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Alabama Department of Archives and History: Celebrating a Centennial
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When the Society of American Archivists comes to Birmingham in 2002, the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) will be 101 years old. It is the first Archives established as an official agency of state government, preceding the establishment of the National Archives and the SAA by over thirty years. In November of 1940, Archivist of the United States R.D.W. Connor stated in his speech for the dedication of the new Alabama Archives building that the "establishment of this department in 1901 has been called 'a new venture in political science' in the United States." The department's enabling legislation served as a model for the creation of several other state archives.

Dr. Thomas M. Owen, the first director, was responsible for promoting the creation of the Alabama Archives. He accomplished this through his work on the Alabama History Commission, established in 1899 to determine the existence and location of resources documenting the state's history. The commission's final report called for the creation of a department responsible for preserving the state's official records; creating a state library; creating a state museum and art gallery; marking four historic sites; publishing state documents; supporting the state historical society; constructing fireproof vaults in every county for records storage; and establishing standard paper, inks and typewriter ribbons for use in the creation of official records.

The first home of the Alabama Archives was the cloakroom of the State Senate. From there, Dr. Owen quickly gathered agency records, manuscripts, war records, flags, photographs, and other materials into the holdings of the Archives. By 1904, Dr. Owen had two staff members: one editorial assistant and one stenographer. He was also creating displays of historical collections for viewing in the Senate Chamber when the Senate was not in session. The Archives moved into its own space in 1907 when a new wing was added to the south face of the Capitol. From then until his death in 1920, Dr. Owen worked to get the Archives a building of its own.

Marie Bankhead Owen, Dr. Owen's wife, succeeded him as director and obtained federal funding to build a new Alabama Archives/War Memorial building. Construction began in 1938 and was completed in 1940. By the mid 1940s, with the move into the new building complete, the Alabama Department of Archives and History initiated programs for a field worker to visit county courthouses, solicit manuscripts, and speak to local groups about the archives. The agency also started microfilming county records.

Mrs. Owen (in her eighties) retired in 1955 and was succeeded by Peter Brannon, an archives staff member since 1911. During his terms in office, the legislature established the State and County Records Commissions as the government agencies responsible for making decisions about the retention and preservation of state and local records. The director of the department serves as the chairman of the commissions. Staff members of the Archives serve as staff for the commissions. This was the beginning of the current agency records management program.

Peter Brannon died in 1967 and was succeeded by Milo B. Howard Jr. Upon his appointment as director, Mr. Howard devoted much of his time from 1968 until the mid-1970s on the east wing construction project.

The fifth and current director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History is Edwin C. Bridges. Dr. Bridges initiated several projects, including Alabama's participation in the US Newspaper Project, the 1985 Statewide Records Assessment, and funding and design for an addition to the west face of the main Archives building. The department hopes to break ground on the west wing this year.

Dr. Thomas M. Owen, the first director of the agency, envisioned an organization that would be important to and used by every Alabama citizen. Over the years, department staff members have striven to fulfill Dr. Owen's dream. They have provided the citizens and public officials with access to genealogical records, records care and preservation information, assistance with research projects, exhibits of museum artifacts, and many other Alabama history-related services. As the agency moves into its second century, it will continue to be a place where Alabama history can be discovered, used, and shared.

One hundred and one years after the creation of the agency, and sixty-two years after the dedication of the main Alabama Archives building during the 4th annual SAA meeting, Alabama archivists are glad to welcome SAA back to Alabama. We look forward to you visiting the Alabama Department of Archives and History and hope that while you are in Alabama's "Black" or "Cotton Belt" you will visit the Voting Rights Museum and the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, as well as other Montgomery landmarks such as the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the Southern Poverty Law Center's Civil Rights Memorial created by Maya Lin, the Rosa Parks Museum, Old Alabama Town, and the Little White House of the Confederacy.

