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Renovating the Atlanta History Center Archives: Moving People, Places and History

Emily Weaver, University Archivist, Delta State University

The Atlanta Historical Society was founded in 1926 when a group of fourteen civic-minded Atlantans were called together by prominent attorney, Walter McElreath, with a desire to preserve the regional history by collecting manuscripts and photographs. With this storehouse of primary source information, the group was able to provide a rich cache of materials to scholars and general researchers. As the collections continued to grow, so did the scope and vision from those original founding members. The Atlanta History Center officially formed in 1991, encompassing over thirty-three acres of land with a newly constructed state-of-the-art museum, two interpreted historic home sites and a projected separate archives research center.

By 2001, the archival collections were stretching the seams of McElreath Hall with such major collections as the Philip T. Shutze & Harvey M. Smith libraries of architecture, decorative arts and design; the Cherokee Garden Library; the Sons of the American Revolution genealogical collections; the Beverly M. DuBose, Jr. and Thomas S. Dickey libraries; Franklin Garrett Necrology and Library; and the Civil War & military ordinances. It was time for a renovation. With the construction of the new museum completed, renovations to McElreath Hall would relieve the storage issues for the Archives and the entire building would be dedicated to the Archives.

Most of the major renovation planning, meetings with architects, and job assignments had already been decided when I joined the staff in 2001. For the purpose of this article, I spoke to those individuals who were involved in the behind-the-scenes planning for the renovation. They expressed to me how utterly important it was for the architects and the archivists to work closely together and keep each other informed as to what types of environments were best for particular collections, creating a positive environment for research patrons and staff, as well as keeping the public informed of closing and opening dates. Hindsight is most valuable here as my experience in moving large quantities of materials was pretty much non-existent. I was learning as we went through each day.

With the move from McElreath Hall to our off-site storage facility, I was simply responsible for labeling a particular section of collections and supervising their move from one building to the next. At this point, I really did not have to make any big, executive sort of decisions. I was able to observe how the process was supposed to work from someone who had really pulled our schedule together well. The move from McElreath to off-site storage was one of the most valuable learning experiences I have experienced in my professional career. In a few short months, the Archives opened again for business, the staff relocated to a small, temporary area and we began planning for the move back into our renovated building. While we were all settling in and getting used to collections being stored in on-site and off-site temporary storage areas, I got the assignment of a lifetime. I would be responsible for moving us back into McElreath Hall and I had almost a year to plan for it.

A year may seem like adequate time to take over a project in mid-stream; however, once we got down to the actual labeling of boxes, packing and moving again, I was still very anxious about our

plans. A timeline was essential. I began by looking at our projected date of when we would be back in the building and open to the public. When we moved out of McElreath Hall, we prepared the public for the Archives reading room to be closed. We had plenty of lead time to notify potential research patrons of the restricted access to collections during that time. We began notifying the public of the projected closing dates at least five months ahead of time. We had approximately two years where we would be in temporary locations and moving back in. Keeping the AHC staff and the public aware of project dates was crucial. Working with the renovation project manager and the Archives staff, we were able to work out a solid but flexible timeline which kept everyone informed of impending due dates for various parts of the moves.

Maintaining control and access to the collections was my next major concern. Our off-site storage facility involved a 45-minute round-trip drive from the Atlanta History Center and back. Running to the off-site facility every day would be possible but impractical. Therefore, the Archives staff had to create a plan that would allow for us to still provide access to the collections. The solution was that researchers could submit their requests for materials and those materials would be retrieved from off-site storage and delivered to the temporary reading room on specified days. For instance, if a researcher was planning a trip for a Saturday, they would need to submit a request for materials by Wednesday at 10:00 am to make sure that those collections would be available for his research on Saturday. Although the majority of records were kept in an off-site storage facility, there were some major collections held in the Archives' temporary storage located on the AHC campus. The collections kept on campus were those that were most often used by researchers. Because of the records kept on researchers and their requests over the previous year, we were able to determine which collections would be kept on campus. This plan worked for the most part, but as in everything, we could not please every one all of the time.

Once our temporary space solutions were up and running, I could focus on the project of moving all of the Archives staff, collections and supplies back into the newly renovated McElreath Hall. I considered the moving company which had moved us from McElreath Hall but also wanted to see what other types of movers were available to us. I set up several meetings with major moving companies and the Archives staff so that we could talk about our needs and their services. I had to be mindful of our moving budget and still find the safest way to move our collections. After all of the interviews, I decided with the help of the Archives staff that we would keep the moving company that had first moved us. They had worked well with the first phase of the move and we were confident they would do well with this final phase; however, I did decide that we would need some 'mover training' sessions.

The moving company we chose were very good movers. They arrived on time, were courteous and careful with our items, but we needed to go one step further. I felt it was important that the movers know exactly how important our carefully laid out order and plan was to a successful move. Therefore, several days before the first move was scheduled, I walked the moving company supervisors through our plans and then took them to the actual collections and told them how the boxes should be handled, lifted and stacked during moving. These moving supervisors would have a team of movers with them each day for which they would be responsible. The Archives staff would be paired up and assigned specific areas to supervise in packing and moving. My reasoning for having at least two Archives staff with each moving team was so that if anything happened or someone needed to take a break, there would always be at least one pair of eyes ensuring that collections remained in order. What I discovered was how hard it was for each archives staff person to keep their distance and not try to get in there with the movers and actually start moving boxes. We found out the hard way a couple of times how important it was for each of us to stand back and keep our eyes on the big picture of the moving process.

I was insistent, and the rest of the Archives staff agreed, that someone from the Archives be with collections and movers at all times. This included when the trucks were moving up and down the interstate from the off-site storage back to AHC campus. I took that part of the job very seriously, so much so that it earned me about five hours of sitting on the side of I-75 one evening. One Friday afternoon, I had been with the movers as we loaded the last truck of materials for the day. I would follow them back to AHC, unload the truck and begin our weekends on our merry ways. Well, as luck would have it, the last truck did not have enough energy to make it all the way back to the AHC. About two miles before our exit back on to Paces Ferry Road, the moving truck stalled and died on the side of the road. The movers were pretty ok with the situation. They called headquarters and told me that a big-rig tow truck would be on its way shortly. Well, there was no way in my mind that I was going to leave a moving truck full of priceless archival materials just sitting on the side of I-75 in rush hour traffic. I sat right there with the moving truck. Of course, I was in my own vehicle by myself. There were three moving guys in the truck. I'm sure they were having a good time visiting with each other.

As each hour ticked away, I was getting hungrier and more upset that I was going to have to spend the night on the side of I-75. I was seriously considering calling to see if Domino's delivered to stranded drivers when the tow truck and the owner of the moving company pulled up. We were rescued and the collections would be safe. I could not have been happier to have seen another person at that moment! I still was not crazy about the fact that the collections would spend the night on the locked truck until the next morning when we could transfer the collections from the broken down truck to another one and have them moved into the Archives, but that was the only solution at the time. I did follow the truck to the movers' headquarters and watched as the truck was backed up into the loading area, locked inside the gate and I made sure the night guard knew to keep a special eye on that truck. I realize now that I may have been a little too protective. I must say again how wonderful our moving company was. They were patient with me as I had a semi-meltdown about the stalled out truck and every time I asked them to move some shelving one more time, they never once were frustrated with me, at least not directly in front of me.

Collections were not the only things that needed to be moved back into McElreath Hall. Before the renovation, the Archives had dominated the ground floor of the building. After the renovation, the entire building was dedicated to the Archives, which meant that collections could spread out more on not just one floor but two! I decided to color code everything so that movers and archives staffers would be able to easily recognize where containers of collections would need to go, first floor or ground floor. Color coding worked out best with all of the moving needs. Since we had to take collections from one huge warehouse, where photographic collections were mixed with Cherokee Garden collections and general reading room books, we created a standard color code for where containers of collections would need to be delivered. The moving company had provided large, rolling metal containers which would allow for the majority of our box sizes to fit comfortably. These containers were open on one side and shelves could be installed so that boxes on the bottom of the containers would not have to bear the load of six or seven boxes stacked on top of it. Then these containers would get a color coded, sequenced sticker and be wrapped with shrink wrap for the move on the trucks back to AHC campus. On the outside of each wrapped metal bin, the archives staff would apply another color coded sticker and the sequence number so that when the containers were unloaded at AHC campus, the receiving archives staff and moving guys could organize the containers quickly and begin to pull the boxes off of the containers in an organized manner.

Originally, all of the collections were housed on metal, static shelving. One of the many special treats of the renovation was the new moving, compact shelving units which were installed in two of the three major storage spaces on the ground floor. However, we still needed to bring back many of the static shelving units that had been taken out to the off-site storage areas. A big challenge was having to balance taking collections off of shelves at the off-site area, then disassembling shelving, shipping it on the correct truck back to AHC campus, and having it reassembled in time for the collections to go back on the shelves. Some of our most time-consuming mistakes were when static shelving from off-site were placed on the wrong trucks and we had to wait for the trucks to arrive and the shelves to be assembled.

With more available space to dedicate to collections storage, we were also able to separate the collections more and create better environments. For example, the manuscript collections were stored in Stacks One while photographic collections were stored in Stacks Two. Because of the varying environmental needs of these collections and the available space to separate them, we were able to create better environments for both types of collections. Of course, physically separating these collections was much easier said than done. Months and years of work has gone into creating wonderful finding aids to help researchers find the collections they need and then assist the Archives staff in finding the collections in their new locations. The behind the scenes work such as this is immeasurable and immense. I will always be grateful and in awe of the wonderful work the archivists did in preparing collections and following through with such fabulous finding aids.

The original reading room had been a small room tucked away on the ground floor of McElreath Hall. With the renovation, the reading room would be located on the first floor and would be at least four times as large as the original room. Again, more space was wonderful but deciding on how that space was to be laid out and where different collections would be shelved was an extensive exercise in planning. We were now able to dedicate space to major collections such as the Cherokee Garden Library, the Genealogical collections, Civil War & military ordinances and a replica of Franklin Garrett's home library was created in the main entrance-way to the reading room to honor 'Atlanta's official historian'. The renovation was accomplishing so many goals.

I had many different kinds of computer programs available to me to help me lay out floor plans. They were wonderful to experiment with and try new possible shelving layouts. Yet, what I found to be the most helpful was actually taking chalk and measuring tape down to the newly renovated storage rooms and chalking out where the static shelving would be placed. I had to create a list of how many pieces of shelving we had in each of the different sizes and where those sizes of shelving would fit best with which collections stored on them. Also, I had to keep in mind how large and deep the boxes would be on each shelf so that there was plenty of room to get a cart between rows of shelving and the boxes off of the shelves. Just when I would think I had the perfect mix of shelving sizes and arrangement laid out, I would bump into one of those fabulously helpful concrete, load bearing pillars. They were doing a great job holding the floor up, but they really did cause me hours of grief in laying out floor plans. I went through countless boxes of sidewalk chalk, but I had to make sure that we maximized our new space. It had taken almost 75 years for this renovation to take place. This move had to stand the test of time for at least another 75 years!

As with any move, not everything is done even when the last box is placed on the shelf and the last moving truck pulls away from the dock. I remember walking down the rows of newly placed shelving thinking, "maybe it should have been four inches wider here" or "I hope I made the right decision in putting this collection here". I learned something new every day on how to make the moving process better, how to work with my co-workers more effectively and sometimes I learned

things that I would never do again! I have a huge sense of ownership over the move back into McElreath Hall and for a while, I took things personally when someone did not like where a shelf stood or how boxes had been placed back on shelves. But I quickly remembered that I could not please everyone all the time. I did the best that I could with what I had. I can laugh at myself now at how eager I was to begin this project, not knowing fully all that would be involved. I suppose it was better that I had no idea really how much 15,000 cubic feet of collections really were. I might not have even tried it had I known at the beginning everything I learned at the end of the process. Above all my self doubt and anxiety, moving back into our newly renovated McElreath Hall was a huge sigh of relief. We had two years of challenging situations but we never lost sight of the final goals. The entire Archives staff worked tirelessly to keep the collections safe and accessible. Now, six years later, everyone is still thrilled with the space, design and layout of offices, collections, public spaces, etc. I believe that Mr. McElreath and those original 14 Atlantans would be proud of the home we created.

Emily Erwin Weaver received her Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Delta State University and her Master of Arts degree in Public History with an emphasis in Museum Studies from the State University of West Georgia. She has been the Archivist for Delta State University's Archives & Museum since 2003.
