

## Surveying the Records of a City: The History of Atlanta Project

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**F**OUNDED in 1847, Atlanta, Georgia, has become the financial and commercial hub of the southeastern United States, its growth stemming from advantages of location and transportation. It was first the terminus of the developing Georgia railroad system and later the focal point of highways and interstate expressways. Yet by the spring of 1970, as Atlanta approached the 125th anniversary of its founding, a comprehensive study of this growth and development had not yet been undertaken. Few amateur accounts existed and trained historians had contributed only a few period or subject-oriented histories of the city.<sup>1</sup>

In response to an obvious need for historical study and understanding, the "History of Atlanta Project" was inaugurated in 1970 by the Department of History and the School of Urban Life at Georgia State University. The leaders of the project, including the late Dale A. Somers and several other history department staff members, concluded that more than eager researchers would be needed to develop this virtually virgin historical area. Documents were not in evidence especially for the city's thriving business community. Indeed, one scholar wondered in the mid-1960's if Atlanta's history, so closely tied to business enterprise, could ever be written.

The prospect of finding records seemed bleak. The several likely repositories in the Atlanta area actually held little documentary material from the city's long and varied past. The Atlanta Historical Society, until the late 1960's, had concentrated primarily on the Civil War period. Although under new leadership the society be-

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<sup>1</sup> As part of its Historical Records Survey, the Works Projects Administration during the New Deal planned to survey all municipal and archival records in Georgia. The records of Fulton County, however, were never inventoried.

came interested in acquiring municipal, business, and other kinds of records, broad collecting progressed slowly at first. The Emory University Archives had generally restricted its acquisitions to university-related documents, while Atlanta University's fine collection on black history was regional rather than local in scope. The Regional Archives Branch of the Federal Records Center in south Atlanta, though a valuable research asset, was organized so that material pertaining to the city was incidental. And finally, the Southern Labor Archives, now located at Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta, had only recently been planned and would not begin operating until 1971. Municipal records, the stuff from which a city's physical, political, and social dimensions are reconstructed, seemed nonexistent. Atlanta, like most cities, had no system for preserving its historical documents.

Confronting the absence of primary source material, the staff of the History of Atlanta Project determined to survey by mail the private record-creating organizations in the metropolitan area. The survey concentrated on organizations falling into four groups: businesses and industries, churches and religious organizations, professional and business societies, and service organizations. The staff excluded labor unions, anticipating the activity of the newly created Southern Labor Archives. Locating municipal records, a task too difficult and complex to undertake by questionnaire, was reserved for a special project.

For the survey of private organizations, staff members, using the telephone directory and publications of the Georgia Department of Industry and Trade, prepared a questionnaire that varied according to the type of record-creating unit contacted. All organizations were asked about minutes of directors or organization meetings, house or institutional publications, lists of members or customers and addresses, scrapbooks, personnel files, and correspondence. Businesses and industries, in addition, found on their questionnaires references to annual statements of earnings, bills of lading, payroll records, and invoices. The questionnaires attempted to find out whether or not each organization maintained an archives program and, if not, if it had inventoried its records. Finally, they asked if the organization ever donated records to an archives or if it would be willing to do so.

Although the primary objective of the survey was locating valuable source materials, the project had other goals as well. In the absence of either a business or urban archives in the area, the questionnaire perhaps would remind record-creating organizations of the value of their papers and would stimulate better care of them. Hence, members of the staff were eager to follow up particularly encouraging

responses to the survey with personal visits to emphasize records preservation. Anticipating a good response to the survey, the staff prepared, for each individual addressee, index cards on which data from the returned questionnaires could be coded.

During a period of several weeks, 2,364 questionnaires were mailed.<sup>2</sup> About 10 percent, some 232, was returned. If the response was not overwhelming, it nevertheless provided revealing insight into the state of private records in Atlanta. Of the 232 organizations which replied, 126 possessed "old records" of varying quality. Forty-two professed to have archives programs in operation. Only 23 of the respondents, mostly businesses, were unwilling to permit access by qualified researchers. Twelve organizations had donated their records to established archives.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the vast majority of the organizations were willing to make their holdings available to qualified researchers for historical purposes.

Although many organizations had no records, the survey succeeded in locating several useful private collections. Thirty-six businesses and industries retained valuable records, and most of the collections were available for study by qualified researchers.<sup>4</sup> Eight businesses professed to have archives programs in operation, although it seemed clear that some executives possibly misunderstood the concept of an archives. The president of one large institution, for example, believed that company scrapbooks and other general material of marginal value to the researcher constituted an archives. The survey staff, through personal visits, convinced him that his company needed a records management and retention program. Many firms evidenced surprise at the interest in their records. "Our history would not be of any importance to a research program such as your are undertaking," wrote one businessman. But as an afterthought, he expressed a willingness to talk with a survey representative "to further understand your project before opening our files to you." Others doubted the value of their papers. We will "be more than

<sup>2</sup> A total of 1,401 questionnaires went to businesses and industries, of which 91 replied and 36 reported the possession of records; 668 went to churches and religious organizations, of which 70 replied and 55 had records; 197 went to professional and business societies and organizations, of which 36 replied and 20 had records; and 98 went to service organizations, of which 35 replied and 15 reported records.

<sup>3</sup> These included three businesses, three service organizations, and six churches.

<sup>4</sup> Except for the Federal Reserve Bank, no metropolitan Atlanta bank responded to the survey although some are known to have records and a few larger banks are pursuing archives programs. Only three businesses reported the donation of records to established archives. These were the Cotton Insurance Association whose records went to the College of Insurance, New York City; Du Pont, whose records are housed at the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation; and Retail Credit Company, which has given its records to the Georgia State Department of Archives and History.

happy to work with you in any way possible," wrote an executive of a large regional airline company, but we "doubt value of records we keep."

Among churches and religious organizations, fifty-five possessed records. Happily, twenty had archives programs, five of which contained records from the nineteenth century. Churches showed little interest in donating records to an urban archives, partly, perhaps, because of the active archival programs of some denominations. Four Presbyterian churches had already sent their records to the Historical Foundation at Montreat, North Carolina. Other local churches such as the Baptists and the Disciples of Christ had denominational archives also, although both groups were apparently less active in saving church records than were the Presbyterians.<sup>5</sup> Only five religious institutions refused the use of their materials.

Unfortunately, the lack of time and shortage of staff prevented a follow-up program for contacting all organizations which reported records. However, the survey produced an extensive index card file with symbols denoting the types of records of each responding organization. The returned questionnaires are also available, with detailed information on each organization's holdings, to the researcher with special interests.

The search for municipal records began shortly after the completion of the survey of private organizations. In spite of a lack of policy direction in the city departments, many valuable records had been saved either because they continued to be of use to city administrators or because they became the domain of a solicitous departmental secretary. In both cases, the problem for the researcher often involved locating the closet (and the official with its key) that contained valuable records in the labyrinth of a city hall where few could understand why, in the first place, dusty, leather-bound volumes would interest anyone.

In carrying out this phase of the History of Atlanta Project the staff decided to find and catalog all the materials still in Atlanta city departments which could be used to reconstruct the city's past. Staff assistants sought both to prepare a detailed description of the primary documents, maps, and plans and to provide an explanation of the most direct way a researcher could gain access to records that few knew existed. This undertaking, although still in its early stages, has met with several important successes.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the Presbyterian archives at Montreat, North Carolina, the following institutions also hold records from Atlanta churches: Disciples Historical Society, Nashville, Tennessee; the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

The staff quickly discovered that the surest way to find materials was to start at the bottom, rather than at the top, of the municipal bureaucracy. Initially, letters were sent to the mayor, several aldermen, the city attorney, and the city clerk, none of whom knew of any extant departmental records. A second approach, contacting department heads, produced only slightly better results: one of the five interviewed produced a particularly valuable cache of annual financial reports dating back to 1880. But the greatest success came through a chance contact with an inspector in the Building Department who had taken it upon himself to preserve building permits which date from the inception of the department in 1895. From this experience the staff learned to seek out sympathetic personnel who usually could find records unknown to administrators. In approaching the Public Works Department in this manner, the staff gained access to street, sewer, and water division records which documented the very beginnings of these urban support systems. Student assistants are now cataloging these materials, and the fruits of their labor will be a researcher's guide to primary record resources, their specific locations, and the name of a clerk or secretary who will make them available.

The surface just scratched in searching out municipal records, a few important discoveries can be reported. The first major accumulation consists of ledgers, correspondence, minute books, and architectural plans in the city Building Department. These records contain a listing of every building permit issued in Atlanta from 1895 with the details of permit date, site owner, location by street and ward, contractor, cost, job description, and completion date. An important find which will permit scholars to trace the physical growth of Atlanta's neighborhoods, these records can also be used to determine the socio-economic backgrounds of owners and early occupants of the city's newly constructed subdivisions. In addition, the minute books and correspondence are extant for the 1890's with notes of the day-to-day departmental operations. Finally, the architectural plans of all the major downtown buildings constructed after 1904 have been saved and are presently being microfilmed to guarantee their continued preservation. The researcher's guide will detail both the location of this collection and the filing system which is being used to arrange the plans.

The search in the Public Works Department led to two other significant accumulations of material. First, the most extensive collection yet discovered of early annual reports of the City of Atlanta was tucked away in the closet of the secretary of the department's director. It contained a copy of the annual report of 1880, which

to date has been found at no other archives or library in the city. Second, a collection of maps, subdivision plats, and correspondence was found hidden in a safe in the basement of City Hall. Although examination of the contents has just begun, random investigations have turned up plats which date to the 1860's, maps of the early public works systems, and correspondence on the subject of the influence of the city beautiful movement in early twentieth-century Atlanta.

Still to be examined are the records of the Sewer Division of the Public Works Department, which provide data on the sewage disposal system as far back as the 1880's. Although most of this material consists of the technical specifications of main sizes, the data includes lists of property owners with street addresses and the amount each was assessed for the extension of service at the time when this utility was first provided. This information will permit both a mapping of the chronological development of Atlanta's sewer system and the relating of that growth to the socioeconomic and racial composition of the city.

While far from complete, the researcher's guide to nonarchival resources in Atlanta is an important first step in the process of data collection for writing urban history. A follow-up program is essential to encourage the city government's adoption of policies which will make existing records available for scholars and establishment of a records retirement program which sends to local repositories those materials no longer essential for city operations. In the meantime, the staff will seek to persuade individual departments that they should save records they have maintained and make known to researchers the extent and location of these materials.<sup>6</sup>

Although the surveys of the records of private organizations and of city government took place at different times and utilized different methods of contact, knowledge gained from both efforts can perhaps be useful for future projects of this type. Also, valuable material was found in the possession of Atlanta's private record-creating organizations and its municipal government. The survey showed, among other things, that personal contact is nearly indispensable in persuading organizations to preserve their papers. Unfortunately, because of the large number of private organizations involved, follow-up visits were impossible except in a few cases. Staff members

<sup>6</sup> Since this paper was written the Georgia Records Act of 1972 was signed into law. This act, which will facilitate the implementation of records management in all of the municipal and county governments of metropolitan Atlanta, provides for the care and preservation of records heretofore subject to indiscriminate destruction or loss. The staff of the History of Atlanta Project is now working with the municipal records division of the Georgia State Archives to inventory and identify for preservation the important records discovered in the departments of the City of Atlanta.

tried, however, to arouse interest in records preservation among the limited number of private organizations they visited. The survey produced more significant results from its contacts with departments of the city government. Upon completion of this phase of the project, the next logical step will take the survey into the records of the two most important counties in the Atlanta area, Fulton and DeKalb, and into neighboring municipalities such as East Point and Decatur.

The History of Atlanta Project began its survey at a time when records management and retention programs were of little concern to most private organizations and to the municipal government. There was, and still is, no established business archives or urban archives in a city noted throughout its history for business leadership and urban growth. Under the circumstances, the staff sought what seemed the only viable alternative, the promotion of records retention programs by the records-creating organizations themselves.

Those interested in pursuing records in other urban centers with archival inadequacies similar to Atlanta's might duplicate this type of survey with greater success by taking a more selective sampling of private organizations and by making personal visits to all organizations responding affirmatively to a mailed questionnaire. One will probably have little difficulty in locating and cataloging valuable municipal documents if other city governments are as willing to cooperate as Atlanta's has been.