. All three are sites where the issues or questions that a community finds most pressing are preserved. The archive is both deeply historical and peculiarly timeless. To understand how it can be so socially embedded and yet appear so detached from the changes and struggles of the society around it—serving as its “archival unconscious”—is the task of this paper.

In an attempt to formulate an answer, I focus on a single moment in the history of American archivy: the establishment of the first state archive. Founded in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1901, the state’s Department of Archives and History established the first independent state agency responsible for the care of public and state government records. Prior to the establishment of the ADAH, other states had sponsored history programs and societies, while other libraries or secretaries of state were charged with the retention of public records. None had the power of an official repository of the government. The founding of the Department preceded that of the National Archives by more than three decades, and its influence upon state archives across the nation was unparalleled. The ADAH therefore stands at the closing of one moment in American archival history and at the beginning of another.

The interweaving of archival and social circumstances that gave rise to the Archives forms the backbone of this study. It looks at what the repository collected and who its stakeholders were, and why. It then traces the career of Thomas MacAdory

Owen, the first director of the ADAH, in light of the concurrent emergence of the professional archivist in the United States at the turn of the century.

This paper aims to make a case for archival history. To do so, it presents the formation of the ADAH as a case study in the history of American archive-building. Through an investigation of the origins of the Alabama Department of Archives, it argues for the benefit and importance of turning to the archival past to clarify the present roles of archivists and their institutions.

What follows does not amount to a plea for the return of the archivist-historian that founded the discipline of archivy in this country, however. The relationship between the archivist and the historian has been complex from the start, of course. Archiving has always been imbued and renewed by historical scholarship, whether amateur or academic. Throughout the nineteenth century, given the salient historical dimensions of their work—even in a relatively young country with few significantly “old” records such as the United States—archivists viewed themselves as, if not historians, at least researchers of historical documents. Their association with the professional community of historical scholarship was deep and in some cases foundational.

Ties to the production of historical scholarship have eroded over the course of the twentieth century. There are tactical and practical reasons for this, many of which have been traced at great length elsewhere.¹ The professionalization of the archivist resulted in (or was the product of) an identity increasingly distinguished from that of the historian. The elaboration of a multifaceted body of archival theory, an element of professionalization, has presented its own set of time-consuming, intellectual challenges. Such theory has developed largely at the expense of the academic writing of history,

which has been pushed to the margins of professional responsibilities and expectations. The rise of electronic record-keeping, couched in the context of the rapid growth of modern information technology, further limited the impact historical scholarship would have on the development of current trends in the field. While provenance-based approaches to electronic records has ultimately served to refocus attention on identifying and making available historical knowledge about records and their creation, institutional history and critique appears less viable and, more importantly, less needed.

Without denying the importance of provenance studies, this paper amounts to a reevaluation of the place of historical scholarship within the archive and, specifically, the necessity of archival history to the archivist. It suggests, through a study of Owen and the ADAH, that practitioners could use a greater awareness of the history of their field in order to make clear what is both singular about the obstacles they face as professionals and the roles archives perform—in short, the relevance of archives and archivists to society. While acknowledging the significance of non-historical forms of knowledge in archival work, archival history stands apart from, and thereby complements, both archival theory and academic historical scholarship. As I discuss in the first section of the paper, it pays heed first and foremost to the overarching historical imperative that drives the creation and support of all archives.

Although the account offered here calls attention to a physical site and its physical records, archival history is not bound by the rules of materialism. If anything, the growing dominance of electronic records has given the lie to the importance of the material presence of the archival document. The nature of the record—and so the archive—encompasses the intangible web of use and management, and the play of power

and authority such actions set into motion. The archivist is perpetually caught in the middle of these transactions, an active participant in its processes as much as a passive, invisible provider of records. By examining and assessing their professional pasts and legacies, by putting their accounts to the test of new interpretations and encounters in the present, archivists have the opportunity to revitalize their status in society. It is hoped, though by no means certain, that the more archivists value their own histories, the more essential archives will grow to those who have the most to gain from them.

NOTES

¹ See Mattie U. Russell, "The Influence of Historians on the Archival Profession in the United States," *American Archivist* vol. 46 (Summer 1983): 277-285; William F. Birdsall, "The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909-1935," *American Archivist* (April 1975): 159-173. Birdsall discusses the relationship between archivists and historians in the years between the first Conference of Archivists in 1909, held under the auspices of the American Historical Association, and the formation of the Society of American Archivists in 1935. The following comments are enriched by Tom Nesmith's discussion of historical and archival knowledge in "Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice," *Archivaria* vol. 60 (Fall 2005): 259-273.

Review of the Literature

Thomas Owen and The Alabama Department of Archives and History

Despite its status as the first modern state archives in the United States, the ADAH has received strikingly little attention in recent literature produced by archivists and archival historians. Since first becoming an object of study in the 1920s, research on the Archives has principally focused on Thomas Owen and his influential role in its foundation and tenure as its inaugural director from 1901 to 1920.

Mitchell Garrett's 1928 study of Alabama history, for example, situates Owen's desire to create a state archive within the larger continuum of collecting and preservation activities originating in the early nineteenth century, particularly the founding of the Alabama Historical Society in 1850.² Although Garrett does not discuss the ADAH at length, his paper provides a succinct account of the transfer of archival responsibility from the traditional historical society to a state-funded, government-administered institution. Four decades passed before the history of the Archives received additional review; like Garrett's account, the essays and papers that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s came from the discipline of history and, perhaps for this reason, continued to focus on Owen's biography as much as the record keeping and management policies of the institution itself. In 1972, Robert Simpson was the first to present a general overview of *what* the ADAH collected in its first years, if not the reasoning behind its specific acquisition and maintenance policies.³ His paper is also the first to cite the legislature

and newspaper reports surrounding the creation of the state archives, although he stops short of analyzing such documentation.

In 1987, with the aid of archival and local historians, the ADAH produced its own written history. In that year, archival historian Richard Cox contributed an introductory essay to a report on the conditions of the state's historical records conducted by the Alabama Historical Records Advisory Board.⁴ Significantly, Cox briefly discusses the mandate and breadth of the Archives' early activities, which included outreach and programs promoting public and school libraries across the state, and the importance of Owen in its early struggle for existence. Because the essay is concerned with the full sweep of the state's collecting history from 1850 to 1985, however, little space is devoted to the institution's origins. His work has since been supplemented by a biographical essay on Owen written by ADAH archivist Alden Monroe and published in 2003, which stands as the most thorough account of the Archives' first directorship.⁵

Although providing little in the way of sustained interpretation of its institutional practices, including its success and failures as a state repository, these texts provide a valuable empirical foundation for further study of the Archives. Considered as a whole, they also offer the initial steps toward the creation of a portrait of the burgeoning professional identity of the American archivist at the turn of the century.

Archival History

Archival history is still very much in its infancy. Indeed, given the relative youth of American archivy itself, the lack of a sustained study of the founding and impact of the ADAH, whether written by archivists or historians, may seem less surprising, if all the

more daunting to overcome. The emergence of archival history in the United States can be traced to the work of a single figure, archivist and educator Ernst Posner, whose *American State Archives*, published in 1964, was the first, and to date only, study of the development and impact of state archival agencies.⁶ Part survey, part progress report, part educational manual, Posner's text necessarily treats each state's institution only briefly, outlining their origins, activities and offering pointed suggestions for improvement. That said, the sum total of the work is a powerful snapshot of a field on the cusp of maturity, a picture that now needs further refinement and expansion.

The greatest proponent of research into the profession's past is undoubtedly Richard Cox, who has published at great length on the subject. In this respect, he is singular among American archivists: few other practitioners have so consistently questioned, analyzed, and engaged the historical parameters of archivy. In "The Failure or Future of American Archival History," an essay published in 2000, Cox points to such an absence:

[T]here continues to be a lack of broader, more substantive histories of record keeping, archival development, and archival theory and practice, indicating that the historical dimension in the professional education and work of archivists is somewhat lacking. There are few in the field who seem able to connect such aspects into a more holistic view of archival history....The best histories of our national archives are twenty to thirty years old, and the best efforts to write an overview analysis of historical societies are nearly forty years old. There also remains only one comprehensive history of archival development in a single state, and it is more than three decades old.⁷

That "one comprehensive history" is a report on the ADAH he himself authored in 1987.⁸

Things have changed somewhat in the six years since this remark was made, yet archival history remains a minor percentage of the scholarship produced each year in the field, and histories of state archives stand as a fraction of that. Traditional definitions of the archival profession—emphasizing notions of custodianship and public service and the

production of a body of theory over scholarly historical investigation—have hampered the production and study of archival history.

As Cox argues, however, the benefits of archivists investigating their profession are multiple. Archival history confronts contemporary professional concerns and issues as much as it examines the past. It can be used to propose and implement new archival programs. It provides a clearer image of the life cycle of cultural institutions such as museums and libraries. Archival history presents a body of case studies through which essential questions about the nature of records and information management may be posed.

One work which has admirably performed these tasks is Kevin Guthrie's *The New York Historical Society*, a study of the non-profit's complex collecting practices and startling financial difficulties over nearly two centuries.⁹ Guthrie's account, published in 1996, is both a critical account of a unique institution and a case study with far-reaching implications. His intricate interweaving of historical analysis and perceptive commentary on the institution's financial situation during the 1990s offers a model for emulation. As Guthrie writes, "The most remarkable aspect of the story of the Society is the astonishing range of issues it illuminates. Many transcend the idiosyncrasies of the Society's situation; they are faced by managers and board members of all nonprofit institutions."¹⁰ The singularity of his text within archival history denotes both its importance and the relative lack of other accounts to accompany it on the shelf. It provides an important model for emulation.

Archives and Cultural Politics

As the work of Cox and Guthrie make clear, archivists must be willing to understand the historical development of the creation of archives and archival theory for what it tells us about the cultural role of archival institutions as much as for what it suggests about the record professional's current image. In the past two decades, there has been a growing amount of interest in the archive as a site for the production of knowledge, and the often highly fraught political implications of such power. That is, the archive is increasingly studied as much as a culturally, historically contingent idea about the role of the document in society as the physical space in which those documents are contained. Originating largely from academic history and cultural studies departments and influenced heavily by postmodern theory--in particular the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida--scholars have turned their attention to the collecting and retention principles and strategies of archives and the way such practices frame interpretation of records.¹¹ Through their collections and ongoing collecting, access, and display policies, archives provide the building blocks for regional, national, ethnic, and personal narratives. In this light, the repository—and by association, the archivist—takes on a newfound, striking power. What audience does the archive actually serve? Whose beliefs does it reflect and assert?

Archivists have only recently attempted to trace the implications of such questions for their own field, turning to examine the various ideological values instilled in both theory and everyday practice. In 2002, two issues of *Archival Science* co-edited by Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook tackled the theme of “archives, records, and power.”¹² In their introduction, Schwartz and Cook addressed assumptions about the

archivist's traditional professional values—neutrality, objectivity, and impartiality—and the frequently very different, “messy” reality of acquisition, retention, and interpretation.

Although historians rarely cite professional archival literature,

various postmodern reflections in the past two decades have made it manifestly clear that archives—as institutions—wield power over the administrative, legal, and fiscal accountability of governments, corporations, and individuals, and engage in powerful public policy debates around the right to know, freedom of information, protection of privacy, copyright, and intellectual property, and protocols for electronic commerce. ..And ultimately, in the pursuit of their professional responsibilities, archivists—as keepers of archives—wield power over those very records central to memory and identity formation through active management of records...¹³

As agents of the archive, archivists are necessarily implicated in its navigation of competing ideologies; the documents of the past are always already inflected by and reflective of the needs, beliefs, and desires of the present.

Schwartz and Cook are no strangers to such propositions. Their work has actively incorporated investigations into the ideologically-charged purposes to which supposedly “neutral” archival documents such as photographs are put.¹⁴ The essays appearing in the two issues follow the general tone of their argument, offering case studies that examine the various ways in which documents, archives, and archivists have participated—whether knowingly or not—in contested social interactions and memory formation.

Scholarship in this area has grown in the five years since the publication of the two issues of *Archival Science*, denoting its importance to archivists and historians alike. It bears noting that Schwartz and Cook's publication coincided with the appearance of *Archives and the Public Good*, a collection of essays edited by Richard Cox and David Wallace.¹⁵ Although less overtly influenced by cotemporary developments in the field of history and cultural studies, the authors share their desire to explore the political

dimensions of record-keeping. Each of the fourteen essays in the collection address, through a study of a particular institution or event, the issue of archival “accountability” in its various and interrelated legal and cultural senses. Although disparate in their subjects, each case study offers a similar analysis “of how records and documents help compel, shape, distort, and recover social interactions, and all, to some degree, comment on...the study of social, public, or collective memory”—in short, the authority and sanctioning power with which a society invests its repositories.¹⁶ The book joins a growing list of scholarship devoted to the intersection of the archive, its documents and practices, with issues of gender, sexuality, class, nationalism, and colonialism.¹⁷

NOTES

² Mitchell B. Garrett, “The Preservation of Alabama History,” *The North Carolina Review* 5 (January 1928) : 3-19.

³ Robert Simpson, “The Origin of the Alabama Department of Archives and History,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 34 (Summer 1972): 154-170.

⁴ Richard Cox, et al., *Assessing Alabama’s Archives* (Montgomery: Alabama Department of Archives and History, 1985). See also Cox, “Alabama’s Archival Heritage,” *The Alabama Review* 40 (October 1987) : 284-307.

⁵ Alden Monroe, “Thomas Owen and the Founding of the Alabama Department of Archives and History,” *Provenance* 21 (2003) : 22-35; Idem., “The Making of An Agency: The Alabama Department of Archives and History,” unpublished manuscript.

⁶ Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). Posner’s work was shortly followed by two other works tracing the first systematic collecting and archival practices in the United States: Clifford L. Lord, ed. *Keepers of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), a survey of early and leading figures in the field of historical preservation; and H.G. Jones, *For History’s Sake: The Preservation and Publication of North Carolina History 1663-1903* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966). More recent case studies include Dennis East, “The Ohio Historical Society and Establishment of the State’s Archives: A Tale of Angst and Apathy,” *American Archivist* 55 (Fall 1992): 562-577; Patricia Galloway, “Archives, Power, and History: Dunbar Rowland and the Beginning of the State Archives of Mississippi (1902-1936),” *The American Archivist* 69 (Spring/Summer 2006) : 79-116.

⁷ See Richard Cox, "The Failure or Future of American Archival History," *Libraries and Culture* 35 (Winter 2000): 141-154. Cox's other relevant writings on archival history include "On the Value of Archival History in the United States," *Libraries and Culture* 23 (Spring 1988): 135-151; Idem., *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1990); Idem., *Closing an Era: Historical Perspectives on Modern Archives and Their Management* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000)

⁸ Cox, Richard, et al., *Assessing Alabama's Archives*. Montgomery: Alabama Department of Archives and History, 1985.

⁹ Kevin M. Guthrie, *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit's Long Struggle for Survival* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

¹¹ See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996); Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural Memory* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Francis X. Blouin Jr, and William G. Rosenberg, eds., *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006)

¹² Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* no. 2 (2002): 1-19. For a more brief, but likeminded, account of archives, see Randall C. Jimerson, "Embracing the Power of Archives," *The American Archivist* vol. 69 (Summer 2006): 19-32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ For examples of their work, see Joan M. Schwartz, "'Records of Simple Truth and Precision': Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control," *Archivaria* no. 50 (Fall 2000): 1-40; Terry Cook, ed. *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections of Hugh A. Taylor* (Lanham, Md.: Society of American Archivists and Association of Canadian Archivists in association with Scarecrow Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Richard J. Cox and David A. Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society* (Westport, Conn.: Quorum Books, 2002).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ See, for example, the essays collected in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005); Elisabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *The American Archivist* vol. 63 (Spring/Summer 2005): 126-151; Joan M. Schwartz, "'Having New Eyes': Spaces of Archives, Landscapes of Power," *Archivaria* vol. 61 (2006): 1-25; Sarah Tyacke, "Archives in a Wider World: The Culture and Politics of Archives," *Archivaria* vol. 52 (2003): 1-25..

The Necessity of Archival History

The challenge of preserving the diverse array of digital objects produced by contemporary society has forced archivists to rethink many of the historically fundamental principles of their discipline. Indeed, much in the current state of archivy would seem alien to archivists a century ago, as the discipline first began to emerge in the United States. Confronting the contingencies of the electronic record has in some cases entailed a complete reevaluation of the place of provenance in archival science and the development of altogether new methods of appraisal, selection, and retention. It has also meant employing technologies whose purposes and effects existed outside of the domain of archival practice as little as a decade prior. This paper, however, argues that it is critical to understand the larger fabric of archival history, of which recent developments are but one unfolding moment.

To speak in terms of “moments” in archival history is necessarily to think in a language of periodization that remains strikingly unfashionable in a field devoted to the preservation of the historical record. Although a growing number of archivists have taken it upon themselves to historicize the intellectual underpinnings of the profession and to examine the lineage of the day-to-day decisions of appraisal, retention, and disposal, the idea of ‘doing’ archival history from within the archive itself, of plumbing the connection existing between the history of records and record management and daily work, has largely proven hard to swallow. The issue of validity has proven a real

obstacle: does the pursuit of archival history add measurable, self-reflexive value to the ongoing experience of the contemporary archivist?

The most sustained attempt to answer such questions has come from Richard Cox, a practicing archivist whose collective writings on the subject have virtually charted the course for likeminded endeavors over the past three decades. Following the example first set by Ernst Posner in the 1960s, Cox has again and again called attention to the need for archivists to reconstruct record of their own past.¹⁸ He posed its attraction thus:

Archival history has two general values. Its first benefit is to the archival community itself. Research into the history of the care of the documentary heritage can assist archivists in understanding themselves and their institutions, provide an outlet for research and writing, and satisfy a normal and healthy interest in their past. Archival history can also be a means to answer a number of fundamental questions about the nature of recorded information, how that information actually relates to decision making and policy formulation, and, finally, how historical records are really perceived by society, past and present. The implications of this, of course, extend far beyond the archival profession.¹⁹

One thing Cox's brief summation only alludes to is the *practical* bearing archival history might hold on understanding the construction of archives, their infrastructure and workaday procedures. The attention recently devoted to developing standards to evaluate digital preservation strategies from the user's perspective, for example, has exposed many gaps in knowledge about systems for the emulation or migration of digital objects. Yet while the technological dimensions of the problem are specific to its time and place, maintaining the *legibility* of the record across generations is a difficulty archivists have faced for three centuries or more.²⁰

One might reasonably argue, of course, that the archive of a century ago—or even a decade ago—is not the archive of today. The gap between the concerns of the archivist working at the turn of the twentieth century and those of the practitioner at the beginning

of this one are surely vast, this logic would claim, thereby rendering productive comparison between them difficult, if not impossible. Although in one sense archiving is certainly a continuing activity whose institutional imperatives exhibit little change, alterations occur in society that substantially affect the organization of the archive and access to records. One case comes immediately to mind: the notorious USA Patriot Act, established on October 26, 2001, the passing of which led to a controversial reclassification of multiple National Archives documents that had, prior to the act's signing by President George W. Bush, existed entirely in the public domain.²¹

Yet there is at least one important reason for 'doing' archival history to illuminate the present conditions of the field, one that speaks directly to the American archivist's current "crisis" in professional identity. As Luke Gilliland-Swetland has made clear, the archival community in this country was from the start driven into two distinct methodological camps. The archivist's relationship to the business of writing history was precisely what separated them.²²

The Place of Historical Scholarship in the American Archival Tradition

Briefly put, there was, on the one hand, the paradigm of administrative record-keeping drawn from the public archives tradition of France, founded on that country's concept of the *fonds*. This model was advocated in the United States by the likes of Waldo G. Leland, Dunbar Rowland, and Margaret Cross Norton; like them, other early twentieth century supporters believed that the concept of provenance provided a distinctly objective means for description founded on systematic principles of arrangement. In contrast to the subjective classification schemes based upon subject

content used by librarians and frequently borrowed by archivists, practitioners of the public archives tradition could claim a corpus of provenance-based theory and practice unique to their discipline. Consequently, they viewed their role as administrator-custodians of the documents they preserved.

On the other hand, this discourse was opposed by an indigenous manuscripts tradition dating back some two hundred years, a tradition shaped by the principles of private antiquarian collectors such as Peter Force and Jared Sparks. Within this conception of the profession, practitioners claimed affiliation with a broad community of humanities scholars. As a result, these archivists viewed themselves as “historian-interpreters” of the documents they preserved, their profession guided equally by the movements and realms of inquiry of academic history as by collecting and appraising proper.²³ As much as they defined themselves as “keepers of the past,” they also embraced the agency that came with creating and facilitating historical narratives.²⁴

Early archivists in the United States found themselves operating on one of two fundamentally different discursive fields. As Gilliland Swetland effectively demonstrates, it was the logic of the historical manuscripts tradition which held sway, informing the collective organization and everyday decisions of three generations of archivists.

There are other, less apparent, reasons for the reticence with which contemporary archivists have faced their own professional history, however. Postmodernism is one of them. Insofar as any defining characteristic may be applied, postmodernist thought has above all entailed a disruption of the forms of representation of which the historical document is a vital part. Gone is the unquestioned truth, the *givenness*, of such notions

such as objectivity and the “natural order of things.” In their place is a desire to uncover precisely the *constructed* nature of such categories of knowledge and arrangement, and by doing so locate their role in the larger circuitry of memory and identity formation.

As a result, scholars are increasingly aware of the ways in which past events are invested with specific meanings in the present. The ramifications of this for the archive should be fairly obvious. In a growing body of studies—originating almost entirely from *outside* the field of archivy—attention has been brought to bear on the collection, display, and even disposal of documents by repositories. Where previously historians plumbed the archive for historical evidence made manifest in and through the record, they now study with equal intensity the layers of selection and exclusion it secretes. They are intent to analyze, that is, the mechanisms of power through which the “official” record—whether of the state, the corporate body, or the individual—is devised and maintained within the repository.²⁵ As Terry Cook has written, “The archive is now seen increasingly as the site where social memory has been, and continues to be, constructed—usually in support, consciously or not, of the narratives of the powerful.”²⁶

What potentially emerges from this new found clarity of vision, however, is a dangerous sort of leveling: even as the complexity of the archive is comprehended anew, making the cultural role it plays more potent (or at least much more visible), so too in the same process do postmodernists view the authority which society has attributed to it—and by extension the archivist—as suspect, merely one more instance of ideology, thereby weakening that authority in the process.

There is, unsurprisingly, resistance on the part of archivists to this conception of the archive. To some degree, the ideological vulnerability of repositories will come as no

surprise to those working in the field. To the extent that their continuing existence is inevitably founded upon the act of legitimating that cultural or political body able to financially support its costly and long-term activities, archives are always caught in a web of complex motivations for collecting and retaining specific types of documents. Yet by their own admission archivists have been slow to participate in, let alone complicate, the dialogue about their profession presently emerging around them.²⁷

There is danger in this silence. Surveying recent literature produced by disciplines ranging from history to political science to postcolonial studies, it quickly becomes apparent that most scholars have little interest in distinguishing between the *archival* decisions made by professionals on a daily basis and the *historical* documents which they impact. Even more importantly, perhaps, they seem to recognize few distinctions between the cultural work performed by archives and other cultural institutions such as museums and libraries.²⁸

For all their frequent ignorance of the practical matters taking place within it, however, these studies do foreground—even if with the ultimate aim of dismantling—the ideological practices, institutions, and political relationships which the archive, by its very existence, serves to naturalize. As an archivist, the overarching purview of the reach and public perception of the archive that these explorations provide can be difficult, even impossible, to obtain while busily engaged in the trenches. There is even less time to take stock of the personal, professional, and cultural contexts which mediate decisions for preservation of the historical record.

Archival history, this paper argues, offers one fundamental way to find purchase on these pressing issues, precisely by examining how they have been addressed in the

past. How have previous archivists come to terms with transformations exerted upon their professional identity? How have they themselves affected such change? What record-keeping systems and bodies of theory have they developed in their confrontation with records? How have the collections and motivations of repositories been shaped by external technological, political, and financial constraints? What past experiences have bearing on the present? For all their attention to the dry, dusty facts of institutional history, these questions seem even more fundamental to the task of comprehending—even anticipating—cycles of change within archival science than grasping the latest digital formats or information technology.²⁹

To answer them, a history of the profession—its leading practitioners, their ideas and the principal debates about theoretical and practical issues—is needed. A more thorough awareness of how political ambitions and motivations have driven the missions of archives is needed. Extensive knowledge of how the concept and definition of the “record” has shifted and changed over time and space is needed. And a comprehensive examination of the archives’ relationship to the population it serves in a given time and place is needed. Answering these questions itself involves a reevaluation of how most archivists view themselves. As Tom Nesmith put it over a decade ago,

What should we offer in return for the unique privilege of caring for records? To acquire and preserve them, yes, of course; to help others employ them, indeed. But at the same time can we not also begin to provide insights into the evolution of society through the study of communication? Why are records like they are? What occurs when a records is created, selected for preservation in archives, and used there in research? How do these actions affect and reflect perceptions of reality?³⁰

These, at any rate, are some of the questions this paper seeks to examine. In what follows I focus on a single, critical moment in the origins of American archival science: the founding of the first state archive, the Alabama Department of Archives and History,

in Montgomery, Alabama. First, I explore the activities and practices of Thomas Owen, the ADAH's first director, in the first several years of the institution. Particular attention is paid to Owen's collecting policies--as expressed in its ideal form in the pages of the Archives' annual bulletins, and in the reality of what actually wound up in its collection. The next section places the institution within the wider cultural context of post-reconstruction Alabama. Here I examine, through analysis of the legislation surrounding its establishment, the state's complicated political motivations in forming the ADAH. I then trace Owen's own involvement in the writing of historical texts derived from the records he obtained for the Archives, analyzing his production of scholarly works and their relationship to his conception of the Archives' institutional mission.

As I will show, Alabama's state archives proved a valuable model for emulation, a fact with great, if still unrecognized, significance for the course of twentieth-century American archivy. The singular qualities of the ADAH notwithstanding, my study of its director and first years of operation might itself be viewed either as a case study or a critical investigation of a unique institution. I would argue that it offers both. One underlying assumption of this paper is that in documenting the life of a specific institution, it will uncover a discovery or theoretical insight about American archival history in general.

NOTES

¹⁸ Richard Cox, "The Failure or Future of American Archival History," *Libraries and Culture* vol. 35 (Winter 2000): 141-154. See also, Cox, *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Richard Cox, "On the Value of Archival History in the United States," *Libraries and Culture* vol. 23 (Spring 1988), p. 137.

²⁰ See, for example, M.T. Clanchy's examination of medieval recordkeeping practices in his *From Memory to Written Record* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

²¹ See the Department of Justice's "The USA Patriot Act: Preserving Life and Liberty," available at <http://www.lifeandliberty.gov/highlights.htm>. Last accessed: 24 March 2008.

²² Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Tradition in American Archival History," *American Archivist*, vol. 54 (Spring 1991): 160-175.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁴ This is the title given by historian Clifford Lord to this group of pioneering archivists, which included Jeremy Belknap, Thomas Owen, Robert Connor, and John Franklin Jameson. Clifford, *Keepers of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

²⁵ See, for example, Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), especially Burton's Introduction, pp. 1-24; Charles Villa-Vicencio, "On the Limitations of Academic History: The Quest for Truth Demands Both More and Less," in James and Van de Vijver, eds., *After the TRC*; Thomas Osborne, "The Ordinarity of the Archive," *History of Human Sciences* vol. 12, no. 2 (1999): 516-564.

²⁶ Cook, "Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," p. 27. As Cook also points out, this authority is an aspect of archives is in fact nothing new; it has always been an implicit but no less powerful force.

²⁷ Essays and papers by archivists analyzing the belated impact of postmodernism on archivists include Barbara L. Craig, Philip B. Eppard, and Heather MacNeil, "Exploring Perspectives and Themes for Histories of Records and Archives. The First International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA)," *Archivaria* vol. 60 (Fall 2005): 1-9; Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* vol. 51 (Spring 2001): 14-37; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* vol. 2, no. 1 (2002): 1-19; Margret Hedstrom, "Archives, Memory, and Interfaces with the Past," *Archival Science* vol. 2, no. 1(2002): 21-43; Elizabeth Kaplan, "We Are What we Collect, We Collect What we Are," *American Archivist* vol. 63 (Spring/Summer 2000): 126-151; Sarah Tyacke, "Archives in a Wider World: The Culture and Politics of Archives," *Archivaria* (Fall 2002): 1-25.

²⁸ On these and other limitations of recent historical approaches to archives, see Joan M. Schwartz, "'Having New Eyes': Spaces of Archives, Landscapes of Power," *Archivaria* vol. 61 (Spring 2006): 7-9.

²⁹ Jonathan Spence's 2004 interview with Judith Schiff, chief research archivist at Yale University Library, is a bold reminder that this is not the only period in archivy that the field has witnessed a revolution. She cites 1962, the year that the first volume of the National Union Catalog was published. See Spence, "A Life in the Archives," *Perspectives* vol. 42, no. 3 (March 2004): 6.

³⁰ Tom Nesmith, "Archives from the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship," in *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*, ed. Tom Nesmith (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1993), p. 181.

Thomas Owen and the Origins of the Alabama Department of Archives

The Alabama Department of Archives and History was created in 1901 by General Assembly Act No. 426, Section 526. The bill states the objectives of the Archives thus:

The care and custody of official archives, the collection of materials bearing upon the history of the State, and of the territory included therein, from the completion and publication of the State's official records and other historical materials, the diffusion of knowledge in reference to the history and resources of the State, the encouragement of historical work and research, and the performance of other acts and requirements as may be enjoined by law.³¹

This statement of purpose brought to conclusion two years of extensive inquiry into current local, statewide, and national archival activities by a governor-appointed Historical Commission. After recommending the creation of a state-funded repository, the commission's report separated the agency into seven divisions, reflecting the breadth of its mission: "administration; publication of bulletins and statistical registers; state and local archives; a library; an historical gallery; a museum; Alabama war records; the encouragement of historical work and research; and special activities, including the building of monuments."³² Unlike other states, which sporadically parceled budgetary funds and appropriations to their state historical societies for the archiving of government documents, the Department would be completely funded by the state and would serve as the primary repository for official state, county, and municipal records. To complete these diverse activities, the governor allotted the ADAH annual funds of \$2,500. The Archives opened its doors on February 27, 1901 in the Senate cloakroom of the state Capitol in Montgomery.³³

From its inception, The Alabama Department of Archives and History was conceived as the primary institution for the storage and access of historical records and materials pertaining to the state. It would collect objects, works of art, printed material and documents pertaining to the history of Alabama and of the South in general. Special attention was to be given to records pertaining to the Civil War and the participation of the state's citizens therein. The objective of this section is to trace the founding and first years of the Department, how it came to collect such a diverse array of materials, and how its first director, Thomas Owen, conceived its mission and organized its collection to assist the aims of the government.

Thomas Owens and the Origins of the ADAH

Any account of the origins of Alabama's archives must in large part be an account of the role played by Owen, the chairman of the Historical Commission, the author of the founding bill, and the Archives' first director. Owen served in the latter capacity from 1901 until his death in 1920. Since his definition of the mission of the ADAH dictated the content and logic of what it collected, the influence he had upon its public image was profound. Over the course of his work for the Historical Commission, he developed a highly specific, if sometimes haphazardly maintained, vision of that mission, one which cast the work of the department as both the preservation of historical knowledge—particularly that of the state—and its continuing production through a wide spectrum of publications and objects. Owen's varied duties as director, defined in the legislative bill discussed above, were a result of this conception. Yet they were more than a decade in the making. Although I will attend to the broader ideological implications of

the Archives' activities more closely in the following chapter, it is necessary to delve briefly into the years surrounding Act. No. 426 and Owen's involvement in it.

For Owen's path to the ADAH illuminates the course the institution would take in the coming years. His formative years were marked, on the one hand, by a deft navigation of Alabama's political system and, on the other, by a burgeoning interest in the current state of academic history. Bridging those pursuits was difficult and, at times, almost entirely unsuccessful in both financial and professional terms. Shortly after graduating and setting up a legal practice in Bessemer in 1887, he was elected justice of the peace, providing him with a small but valuable point of entry into the local political scene. By 1890 he had been elected chairman of the Democratic executive committee in Jefferson county; within two years he added the title of assistant county solicitor. Four years later he married Marie Bankhead, daughter of U.S. congressman John Bankhead.³⁴ The influence and visibility of the Bankhead family reached across the entire state, ensuring financial assistance for Owen's enterprises and an invaluable network of personal and professional links that would buttress the ADAH in the future.

Throughout this period, Owen collected materials related to his alma mater, the University of Alabama, an interest that gradually broadened to include materials pertaining to the history of the entire state. Although unwilling to entirely divorce himself from politics and the law, historical inquiry increasingly occupied his time. In an attempt to rejuvenate his professional status after the decline of his firm without relinquishing his burgeoning scholarly pursuits, Owen, with the clout of his new father-in-law behind him, secured a position in Washington, D.C. Only a few months after

getting married, he became chief clerk of the Division of the Post Office Inspection and Mail Depredations in the nation's capital.³⁵

The relocation accelerated his interest in state history and made possible another series of practical allegiances that would prove significant during and in the years after the establishment of the Department of Archives. Once employed in Washington, Owen was able to participate in the rich network of academic historians populating the region's universities and cultural institutions. He formed friendships with the director of the Library of Congress, Aisworth R. Spofford, as well as numerous academics. With historians Colyer Meriwether and Stephen Weeks he founded the Southern History Association in 1896. During this time he prepared two massive bibliographies on Alabama and Mississippi. With their publication by the American Historical Association, Owen became one of the leading historians of his state.

It was in Washington that Owen also became convinced of the need for a publicly funded archives program in Alabama. The difficulty of creating one from a distance soon became apparent, however. After failing to lobby for such an institution to state representatives from his post in Washington, he returned to Alabama, and his legal practice, in 1897.

Strength lay in numbers: he turned his attention to reviving the Alabama Historical Society, a loose affiliation of amateur and professional historians that had been founded in 1850 but had faded less than two decades later due to moribund interest. Enlisting membership from university professors at the University of Alabama and Auburn, clergyman, and lawyers with whom he had worked over the past decade, he used the Society as a spring board for pushing the creation of a public archives to the forefront

of the state's legislative agenda. As the association's secretary, Owen held the responsibility of disseminating news of its activities and extending membership to additional historians as needed.³⁶ In a move that now seems no less politically transparent than it likely did even then, Owen urged the Society to elect Governor Joseph Johnston as its president. State aid for its activities was, as a result, generous. Within two years, largely because of Owen's strategic outreach and publicity tactics, the society's members numbered more than 300, including multiple state officials and such figures as Spofford, historian Herbert Baxter Adams, Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt and J. Franklin Jameson, future director of the National Archives.

It was within the context of the Alabama Historical Society that the Historical Commission arose. Since returning to Alabama, Owen had displayed a keen sense of political acumen. After he succeeded in increasing membership and bringing public attention to the importance of the Society's work, he embarked upon a successful campaign for state aid of its causes. On January 6, 1899, the governor passed two bills, the first designating funds for the Society's publications (a series of *Transactions* containing essays on state history by amateur and professional historians), the second providing for the organization of the Commission and outlining its aims. Johnston also decided upon the composition of the commission's membership, though it is unclear to what extent Owen, in actuality, may have participated in or even wholly made this decision.

The Commission produced a 447-page volume that it submitted to the recently-appointed Governor William J. Samford. The mass of information included descriptions

of various collections throughout the state, but the most important part of the report, by far, was the recommendation for

the creation of a department of archives and history, charged with the custody of the States official archives, and the collection and creation of a state library, museum and art gallery, with particular reference to the history and antiquities of Alabama, to be under the supervision of a Director.³⁷

Samford conveyed the recommendation to the legislature. According to the bill, a board of trustees, consisting of one representative from each congressional district and the governor serving in ex-officio capacity, would serve terms ranging from two to six years (see Appendix A). As Alden Monroe has pointed out, the geographical diversity of the trustees guaranteed Owen a fair degree of statewide backing for the ADAH's activities.³⁸ He was able to use the relatively marginal location of the new Archives—the Senate cloakroom—as a means of maintaining its visibility in the eyes of the state legislative body.

All that remained was deciding who would oversee the management and direction of the repository. There had never been much doubt who this would be. When the board gathered in the governor's office on March 2, 1901, it unanimously agreed to bestow the authority of the directorship upon Owen. After calling upon nearly every relationship he had developed in the state and national political system over the past decade to champion the creation of a state repository, he now possessed full economic and creative power over the Alabama Department of Archives and History.³⁹

Practices and Procedures of the ADAH, 1901-1907

Inasmuch as Owen played a significant part in setting the formation and operation of the first state archives into motion, how he conceived the activities of the Archives

would seem as important to present day archivists as it did to his contemporaries. It was through the conception of its mission that he fashioned his own burgeoning identity as an archivist—a model that was to be either emulated or countered by others—and shaped the face of the ADAH for decades to come.⁴⁰

Like many of his contemporaries, Owen was well aware of the fact that the institutional identity of the state archives lacked codification. Indeed, turn-of the century record keepers were still keenly pressed to sort out what it was that different types of repositories *did*. Consider the following two texts. The first is an essay entitled “The Work of American Historical Societies,” by Henry E. Bourne, chairman of the American Historical Association. The second, written by Owen, bears the title “State Departments of Archives and History.” Both appeared in the 1904 *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*. Taken together these texts put forward a set of claims about the function and mission of repositories in the United States. What these claims amount to is a declaration of division that continues to mark the record-keeping landscape to this day.

The fault lines upon which that division unfolds are familiar enough: Historical societies exist on one side, state archives on the other. Here is Bourne, intricately outlining the scope of historical societies as found in their two basic forms, those maintained by private individuals, and those existing through the management or fiscal aid of the State:

The programme of the State and local historical societies are varied, but the work for which they provide may be analyzed as follows: The association of those actively engaged in historical investigation or who wish to exert an influence toward the promotion of historical studies; meetings of members to read papers or to listen to addresses; the collection of manuscripts, books, and historical relics, maintaining these collections as public libraries and museums; marking historic sites; publication of papers or of documents of historic interest; reprinting rare pamphlets. How many of these functions a society shall perform

depends often as much upon circumstances as upon the preference of its managers.⁴¹

The unspoken term in Bourne's statement is "decentralization," the source of the society's greatest strength as well as its sometimes crippling weakness. Decentralization allowed a society a striking degree of autonomy and diversity in what and how it collected, yet it often caused a perpetual search for sources of funding. Bourne put the number of societies in the United States between 400 and 500. These ranged from the American Antiquarian Society to the Society of the Colonial Dames, from the Southern History Association to the California society. Functions were equally diverse, stretching from family document repositories to the implementation and publication of genealogical surveys. These numbers were deceptive, however, since societies often opened for business and disappeared seemingly overnight.

Writing three years after the establishment of the ADAH, Owen closely follows Bourne's definition when setting out to characterize the state archive. He conceives it along complementary, yet subtly different, lines:

Before we can properly discuss agencies for the performance of duties [within the state archive] we must have a clear and definite conception of the duties themselves....These are declared to be the care and custody of official archives, the collection of materials bearing upon the history of the State and of the territory included therein from the earliest times, the completion and publication of the State's official records and other historical materials, the diffusion of knowledge in reference to the history and resources of the State, the encouragement of historical work and research, etc.

The enumeration, it must be observed, only purports to set forth the duties of the state archive, not the obligations of historical societies or individuals, which, while they may be identical in some respects, are nevertheless altogether distinct and separate....So far as I have been able to discover, no existing [historical] society, however useful its work and extensive its operations, undertakes or is in position to undertake the functions of the archivist.⁴²

Thus for both men the *work* carried out by the historical society at the turn of the century and that proposed for the state archive, regardless of their content, were not the same. There was the definitive matter of centralization and the regularity (or lack thereof) of state aid—state archives had it, historical societies did not, at least not with any regularity. Ultimately, these differences also played out in the material that each kept and maintained as well. The mandate for the creation of the ADAH designated it as an independent state agency, and it was charged with direct responsibility for the official archives of state government.

The date of Owen's essay bears pointing out. By 1904, several states had adopted the administrative structure, record-keeping systems, and organizational scheme of Alabama's Department of Archives in nearly identical terms. Mississippi had been the first; similar institutions were subsequently formed in Arkansas, South Carolina, and North Carolina.⁴³ Concomitant with these events, historical societies saw their role in the preservation of national and state documents diminished, mostly *because* their ranks had grown so swollen. Almost all societies expressed a desire to collect government documents and manuscripts—but also church and school records, town and country records, maps, family records, and so forth. Mixed motives, frequent competition for the same materials, and a general lack of systematic preservation policies further diluted the institutional power of historical societies in the eyes of the government at the turn of the century.⁴⁴

Owens perception the respective roles of the historical society and state archives—and by extension the archivist—had taken on impressive clarity as well. Only a year prior, Owen had addressed an AHA conference audience in New Orleans,

delivering a paper tellingly entitled “On the Problems of State and Local Historical Societies.”⁴⁵ Here he made clear the concrete necessity of a state-regulated repository. That he had been the most visible member of the Alabama Historical Society at the time made his message all the more pointed. His talk was the culmination of a week in which the new Archives had received a great amount of attention from archivists and historians. Before the annual conference had commenced, organizers had booked a train, leaving from New York that stopped in Montgomery to allow visitors to visit the ADAH before traveling to its destination in New Orleans. By the time he published “State Departments of Archives and History,” then, Owen held a significant degree of influence within the nascent sphere of professional archivy. The essay was intended to further the stature of the ADAH in the eyes of archivists and public alike.

Achieving the goals set forth in the original legislature—“the care and custody of official archives, the collection of materials bearing upon the history the State, and of the territory included therein”—on a daily basis was sometimes less clear, however.⁴⁶ Believing that “the collection of historical materials is our first duty,” he reported to the board of trustees on sources still in dire need of physical preservation, and warned of the ravenous collecting activities of regional societies and amateur historians.⁴⁷ Photographs of storage bins perilously overflowing with state records in the capitol and Owen’s assistants removing documents from the building’s basement attest to the horrible conditions of current recordkeeping (Figs. 1 and 2).

There remains strikingly little evidence, in the way of published statements, correspondence, or personal recollection, of how Owen set about the tasks of collecting, appraising, and retaining documents, except in what may be deduced from the periodic

subject inventories found in the Archives' administrative records. Ernst Posner, in his still unmatched survey of American state archives, has characterized American archivists at the turn of the century as strikingly independent in their methods, "rarely paying attention to any organizational arrangements [or appraisal methods] that their neighbors had made for the preservation of their archives." Some practitioners were driven by the need to store local and state documents; the practices of others were dictated by the less tangible forces of surrounding historical endeavors.⁴⁸

It is apparent, however, that of all his duties collecting was foremost on Owen's mind. Although primarily conceived to be the repository for the documents of state government, his plans for the Archives extended beyond that from the beginning. Even before the ADAH had opened, he had also sought to add private collections from throughout Alabama. He printed circulars that solicited the depositing of historical sources from members of the community. Between 1901 and 1905, the archive became the home of the original 1819 Alabama constitution, executive correspondences dating from 1835, files of governmental officials, legislative records, constitutional convention records, census returns, land records and maps, military registers, bonds, tax statements, and pension statements.⁴⁹ To this array Owen added duplicates of Southern newspapers donated by the Library of Congress, the private library of the historian J.L.M. Curry, totaling some 2,5000 pieces, and the papers and manuscripts of several notable Alabama politicians, writers, and cultural figures. He bought and bargained for copies of Alabama records and newspapers where original records could not be obtained. The trails of his correspondence sprawled across most of the country.

Taken together, these documents presented a sizable challenge. The situation of American archivy in 1901 was less bleak than it was merely formless, a fact more attributable to the relatively new existence of American records than to the lack of archival professionalization. Owen did not have the luxury of devising archival principles based on the studious analysis of old documents and their provenance, as was possible in Europe. Nor was he able to rely on a rich body of theoretical literature akin to the one that had recently developed around the so-called Dutch Manual of 1898 or that would develop decades later in the writings of Schellenberg, Jenkinson, and others. (It is possible, though unlikely, that he read the Dutch Manual in its 1910 French translation; even then, no mention of its influence upon his thinking has been uncovered.)⁵⁰ He began his professional activity before a growing crisis of public records that archivists as a whole were largely ill-equipped to confront. “As indicated, great differences of practice prevailed in the character of our archives in the past,” he wrote in the 1908 bulletin.

At the same time, it should not be overlooked that great differences prevail even now, some of our officers preserving very carefully their entire collection of papers and documents, while others systematically destroy them and keep just as few books and files as possible. Owing to these conditions it will probably be impossible to ever reach an ideal condition of arrangement of our archives, and yet in process of time we will be able to know every document and paper which has ever come into the possession of the state and which is now in existence.⁵¹

Nevertheless, he attempted to work his way toward an ideal condition by fixing on a rudimentary organizational system that could be employed across the Archives’ collection. In practical terms, this meant that most files were kept in glove file boxes; vertical files were hardly used—the Department received the first of roughly a dozen used in Montgomery. arrangement and classification involved a simple system of numbers he had derived from the Dewey system used in libraries:

The plan is a very simple one. All of the records on a given subject are brought together and arranged in volumes chronologically. These are then placed together as an entire group...after which they are given a consecutive series of numbers from the earliest value of the first series. In this way, as you can see, when a volume is out of place, it is simply restored to the shelves in accordance with the large number thereon. Again, the entire system is listed according to subject and to date, and opposite each one is placed the number.⁵²

The collection's files were divided into eight categories with numerous subdivisions, (see Appendix B). Despite its numerical arrangement and divisions and subdivisions in decimal multiples of ten units. Owen's schema made little serious effort to follow the meticulous conceptual hierarchies of Dewey's scheme. Instead, arrangement of documents was based on typology and genre: within the Historical Collections, for example, manuscripts were grouped with manuscripts, maps with maps, and so forth. Within these categories, materials were further arranged chronologically. At first there was little distinction between the files concerned with the Department administration itself, the historical collections assembled in connection with its work, and the personal correspondence and papers of the Director, though these were later separated.⁵³

In conceptual terms, then, Owens recordkeeping practices were ultimately driven by arrangement. He had little to say about appraisal and selection as we now understand the terms—indeed, his criteria for selection were often as all-encompassing as they were strategic. From the standpoint of his classification system, the aim of the Archives was less the orderly transfer of government, public, and corporate records in their original order— in many cases, that order had never existed in the first place—than in the simple act of preserving documents and highlighting their historical usefulness as clearly as possible. Owen believed that the composition of an archive, what records it retained, were ultimately determined by the public, not by archival administrators. As a result he

largely collected records in anticipation of their potential for historical research or other uses, in some sense shifting real decisions about appraisal and documentary significance—what Schellenberg would later call a record’s “informational value”—to the public, and specifically to the historian.

“Let the documents be assembled,” Owen wrote in the 1908 bulletin of the ADAH, “and the [historical] writing will take care of itself.”⁵⁴ Yet this process was more complicated than he would have had it. As I will address in the following section, he was in reality devoted to making decisions about those documents and artifacts worth “assembling” and, by extension, those that were not. To a striking degree, the Archives was an active participant in the creation, not simply reflection, of a particular historical narrative about Alabama and its ideological place within both the South and the nation as a whole. The fact that Owen was himself busily engaged in historical research and writing only complicated this process.

Nevertheless, his principle efforts were the creation and custodianship of an extensive historical agency. In hindsight, his success in doing so was nothing short of Herculean. Although he worked without a full-time staff, he accumulated historical records until, in 1907, the department ran out of collection space. After aggressively pursuing a position on a state commission for the renovation of the capitol building, Owen once again found himself in a position to make the ADAH a pressing legislative issue. The Department was given a portion of the proposed new south wing of the capitol as its permanent site of operation; the newly constructed space was to include a storage vault, gallery, and museum. The increased room was accompanied by a larger budget as well—Owen’s spending nearly tripled between 1901 and 1908, from \$2,500 to just under

\$6,000.⁵⁵ It was clear that the Archives had achieved a significant place in the public and political fabric of the state.

NOTES

³¹ “Act Establishing the Department,” *State of Alabama Department of Archives and History Bulletin* 1 (1901) 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 9.

³³ Regarding the details of the history of the ADAH, I have drawn from the following sources: Richard Cox, et al., *Assessing Alabama’s Archives* (Montgomery: Alabama Department of Archives and History, 1985); *Idem.*, “Alabama’s Archival Heritage,” *The Alabama Review* 40 (October 1987) : 284-307; Alden Monroe, “Thomas Owen and the Founding of the Alabama Department of Archives and History,” *Provenance* 21 (2003) : 22-35; *Idem.*, “The Making of An Agency: The Alabama Department of Archives and History,” unpublished manuscript; Mitchell B. Garrett, “The Preservation of Alabama History,” *The North Carolina Review* 5 (January 1928) : 3-19; Robert Simpson, “The Origin of the Alabama Department of Archives and History,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 34 (Summer 1972) : 154-170.

³⁴ Monroe, 2003, p. 23.

³⁵ Doster, 1965, 98.

³⁶ Garrett, 1928, p. 9; Simpson, 1972, pp.158-159. These tactics, discussed in the next section, included issuing circulars, a sort of forerunner of the modern press release, explaining the reorganization of the Society and the cultural benefits of its work to the press. In December, 1898, The Montgomery *Advertiser* would run an editorial, likely written by Owen, that explained (and implicitly endorsed) the objectives of the Historical Commission. See the Montgomery *Advertiser*, December 4, 1898, n.p.

³⁷ Thomas Owen, *Report of the Alabama History Commission to the Governor of Alabama, December 1, 1900i* (Montgomery: Alabama Historical Society, 1900), p. 14.

³⁸ Monroe, 2003, p. 31.

³⁹ To the extent that the AHS was the initial vehicle for Owen’s ambitions, which were as much political as archival in nature, it suffered from his devotion to the ADAH. At its annual meeting in 1901, the Society voted to turn its current holdings of historical materials over to the Department of Archives and History and to limit itself in the future to publication of papers. As it turned out, it would meet only three more times before dissolving.

⁴⁰ See Robert F. Simpson, “Leland to Connor: An Early Survey of American State Archives,” *American Archivist* vol. 36, no. 4 (October 1973): 518-522.

⁴¹ Henry E. Bourne, “The Work of American Historical Societies,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (1904): 118.

⁴² Thomas Own, “State Departments of Archives and History,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (1904): 238.

⁴³ Monroe, “Thomas Owen and the Founding of the Alabama Department of Archives and History,” 33.

⁴⁴ This general decline was not limited to Alabama. See David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: an Interpretation of the Development of Historical Societies in America, 1607-1884* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960) 161-180.

⁴⁵ Stephenson, *Southern History in the Making*, 214.

⁴⁶ Bulletin, p. 2

⁴⁷ Thomas Owen, ed. *Alabama Department of Archives and History Annual Report* (1905) n.p.

⁴⁸ Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964) p. 2. One can draw similar conclusions about the relative formlessness of collecting and appraisal efforts by studying the activities of contemporary historical societies. In his recent study of the New York Historical Society, Kevin Guthrie has asserted that the "remarkable growth" of the society around the turn of the century "took place without a clearly defined acquisitions policy; no policy had been written that superseded the original broad appeal to the public [first issued in 1857]. The Society basically accepted anything and everything it was given." See Guthrie, *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit's Long Struggle for Survival* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996) p. 12.

⁴⁹ Simpson, "Thomas Owen," 168.

⁵⁰ He may have seen a copy of the Manual owned by Dunbar Rowland, director of the Mississippi State Archives, who *possibly* acquired one while attending the International Congress of Archives in Brussels. See Patricia Galloway, "Archives, Power, and History: Dunbar Rowland and the Beginning of the State Archives of Mississippi (1902-1936), *American Archivist* vol. 69 (Spring/Summer 2006): 101.

⁵¹ Thomas Owen, *Bulletin of the Alabama Department of Archives*, no. 7, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Directors Files.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ In general, Owen's organizational scheme falls into the "non-archival"—that is to say, non-provenance-based—methods enumerated by Elio Lodolini: chronological, alphabetical, geographical, by decimal classification (subject), and by type or form of material. See Elio Lodolini, *Archivistica: principi e probemi* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1987), p. 97-105. Cited in Terry Eastwood, ed. *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Vancouver: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1992), p. 13.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Cox, "Alabama's Archival Heritage," 291.

⁵⁵ Thomas Owen to Governor A.D. Chandler of Georgia, July 3 1908, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Directors Files. See also Monroe, unpublished manuscript, p. 18.

History in the Making: Owen and the ADAH in Context

The challenge of historical scholarship after postmodernism is not to recover past events as they occurred—or how we think or wish they occurred—but to investigate the discursive forces that permitted their initial emergence and gave rise to their subsequent representation. It is rarely acknowledged by scholars, however, that the complex, often highly charged collecting activities of archives inevitably impact the stories they themselves tell. How is it that archives can play such a vital institutional role in society and yet appear to exist so completely outside of its politics?

Because the answer to that question changes from one period to the next, it is necessarily contingent and historically specific; the question itself speaks to the nature of such discursive representation. Certainly, archives tell stories, and archivists make that story-telling possible through a carefully tended history. Yet to what extent is an archive beholden to the society that produces it; to what extent does it mirror the values and beliefs of the society it attempts to represent through its records? What is the nature of the relationship between the archivist, as a member of a broader social community, and the record? These are the questions this section entertains. In the case of Owen and the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the tumultuous socio-cultural dynamics of the state attributed a complex legitimacy, if not a sense of urgency, to its activities at the turn of the century. It was an authority Owen was well-equipped, and well-prepared, to support.

History, Social Memory, and the Archivist

From the start, historical scholarship played a critical part in Owen's conception of mission of state archives and in his own self-image as a professional archivist. For Owen, the collecting and maintenance of records by the ADAH was meant to facilitate not only the bureaucratic functioning of the state but also, and perhaps more importantly, the writing of history. The institution was to serve as a government repository as well as a valuable site for the writing of history. Owen viewed himself, moreover, as an integral producer of such scholarship; it was part and parcel of his task as archivist: "Let the documents be assembled and the writing will take care of itself." In reality, the painstaking reconstruction of the past through archival documents was inextricably bound up in the present ideological struggles of the Alabama state government and in the broader image of the South at the turn of the century.

The work of the archivist and historian were, to Owen, not just complementary; they were inextricably bound. He saw himself as both or, rather, that an archivist *was* necessarily a historian. His own bibliography supports such an image. In 1897, nearly four years before the establishment of the Archives, he completed the comprehensive Bibliography of Alabama, an encyclopedia that first appeared in the *Annual Report of the American Historical Society* before being published as a separate volume. As editor of *The Transactions of the Alabama Historical Society*, he compiled and edited the essays and research findings of many leading southern and national historians. In 1921, a massive seven-volume narrative history of the state was published posthumously. The annual publication of *The State of Alabama Department of Archives and History Bulletin*

became a means to address and disseminate information about the growing body of documents and objects contained within the Archives. Such publications appeared in addition to the statistical registers and numerous bulletins he either wrote or commissioned.

Owen also actively participated in the communities of amateur and professional historians gaining momentum at the turn of the century. In 1904 he served on the American Historical Association's Historical Manuscripts Commission. It was in that year that he addressed the AHA at its annual conference in Chicago, arguing for the necessity of state archives. His paper also addressed the general requirements for a director of such institutions, "someone who is interested in historical matters and appreciates the value of documentary material, inasmuch as the average administrator officer is not likely to have much respect for documents that have no immediate and evident utility."⁵⁶

This statement deserves closer scrutiny: because Owen was the principal agent in the daily operations of the Archives—because in some sense he *was* the Archives—historical research was a central facet of the repository's mission. In his case, "respect for the documents" connoted a specific and contemporary view of the document's role in such scholarly endeavors.

Patricia Galloway has recently noted the confluence of the emergence of state archives in the South with the rise of a new generation of American historians basing their research on the sustained review of primary sources rather than the record of previous scholarship. While earlier historians had respected documentary evidence, emerging scholars such as Albert Bushnell Hart and Andrew White adopted a "scientific"

methodology, originating in Germany and subsequently advocated by educational reformers in American universities, which emphasized the meticulous and systematic examination of a wide range of primary source material. Collecting, arranging, and retaining such materials in a limited number of places for the service of the historian would naturally be vital. As a result, professional historians directly participated in the institutionalization of archival repositories in the United States beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. “The emergence of a history profession as a field of university specialization,” Galloway writes, “required the creation of archives, since it required...the existence of original documents and institutions to preserve and provide access to them.”⁵⁷ No doubt in economic as well as academic terms, their careers were aided by the creation of archives.⁵⁸

The drive toward an archive-based, “scientific” writing of history found particularly strong impetus in the South, thanks in no small part to the influence of Herbert Baxter Adams, professor of history at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Believing that the historical materials of the colonies (and thus the examination of their histories) had reached near exhaustion, he urged his students to turn their inquiries elsewhere. Through his emphasis on archival research and the use of primary sources, Adams’s students, many of whom were originally from the South, returned to teach in colleges across the region, where they campaigned for the collection of primary documents and started historical publications to serve as vehicles for their own and their students’ work.⁵⁹ Owen had good reason to support the spread of Adams’ brand of public history. Although he was in some sense not a formal

historian—he had failed to acquire an academic position in the history department of the University of Alabama—the archivist clearly saw himself as one.

Like his colleagues, Adams stressed the need for objective reporting of the past through the “laboratory” environment of the academic seminar and, more importantly, field work in repositories. To be scientific was to be objective. To be objective was to critically analyze authentic documents and then to reconstruct without judgment events and facts of history in the same way that doctors study the human body or scientists studied the natural world. Once brought to light and observed, the facts, would speak for themselves.

By now the danger of such thinking has become apparent, sometimes painfully so. No facts speak for themselves; they are, instead, selected (or excluded), mediated by those seeking to re-create and, by doing so, recover, the past. Recent work in archival history has only begun to supplant the discipline’s positivist foundation at the turn of the century with a forceful account of the networks of power relationships and external commitments guiding archival appraisal and retention (or, conversely, disposition).⁶⁰ It is increasingly clear that, like the records they hold, archives have always been heavily invested in the representational politics of creating historical narratives.

Owen’s professional self-image was tied to an emerging definition of the archivist that was bound to and constructed by the period in which he worked; as this image changed over the course of the twentieth century, the archivist’s relationship to the production of historical scholarship also changed, largely by forcing the issue to the margins of the profession.⁶¹ Just as his idea of the duties of the archivist were bound to a specific cultural discourse, Owen’s belief in what constituted an appropriate form of

intellectual work, if not his definition of the very records upon which it depended, bears the mark of scientific history.

This system of knowledge guided what Owen collected and what he wrote about, but they also intersected with a constellation of social forces exerting their own pressures upon the shape and form of the ADAH in its first years. As a state-funded institution, the Archives reflected the ambitions and limitations of the Alabama government.

The ADAH appeared at a tumultuous point in the history of the state. Alabama still struggled with the massive social and economic transformations effected by Reconstruction three decades earlier. For three decades its Democratic party had been overwhelmingly successful in its strategy of uniting whites across class lines. Although it had received occasional challenges from agrarian and political groups advocating a radical union of economically-aligned blacks and whites, such efforts failed. In 1894, the votes of African-Americans had been manipulated to ensure a Democratic victory in the state election. In 1901—the same year, to repeat, the Archives were established—the recently empowered, politically conservative Democratic majority produced a new state constitution eradicating many of the most progressive strands of Reconstruction policy. The document reinforced segregation per force and placed a cap on both state and local property taxes, restricted suffrage, and generally countered rising Populist calls for government and land reform. Although the abolition of slavery was now coming upon its fourth decade, racial tension pressed upon nearly all facets of social and economic production in the South.⁶² Amidst the complex maneuvers of the state's political elites within this framework, the ADAH opened its doors.

The enthusiasm the legislature displayed in 1900 for the Historical Commission's final report—a report that called for the existence of a state-sanctioned and funded repository—may be read as a manifestation of its own political ambitions. Coupled with its control of other state agencies, the white elites of the politically dominant Democratic Party could use the ADAH to confirm the validity of their power and guarantee that narratives of the recent past produced from its holdings would accord with their own vision. They were its greatest stakeholders.

In this Alabama was, of course, hardly alone. As historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage has written of the period, “At its most fundamental level, the project of public history in the early twentieth century South was the archiving of white civilization. Evidently no thought was given to preserving, displaying, or analyzing the history of the region's African American citizenry.”⁶³ Race and class lay at the heart of the matter; untangling the ADAH from their strands is a difficult, if not impossible, project.

A former lawyer in Washington D.C., Owen was no doubt aware of the ideological purposes to which a government agency could be put, not to mention the social stratum it would most likely serve.⁶⁴ He was a member of the Democratic party and had used his own professional and social status to secure his position as director.⁶⁵ In turn, he saw the mission of the ADAH as providing the greatest access to documents to those most qualified to use them. “Again,” he wrote in the closing pages of the history commission's report,

consider [the Archives'] practical value to State, County, and Municipal officials, legislators, politicians, lawyers, and all classes of professional and businessmen, who are in constant need of information now nowhere in reach...It would not only increase our sense of local importance and State pride, but would also engender a higher degree of respect on the part of sister commonwealths.”⁶⁶

As this statement alludes, he was also certainly aware of the beleaguered status of the state upon the field of national public opinion more than three decades after the Civil War. In fact, a significant portion of energy was allotted to the collection of materials related to Confederate soldiers in Alabama and the history of the war in general, as demarcated by the founding charter. Upon its creation the Department was charged specifically with “the duty of making special effort to collect data in reference to the soldiers of Alabama in the War Between the States.”⁶⁷ As Owen notes in the commission’s report, “It was felt that next to the current business of the Department, the compilation, for publication, of the record of Alabama troops was of the very first importance. In the performance of this duty, the Director has labored diligently.” His labors culminated in the publishing of an exhaustive roster of native troops, a history of the First Regiment Alabama Volunteer Infantry, and the collection of hundreds of war-related objects such as weapons and flags.⁶⁸ Letters to state citizens make plaintive calls for confederate artifacts and southern war memorabilia.⁶⁹

Owen’s writings and those of the “scientific” historians he enlisted were deeply enmeshed in the ideological recovery of the state’s role and that of the South in general, in the events surrounding the Civil War. The adoption and adaptation of Adams’ model of rigorous, objective archival research would have lent further legitimacy to the Archives’ contents and their contextualization in its institutional production of knowledge. As a research center under his charge, it reflected his own cultural and political identifications to no small degree. As Owen writes in a 1908 bulletin, the Archives became a destination for more than one scholar of the war:

Mr. John Reed has for some months been engaged in the preparation of an elaborate paper, in which he explodes very effectively the charges made against

the South that the secession movement and secession were largely prompted by the desire of the Southern people for the extension and reopening of the slave trade. In the preparation of this paper the books of this Department have been the basis for Mr. Reeds enterprises.⁷⁰

Owen's duties as director of the Archives imparted an additional cultural authority that exceeded the physical boundaries of the repository. In a section labeled "Patriotic Organizations" found in the same report to the board of trustees, the archivist discussed his various roles within the broad "cause" of remembering and preserving the state's history. It is a lengthy passage, but one that bears quoting in full:

The usual assistance has been rendered to the United Confederate veterans, and to the United Sons of Confederate Veterans. As Historian General of the latter I have done many things of a helpful nature to the cause of history, not only in Alabama but throughout the South. My report delivered at the reunion in Birmingham, AL, during June of the current year was well received, and when printed will be widely distributed.

The several confederate organizations in the State of Alabama during this year have striven to secure as general a distribution of likeness of President Jefferson Davis in the schools as possible. As is known this is the centennial year of the birth of President. Davis. The movement looking to the placing of his portrait in the schools was directly responsible to the Confederate Southern ladies Memorial Association. In Montgomery the eleven patriotic organizations of the city, consisting of the two camps of Veterans, the Ladies Memorial Association, four chapters of the Daughters of the Confederacy, the camp of the USCV and the two chapters of the Children of the Confederacy united in these memorial exercises. I had the honor to be chairman of the general committee and representative of all of these organizations.⁷¹

Would it be too much to assume that the creation of the ADAH was motivated by the desire to preserve records important to the people who promoted its foundation and continued existence, a class of citizens of which Owen was not only a member but also a public spokesman and advocate? At the very least it might explain the near complete absence of collections representative of the state's black citizens, or the total lack of presence of African-American scholarship connected to the repository.

That Owen served an important role in memorializing events in the state's recent past should come as no surprise. From the outset, the Alabama Department of Archives and History was intended to be a multifaceted cultural institution. The 1901 Historical Commission had urged the new agency to operate "a state library, museum, and art gallery, with particular reference to the history and antiquities of Alabama.' Within a decade of its opening it fulfilled these objectives.

Perhaps more importantly, however, it assumed responsibility for "marking historic sites."⁷² Strikingly, the Archives was itself cast as a metaphorical monument to the Confederacy and its soldiers even before it had been officially founded. Governor Thomas G. Jones publicly announced the Commission's findings before an audience gathered for the unveiling of a monument to the Confederacy in front of the Capitol. He voiced the repository's importance in these terms, appealing in purple prose to the memories of his audience:

Where may an Alabamian find a roll of the men who made history and yet left no name on its pages? Where can he find the names of the great throng who died, with no rank to attract the eyes of the country, and went down to death unheeded save by the firm beating of their own dauntless hearts? Can he find their names among the archives of the State for which they gave their lives? They are not there. In historic publications of her heroic sons? She has written none. Will he find them on the graves of the dead? Some have no headstones, and many are marked "unknown."⁷³

If the ADAH was to serve as a sort of monument to the "great throng" of fallen southern soldiers, it would also mark the landscape of the state in a more literal fashion. Arranging and facilitating the construction of state and historical monuments dedicated to an invariably romanticized Lost Cause was a responsibility Owen assumed with characteristic gusto.

For unknown reasons no monuments or markers were ever actually constructed under the auspices of the ADAH. Nevertheless, it bears dwelling on the implications of its potential ability to do so. Multiple scholars have addressed the complex symbolic power associated with publicly commissioned monuments. At their core resides an expression of collective memory and, as such, an assertion of collective ideology. The images of the past such monuments present are always already simplified in the service of bolstering those commemorated, rendered complete and final at the exclusion of other groups and social narratives. As Cynthia Mills has noted, monuments dedicated to the Civil War often ignored the crux of the war—slavery, racism, and the social identity of the African American—in favor of representations of reconciliation, brotherhood, and the sacrifice of (inevitably white, male) soldiers.⁷⁴ As much as it pointed to the past, the postbellum monument and memorial also served the more complex purpose of making sense of the present. Paul Schakel has called this function the “struggle to remember and the cause to forget.”⁷⁵

Stated in these terms, erecting monuments to the past might seem the natural responsibility of archives. And once again, Owen found a particular form of rationale in the discursive authority of scientific history. In “The Historical Opportunity in America,” an essay published in *The American Historical Review* in 1898, historian Albert Bushnell Hart urged the country to preserve its historical buildings and erect monuments on important sites and for significant national events. Lamenting the country’s lack of awareness of its own history, he asks:

Who is to do this work of identification, of marking sites, of providing the necessary monuments, of preparing photographs and slides? In many places the state or local government will take up the task if properly inspired; and indeed most municipalities are pleased to find that they have spots worth marking. In

other cases the work must be done by private societies, whose sole function shall be historical.⁷⁶

One could also argue, however, that the creation of monuments runs counter to the aims of the archive as they have been traditionally defined. The social appropriation of the past is a complicated operation. By drawing attention to the public past it points, on the one hand, to the necessity and essential purpose of the public archive. On the other hand, the images of the past that monuments often forge—static, final, closed to further shades or altogether different forms of meaning, contained to the surface of the monument itself—operate in a fashion antithetical to the deep layers of archival collections. The commemorative monument frequently invokes nostalgia, a powerful emotive appeal nonetheless viewed with growing suspicion in contemporary society. By idealizing the past, nostalgia forecloses the possibility of the reanalysis of historical events offered by the archive. Monuments make a geographically or temporally distant event immediate to the public, but frequently at the cost of contextual awareness.

At any rate, substantial funds were allotted to the interpretation of the state's history—through property and voting records to Civil War dossiers, civic deeds, and noble Confederate statues—and its diffusion through the agency's various cultural enterprises. Even the most seemingly benign publications of the ADAH, such as its statistical registers and commission reports, are features of state authority. Both were products of the state's investment in evidence and accountability. Statistical registers counted, arranged, and assessed citizens.⁷⁷ The state extended the pedagogical and public outreach functions of the Archives stretched as needed. In 1907, the ADAH acquired funding for programs to support the creation of public and school libraries across Alabama.⁷⁸ An assistant, Laura Greene, was hired to “lecture and meet with faculties and

students,” across Alabama, “at each place urging the importance and value of library work, the use of books, trained librarianship, and courses in library instruction.”⁷⁹ The following year, the museum was rehung, its collection expanding to include a wide range of state-related artworks, relics, artifacts, and popular and industrial objects.

It should be increasingly clear that Owen was intent on creating an archival institution whose broadly conceived mission would embrace every portion of the state’s history that he—and to a large degree the racial and class group to which he belonged—adhered and also helped to shape. The ADAH, moreover, was meant to be most fully accessible to those he considered most capable of benefiting from access to its collection. Yet pointing to Owen’s deft navigation of complex local and national socio-political networks; pointing to his deep engagement with dominant modes of historical interpretation and scholarly production; pointing to his access to forms of cultural representation and collective identity through archival practice—it becomes obvious that his identity as a professional archivist was a complex one. Although Owen’s period may seem distant and different from ours, highlighting the multifarious purposes to which the ADAH—activities that went beyond the keeping of state government records—were put during his tenure as director, however, is not meant as a condemnation of the institution or its figures. It is instead intended to reveal the potent and sometimes contradictory status of the archive (and archivist) in modern society.

Owen’s impact on the discipline’s burgeoning professional identity was great, a fact that has unfortunately dimmed with the passing of time. Although ostensibly operating on the margins of state government, bringing into custody sometimes fragmentary and disorganized records no longer an essential part of its operation, he

never viewed the Department of Archives as simply a means to an end. Despite, or perhaps because of that marginalization, the ADAH exerted a vital, diverse influence upon the preservation of collective memory in Alabama during the first years of his directorship. But to understand his efforts one must understand the institutions they served. While dynamically defining and then pursuing what collections the Department would obtain (and what, therefore, it would fail to obtain), Owen clothed his activities in the dominant guise of scholarly and archival neutrality. By taking his practice outside of its cloistered institutional location and placing it within the cultural at large, the broader charge of those claims to objectivity and comes closer to resolution. Because of space and funding limitations, the ADAH could never be the compressive repository Owen wanted it to be, but it must be recognized that his own ideological investments also thwarted that desire. It remains to be seen exactly what quantity of the “official” history of Alabama was written from within the confines of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, and what that means for the present.

NOTES

⁵⁶ “The Meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 10, no. 3 (April 1905): 493.

⁵⁷ Patricia Galloway, “Archives, Power, and History: Dunbar Rowland and the Beginning of the State Archives of Mississippi.” Since Dunbar Rowland, the first director of Mississippi’s state archives, modeled his institution directly on Alabama’s example, even copying its charter, Galloway’s article was useful in understanding the socio-cultural contexts surrounding the founding of the ADAH.

⁵⁸ More than a century later, archival research remains a central facet in legitimating the career of a historian and his or her claim to authoritative ‘truth.’ On the history and deconstruction of this notion, see Durba Ghosh, “National Narratives and the Politics of Miscegenation,” in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 27.

⁵⁹ Wendell H. Stephenson, “Herbert B. Adams: Southern Historical Scholarship at Johns Hopkins,” in *Southern History in the Making: Pioneer Historians of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

Press, 1964), 52-70. On the history of “scientific history,” see Deborah L. Haines, “Scientific History as a Teaching Method: The Formative Years,” *The Journal of American History* 63 (March 1977): 892-912.

The belief that the archive served as a “scientific laboratory” of historical investigation reached its culmination in the writings of Hilary Jenkinson two decades after the founding of the ADAH. In his widely influential *A Manual of Archival Administration*, published in 1922, Jenkinson declared in priestly tones: “The Archivist’s career is one of service. He exists in order to make other people’s work possible. . . . His Creed, the Sanctity of Evidence; his Task the Conservation of every scrap of Evidence attaching to the Documents committed to his charge; his aim to provide, without prejudice or after-thought, for all who wish to know the Means of Knowledge. . . . The good Archivist is perhaps the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces.” The extent to which Jenkinson’s definition of the professional archivist fit the career of Owen and the composition of the ADAH itself reflects how innovative his actions were at the turn of the century. Quoted in Randall C. Jimerson, “Embracing the Power of Archives,” *The American Archivist* 69 (Spring/Summer 2006): 22. On Jenkinson’s place in archival history, see Elisabeth Kaplan, “‘Many Paths to Partial Truths’: Archives, Anthropology, and the Power of Representation,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 209-220.

⁶⁰ See Richard J. Cox and David Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good* (Westport, Conn.: Quorum Books, 2002); Antoinette Burton, ed. *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). Of particular importance in framing my argument were two recent issues of *Archival Science* dedicated to the theme of “power, archives, and history,” especially the two part introduction by Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002) : 1-19; 171-185.

⁶¹ On this idea, see Terry Cook, “From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives,” *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*, ed. Tom Nesmith (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1993); 201-226.

⁶² Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). On the significance of the 1901 Constitution and the general history of turn-of-the-century Alabama, see Wayne Flynt’s excellent *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004). According to Flynt, of the 155 delegates elected to the 1901 constitutional convention, 141 were Democrats, 7 were Populists, 6 were Republicans, and 1 was an independent. A striking 96 of the delegates were lawyers; 12 were bankers. (7)

⁶³ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005)

⁶⁴ The extent to which Owen made use of professional connections and the tactics of publicity to bring attention to the ADAH and campaign for his directorship is striking, if all too familiar. In 1900, for example, a summary report of the findings of the history commission was released to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the city’s popular newspaper, to generate public support for the new repository. In an anonymous editorial published in the *Montgomery Journal*, Owen urged the governor to follow the commission’s recommendations. In addition, Owen closely allied himself with the various platforms of the Senate and Governor. It is with some irony, then, that Owen described the administrative structure of the ADAH in a 1904 letter thusly:

In our desire to keep the Department free from politics, we were confronted with a very serious problem. Our plan of administration through a Board of Trustees is believed to meet all criticism and objection. It was felt that it would be fatal to leave the selection of the Director either to a direct vote to the people, to an election by the legislature, or to an appointment by the Governor. The Governor is the ex-officio member of the Board of Trustees and the Senate has the right of rejection in the matter of filling vacancies. The State is thus protected from an abuse of power on the part of the Board.

Quoted in Monroe, “Thomas Owen and the Founding of the ADAH,” 30.

⁶⁵ In his account of Progressive era politics in the state, historian Sheldon Hackney calls attention to the political partisanship of Owen's *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography*. "A man who valued the ideals of the genteel tradition," Owen included only 9 of the 35 Populists in the House of Representatives, while 36 of the 65 Democrats are found there. Strikingly, 18 of the 36 Democrats were either lawyers or judges. Populist leaders were essentially of the same class, but occupied, according to Hackney, "considerably lower rungs of the social ladder than did comparable Democrats." Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 28-29.

⁶⁶ Owen, "Report," 37-38. Quoted in Monroe, "Making of an Agency," 13.

⁶⁷ Owen, "Report," 9.

⁶⁸ Owen, 1901 *Bulletin*, 31. The history of the first regiment was compiled and written by E.Y. McMorries, "History of the First Regiment," 1904 *Bulletin*, 9-136.

⁶⁹ Witness, for example, this letter from Owen to Capt. J.M. Anderson, Montgomery, dated Aug. 1, 1901: "I am told that you are greatly interested in the preservation of the history of our troops in the late War, and that you take a lively interest in everything pertaining to the history of the State. I beg to call to your attention the enclosed circular which explains our plans and purposes. If you can assist us in any way it will be greatly valued. Hon. Warren S. Reese tells me that you have an interesting old relic—a small pistol in good preservation carried by you during the War which saved your life from a well directed shot of a sharp-shooter. Why not add this to our collection, as well as such other things as you may have of this kind. I hope I shall not appeal in vain to your patriotism and public spirit." Thomas Owen, Acquisitions File, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁷⁰ Thomas Owen, *Bulletin of the Alabama Department of Archives and History*, September 30, 1908, n.p. Administrative Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Owen, *Report*, 14.

⁷³ Thomas G. Jones, "To the Confederacy's Soldiers and Sailors," *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 8, 1898.

⁷⁴ Cynthia Mills and Marc Simpson, eds., *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), xv-xxvii.

⁷⁵ Paul A. Schackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (New York: Altamira Press, 2003), 31.

⁷⁶ Albert Bushnell Hart, "The Historical Opportunity in America," *The American Historical Review* vol. 4, no. 1 (October 1898): 5. Hart goes on to urge societies and archivists to compile bibliographies of state materials and figures, indexes, and "scientific manuals" for students of history—all of which Owen would go on to do within the next decade and a half.

⁷⁷ Thomas Owen, *Alabama Official and Statistical Register* (Montgomery: Alabama Department of Archives and History, 1903). The registers were issued every four years.

⁷⁸ *Acts of Alabama: 1907*, pp. 318-319.

⁷⁹ Owen, letter to board of trustees, 1907, n.p., Administrative Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Conclusion

“[T]he position of the archivist cannot simply be asserted in society,” David Bearman has written, “it must be negotiated and accepted.”⁸⁰ This negotiation and acceptance takes place principally on two levels: through interaction with the society and its citizenry as a recordkeeper; and through the identity-forming structures set in place by the professional community of archivists.

The state or public archivist must shoulder a social expectation to shelter records from the politics and demands of society itself without in any way shaping them. Couched in this public conception of the archivist’s duty is another, equally incomplete, image: the record as transparent, inherently truthful, without bias. Numerous political figures in the United States have faced legal prosecution for the alteration or removal of archival documents, yet most people are profoundly unaware of the complex appraisal, retention, and disposition policies of archives themselves.⁸¹ Although these policies are (or at least should be) rigorously analyzed before implemented, they nonetheless underscore the fact that archivists are, from the start, implicated in shaping the historical account. Complicating this process, the definition of the record—what is or is not worthy of retaining—is historically contingent. Just as interpretations of a literary text may change from context to context, the idea of proper documentation, let alone what comprises a significant record, changes from one period to another. In the past thirty years, electronic records have decidedly altered the terrain of recordkeeping. The standards and practices of archivy reflect and impact these broad cultural and historical definitions.

There are other tensions beyond those resulting from this relationship to the record. The public archivist is frequently pulled in two directions. On the one hand, a state archive

represents social memory that has been decisively, tendentiously, or insidiously shaped by society, perhaps even before records found their way to the repository. On the other, the archivist is bound to the imperatives of her employer, the state or other institution, which to varying degrees, through funding and bureaucratic policies, regulates the records created, collected, and the length of time maintained. There is little concern, at this level, with collective memory beyond the boundaries and self-preservation of the state itself.⁸² The work nevertheless involves selection and exclusion, and thus distortion of the past. What is important is kept; what is not is discarded. Again, this process is historically contingent: it involves shifting perceptions of what is deemed valuable. Whatever record the archivist decides to keep, it will likely eventually be surpassed and ruled obsolete or contradictory to current records.

An investigation into archives necessitates grasping the conditions surrounding the preservation—and, just as importantly, the removal—of material from the record. Such inquiry also requires close scrutiny of the networks and relationships of power buttressing these circumstances. The extent to which archivists are involved in and aware of this process is a pressing concern; they, like historians are only beginning to come to terms with the influence they exert upon primary source materials and thus the creation of historical narratives.

This paper has examined two of the discursive strands leading to the establishment of the Alabama Department of Archives: the state's need to preserve its records and create an image of its immediate past, and Thomas Owen's drive to create a comprehensive state repository/cultural institution and forge a professional identity for himself as an archivist therein. In both cases appeals were made to the same narrowly defined set of stakeholders to

support the legitimacy of these needs. Because of these decisions, the records of the ADAH during its first decades largely reflected the (frequently exclusionary) interests of those stakeholders. At worst this meant that the Owen collected certain archives and documents while neglecting collections deemed marginal for social, political, and cultural reasons, over and beyond what financial restraints may have dictated.

At best it contributed to the Department's authority as a keeper of social memory. By 1915, as Richard Cox notes, the ADAH's administration of state records had greatly expanded. The institution was the central repository of legislative documents; all public officials were required by law to transfer non-current records to the state archives.⁸³ Four states had patterned their own archives after the legislature and charter of the Archives.⁸⁴ For the first twenty years of its existence, the ADAH was one of the pre-eminent institutions in the nascent archival profession. This was in no small part due to Owen, who was, in some sense, the archival "unconscious" of the Alabama repository. After his death in 1920, the Department and its programs would witness a decline in funding and power that its directors could not rectify until after the second World War.

An implicit but essential premise of the preceding discussion has been that archival history should be a pressing concern to practitioners in the field. Although now relegated to the margins of archivy, such a historical turn would find deep roots in the field, as Owen's example illustrates. Archival history has much to tell us, in fact, about a lineage of professionalization that archivists are even now questioning and deconstructing.

Even more importantly, examination of the origins of the field brings to light changing conceptions of what archives *are*: what constitutes an archive, the different forms the repository has taken over time, what epistemological systems of ordering and

arrangement archivists have utilized. All of these components are inherently political and entirely relevant. As the nature and place of the archive shifts and extends—from the physical repository with original materials to an electronic environment unconstrained by notions of materiality or originality—it is enlightening, and not a little comforting, to learn from past archival beginnings and challenges. Only by turning to our own institutional histories can we begin to confront the changes of the present and address the potential needs of the future.

NOTES

⁸⁰ David Bearman, “Electronic Record-keeping, Social Memory and Democracy,” *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), p. 331.

⁸¹ This list would include the 2001 case surrounding former National Security advisor Sandy Berger and the National Archives, for instance. See also Richard Cox, *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), pp. 47-52.

⁸² Bearman, 2002, p. 324.

⁸³ Richard Cox, *Assessing Alabama’s Archives* (Montgomery: Alabama Department of Archives and History, 1985), pp 37-39.

⁸⁴ These states were Mississippi, Arkansas, South Carolina, and North Carolina.

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Fig. 1 Photographer unknown. Storage bins filled with state records in the capitol before the creation of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.



Fig. 2 Unidentified assistant removing state records from the basement of the capitol, c. 1901.

Appendices

Board Member	Length of Term	Background
Peter J. Hamilton	Two years	Lawyer, Judge
Jefferson M. Falkner	Two years	
W.D. Jelks	Two years	Governor, 1901-1907; responsible for ratification of 1901 state Constitution
J.H. Johnson	Four years	
W.H. Blake	Four Years	
Henry B. Foster	Four years	Judge
Oliver Street	Six Years	Candidate, U.S. Representative from Alabama, 1918; Secretary of Tennessee Valley Historical Society, organized in Huntsville, AL in 1902
William Richardson	Six Years	Alabama state representative, state court judge, Hunstville, AL
Samuel William John	Six Years	

Appendix A. Board of Directors of Alabama Department of Archives and History, 1901.

General Administration (only.) 000 General 010 The Department 020 The Director 026 The Trustees 040 Annual meetings of the Board 045 Annual Reports 050 Clerks and employees 060 Department finances 070 Quarters and furnishings 080 Department organization, etc. 090 Other administrative details	Department Library 400 General 410 Accessions 420 Catalogue 430 Circulation 440 Binding 450 The Library. General. 460 Special collections. Alabama. 470 Special collections. Continued. 480 Special collections. Continued. 490 Bound pamphlet groups.
Alabama State Archives 100 Archives 110 Executive officers, etc. 140 Special Commissions 150 Legislative 160 Judiciary 170 Institutions 180 County 190 Municipal	Library Extension 500 General 510 Library movement 521 Free public library promotion in Alabama. 530 School and institutional library in Alabama 540 Organized agencies, etc., in Alabama 550 Instruction 560 Supervision 570 Publication 580 Traveling libraries 590 Detailed statistics of Alabama libraries.
Historical collections (Everything in the Department except Archives, portraits, museum articles, and the library) 200 Historical collections 210 Manuscripts 220 Transcripts 230 Newspapers and periodicals 240 Photographs, views, prints, etc. 250 Maps, plans, etc. 260 Stamps, coins, etc. 270 Scrapbooks. Broadsides 280 Music 290 State documents	Legislative Reference 600 610 620 630 640 650 660 670 680 690
Department Gallery 300 310 320 330 340	700 Publications 800
Department Museum 350 360 370 380 390	Encouragement of historical work and research; diffusion of knowledge as to the history and resources of the State; and Special activities 900

Appendix B. Arrangement of the Alabama Department of Archives, c. 1905
Source: Unpublished manuscript, Alabama Department of Archives and History.