

Archival Odyssey: Taking Students to the Sources

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A FEW years ago I was walking along the banks of the Neckar in the lovely university town of Tübingen. There was a great commotion on the river, as scores of university students, in boats and along the banks, were engaged in some sort of game involving their ducking each other. I was completely absorbed in trying to understand just what they were up to; and I did not notice another observer who had taken up a position at my side. He was a local citizen, although I would never have guessed it from his impeccable English. He said, almost casually, "They enjoy the summers here. There is nothing like the Neckar for summer water sports. But soon, they will be leaving for Munich and Freiburg. The skiing is better there during the winter months."

I did not know that European students were quite that mobile; and I was thoroughly unprepared to discover that summer and winter sports were a major factor in their movements. Perhaps I had been too much influenced by the romantic picture of the medieval student who did, indeed, move but only in order to work with some great professor whose fame drew students to him. I was even aware that towns had founded universities with a view to attracting students. In 1442 the Board of Twelve Wise Men and twenty-four citizens of Ferrara urged the establishment of a university because "strangers will flock thither from various remote regions, and many scholars will stay here, live upon our bread and wine, and purchase of us clothing and other necessities for human existence, will leave their money in our city, and will not depart hence without great gain for all of us." It seemed a bit excessive that students should move from one place to another because of the physical attractions; and frankly I hoped that my companion for the moment, there on the banks of the Neckar, was at least half-facetious in what he said.

Such ruminations put me in a mood to consider the mobility of university students in the United States. Actually, I said to myself, they do not move very much. There are the usual exchange programs, ranging from a week to a semester, when students of one race, class, or religion do a bit of sampling of the other's race, class, or religion. Several universities in the Midwest and elsewhere have entered into

The author, chairman of the department of history at the university, read this paper at the joint luncheon of the American Historical Association and the Society of American Archivists in New York City on Dec. 30, 1968.

agreements that facilitate the movement of their students from one member campus to another. Then, there are the junior years abroad, about most of which I should like to say absolutely nothing. Thanks, however, to the rigidity of university structures and matriculation regulations in the United States and thanks, perhaps to an even greater degree, to the regulations by athletic associations regarding the movement of undergraduate athletes, students in this country do not move very much and seldom do so to benefit from the presence of a scholar on another campus.

And yet, among our students, especially our graduate students, who are serious about more than the week-end athletic events and the winter carnival week, it is possible to generate a measure of real enthusiasm for going after truth, even if that means going to some remote place merely to work in an archives or a library. A few years ago I had an opportunity to put this general proposition to a test. When I was visiting the South Carolina Archives, Charles Lee engaged me in conversation about the richness of the archival sources in his State and elsewhere. In the stacks he pointed to an entire wall of manuscript boxes bearing on a well-known and highly controversial period in South Carolina history. He observed that no scholars had yet examined any of them. Then looking at me somewhat condescendingly, he said, "Why have your students engage in a tug of war over two or three pages of manuscripts, perhaps one newspaper, and *Appleton's Annual Cyclopædia* as they attempt to write seminar papers up there in Chicago, when each of them could have his own wall of manuscripts down here."

My first reaction bordered on outrage. How dare anyone speak disparagingly of the university and the library that I love. "This sounds like a Proper Bostonian," I said to myself, "remarking on the library resources of Reno, Nevada." Then, I remembered that Charles Lee, an alumnus of the University of Chicago, did, indeed, know something about the University of Chicago Library. Even more important, I recognized in his remarks a most valuable suggestion that could greatly contribute to the success of my graduate seminar. The more I thought of it the more I saw its great possibilities. Soon, I had resolved to give my seminar students a bit of mobility by sending them to the sources. Better still, I would go with them. By this time I began to regard it as a wonderful idea; and I wanted to claim it as my own. I could not, for it was the property of Charles Lee.

For this first venture in taking the students to the sources, I decided on North Carolina rather than South Carolina. There were two primary considerations that influenced my decision. In the first place I was much more familiar with the archives of North Carolina. I had done much of the research for my own doctoral dissertation in the State Archives of North Carolina, and for the next 8 years while I was resident in the State I worked there regularly. I believed that

my students would derive more benefit in an experimental situation where I was secure in my own knowledge of the institution in which they were working. I also appreciated the fact that with Duke University and the University of North Carolina nearby, the students would have an opportunity to work in the rich manuscript collections of those two universities. The second consideration was that since the seminar was to be on the Reconstruction era and since no major work on Reconstruction in North Carolina had been published since 1914—as contrasted to several important works in recent years for South Carolina—we would have what would amount to a “wide open field” in selecting North Carolina.

In the Autumn Quarter 1966 I announced that my seminar for the Winter Quarter would be on the history of Reconstruction in North Carolina and that the eight members of the seminar would spend 2 weeks in North Carolina working in the sources. Within a few days the seminar was closed, for eight students had indicated by their qualifications and personal interviews that they would benefit from the experience. I had already received assurances from the university that although it could not underwrite the seminar, it would be willing to bear the expenses of any qualified student who would be unable to go for financial reasons. The university also indicated that it would be pleased to finance the photo-duplication of all materials that the students found useful but that they did not want to consume valuable time in copying by hand.

Once the students had signed up, I began to confer with them individually and collectively long before the beginning of the quarter in which the seminar was to be held. I encouraged them to read as widely as they could on the general problem of Reconstruction in North Carolina and to come to some decision, as early as possible, about a possible topic on which they would like to work. By the middle of December, all of the students had selected tentative topics and they had gone as far as possible in the reading of secondary materials. Indeed, during the Christmas holidays several students had pursued their topics in New York and Washington as well as Chicago. It was an impressive introduction to a seminar that officially had not yet begun.

Meanwhile I had proceeded with the arrangements for the trip to North Carolina. Since the term began the first week in January, I thought that it would be best if we remained at the university for the first 3 weeks of the term. This would give the students ample time not only to complete the preliminary work connected with their own seminar topic but also to get a good start in the other courses in which they were enrolled. First, there was the problem of transportation. It has never failed to awe this child of the depression that virtually all the members of the seminar had cars; and it was merely a problem of choosing which two cars we would use for the trip. As there were two women

and five men (one student dropped out at the last minute because he could not resist a \$10,000 job that was offered him), we decided that one of the women should take her car and one of the men should take his. Second—and this is related to the matter of transportation—North Carolina State University offered to house the men students at a rate that was tempting even to one who might have to commute to Chicago to his job. St. Augustine's College made a similarly attractive offer to house the women students. The women who lived at St. Augustine's could transport themselves to the Archives, and the men could do the same in the faithful Volkswagen bus of one of the students.

The North Carolina Archivist and the Director of the State Department of Archives and History were delighted that we had decided to visit them during the final week in January and the first week in February 1967. I sent them the tentative topics on which the students had decided, and the archivists assured me that they would give the matter their attention and would be prepared to make suggestions upon our arrival. I also sent the topics to the curators of the manuscript collections at Duke and the University of North Carolina and received similar responses. Indeed, the curators at the universities offered to keep their manuscript collections open during the evenings and on weekends to accommodate our students. (I hope that this did not set a precedent that has proved inconvenient to our hospitable friends at these institutions.)

During those exciting three weeks of the term before we departed for North Carolina, I met regularly with the members of the seminar. We refined the topics, continued our reading, and prepared ourselves in every way to make certain that we would spend the two weeks in North Carolina most profitably. We had sessions on Hamilton's *Reconstruction in North Carolina*. We discussed every article that had been published in the *North Carolina Historical Review*. We reviewed the published guides to the manuscript collections of the State Archives, the University of North Carolina, and Duke University. Even before we departed for the Tar Heel State, the students had begun to feel that they were real authorities on Reconstruction in North Carolina.

It was only now and then that I recognized the fact that they were not yet the authorities that they wanted to be. In the lull in our conversations about the Negro Convention of 1865 or the Kirk-Holden War, one of the students would say, "Please tell us something about the climate in Raleigh in late January. What kind of clothing should we take, and is it all right if we take our golf clubs." Then, I would assume the full authority of my years of experience, deplore the ignorance of my students and add, somewhat impatiently,

It is a pity that you know nothing of the climate of this State. North Carolina is not in the tropics. It is located in the upper South, where the weather in late January is likely to be harsh and raw. Kindly take ear muffs, storm coats,

and snowshoes. I can only hope that you will fare better than I did during those 8 bleak, cold winters I spent in the State.

Some students grumbled that they were more interested in the Reconstruction of Florida and wished that we had selected that State.

I did not travel with the students but flew down on the day of their arrival. They met me at the airport on a balmy Sunday afternoon. My plane was late owing to a snowstorm in Chicago. The students were also late in arriving to meet me at the Raleigh-Durham airport because they had been out to a golf course watching a number of matches in which the participants had been attired in shorts. I shall never again be so certain about the weather in North Carolina or even in Antarctica!

At the beginning of our first working day we spent the morning consulting with the staff of the North Carolina State Department of Archives and History. Christopher Crittenden, the Director, and H. G. Jones, the Archivist, brought together the members of their staff who had informed themselves about relevant materials on each of the topics on which the students were working. For several hours all of us exchanged notes and observations about the research problems, with the students asking literally hundreds of questions and the staff making literally hundreds of suggestions about sources and approaches. This was the first of several such seminars with the staff, and I venture to say that this part of the seminar was one of the most valuable experiences that any group of students could possibly have. Our friends at Chapel Hill and Duke offered the kind of cooperation we were receiving at Raleigh. As a class we also met several evenings each week during the two weeks that we were in North Carolina. We usually ate lunch and dinner together. These regular associations gave us an opportunity to exchange materials, discuss problems that arose, and suggest to each other possible ways of approaching the next stage of the research.

Under the circumstances it was not long before the students knew quite well what was involved in getting to the heart of their problems, and quite early I began to detect an air of confidence and a feeling of self-satisfaction among them. One student, working on "The Reception of the Fourteenth Amendment in North Carolina," began to talk quite confidently about the inadequacy of the treatment of the subject by Hamilton. Another student, who was concerned with agricultural recovery in postwar North Carolina, complained that no historian, with the exception of him of course, had done justice to agricultural developments in the piedmont and in the western part of the State and that the Carolina *Western Democrat*, a newspaper of Mecklenburg County, had been tragically overlooked by students of the period. On the second day of our visit I asked the student who was working on "Race Relations in Raleigh, 1865-1866" how he was getting

along. After reviewing the auspicious beginnings of the career of Jim Crow in the jails and cemeteries of Raleigh in 1866, he replied, "I'm doing fine, but Professor Vann Woodward isn't doing very well!"

This self-confidence and self-esteem on the part of the students—rapidly becoming authorities—were bolstered considerably by the local attention that they received. On the third day of our visit the Raleigh *Times* devoted a half page, with pictures, to an article entitled "Chicago Students Sift North Carolina Historical Documents." Before the end of the week, the piece had appeared in more than a score of afternoon daily newspapers in North Carolina. There were other reporters and other articles, and one of my unanticipated duties was to protect the students from journalists who wanted to do feature stories on them. Then, there was the luncheon with Lt. Gov. Robert Scott, now the Governor, of North Carolina. A measure of the effect of this heady experience was to be seen shortly, when a student was overheard saying, "Did you hear what I told Bob Scott about his State's educational needs?"

While the students were busy with their own research, their professor remained busy not only protecting them from reporters but also performing other duties as impressario and "fixer." He was called upon to make speeches at Shaw University and St. Augustine's College. He addressed the members of the Archives staff on "What the Teaching Historian Looks For in a State Historical Agency." He found it necessary to talk with various local citizens who had been impressed with the newspaper articles that continued to appear. In one case he succeeded in convincing one woman that the State Archives was the place for the papers of a member of her family who had been prominent during the Reconstruction era. He even had to give a talk about his own research before a group of graduate students from neighboring institutions at a dinner graciously arranged by Doctors Jones and Crittenden.

These were insignificant tasks when one compares them with the great rewards that such an experience provided. As I look back on it, I should say that the opportunity afforded the students of going "beyond the water's edge" to confront significant materials that formed the bases for meaningful and even important papers was worth every effort that was put into the undertaking. The members of the seminar made useful and lasting contacts with the archival and library staffs and with other graduate students that are still proving valuable. The students came away from the experience of the 15 days more absorbed in their subjects than they had ever been before, for the concentration of many hours each day on one topic was a new experience for virtually all of them. Now they were real professionals; and they knew it. If one had any doubt about this he had merely to witness the conduct of these neophyte professionals upon their return to the University of

Chicago. The recounting of an African safari and the display of the trophies could hardly have been more exciting. And if that was a bit hard to take at times, one can observe that the effect on the poor, underprivileged students who did not make the trip was humbling if not humiliating. If the privileged seven were a bit difficult to live with, the hundred or so who remained behind were infinitely more sober and even more teachable.

A Wonderful System

Years earlier, not wanting to be a Vice Consul caught out with an unanswered letter from a Congressman in his pocket, I had invented a wonderful system whereby no unresolved case was permitted, like unrequited love, to languish. Every so often, under my formula, the pending case popped up, waving a little colored flag and making a noise like Donald Duck with bronchitis. My scheme for reminding myself of unfinished business was the despair of visiting IBM technicians, who struggled in vain to devise a computer that would keep track of my unzipped mnemonics. They finally gave it up when they discovered, poking about in my archives, that during my service in Liberia I had once filed "Mining" under the letter T. "Why 'Mining' under T?" they asked me.

"*Thar's* gold in *Them Thar* hills," I answered.

—ELLIS BRIGGS, *Farewell to Foggy Bottom: The Recollections of a Career Diplomat*, p. 157 (New York, David McKay Co., Inc., 1964).
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