

## **Margaret Cross Norton: Defining and Redefining Archives and the Archival Profession.**

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### **Abstract:**

Through her thirty-five years of service as head of the Illinois State Archives, her numerous writings in library and archival publications, and her involvement in the establishment and growth of the Society of American Archivists, Margaret Cross Norton helped establish the archival profession in America. Her emphasis on the legal and administrative functions of archives and on the use of archives by governmental officials instigated a shift in the American archival mindset and provided a basis for professional respect. She defined and redefined the nature of archives and archival work, providing an example for advocacy and education that resonates in the profession today.

**Keywords:** Margaret Cross Norton | archives | archival profession

### **Article:**

During the cold Chicago December of 1914 more than four hundred historians gathered at the Auditorium Hotel for the thirtieth meeting of the American Historical Association. Attendees were treated to a special exhibition of "rare Americana" at the Newberry Library. The Art Institute of Chicago hosted a public lecture and reception. Papers were presented on topics ranging from the reign of Hadrian to medieval clerical salaries to an account of cabinet meetings under President James K. Polk. Fifty of these historians who attended the annual Conference of Archivists, a subgroup of the larger AHA, heard presentations on the Public Archives Commission and an examination of legislation affecting archival work. One young attendee was particularly enthralled by the presentation of Waldo G. Leland, in which he advocated the creation of a national archives. In his talk Leland "distinguished sharply between historical manuscripts and archives" and emphasized the "official importance of archives in the government." (1)

The attendee, a trained historian and librarian, had become disillusioned with her current work as a library cataloger, a position in which she felt restricted and unchallenged. Hearing Leland's impassioned plea, young Margaret Cross Norton declared, "Now that's what I want to do--I want to be an archivist!" (2) Through her thirty-five years of service as the head of the Illinois State

Archives, her numerous writings in library and archival publications, and her involvement in the establishment and growth of the Society of American Archivists, Norton would help establish the archival profession in America. She would define and redefine the nature of archives and archival work, providing an example for advocacy and education that resonates in the profession today.

"I Want to Be an Archivist!"

Born in Rockford, Illinois, on July 7, 1891, Norton learned the importance of records and record creation at an early age. At the time of her parents' marriage Norton's mother served as deputy county treasurer and her father as deputy county clerk for Winnebago County, Illinois. On days when young Margaret spent time at her father's office, he encouraged her to "play in the vault." Norton later noted that "it had a balcony and that had great fascination for me." She watched attorneys access the vault's records, and she observed "how and why records were being created, and how they were used." At home this records-rich environment continued, as her father frequently discussed his work with both wife and daughter. He issued marriage licenses from their home and utilized his wife's "expert bookkeeper" skills to balance the county's large assessment books. Official governmental records--their preservation and their use--were a part of young Margaret's everyday world. (3)

After high school graduation Norton earned bachelor's (1913) and master's (1914) degrees in history from the University of Chicago. She saw her future professional career limited to those deemed acceptable at the time for women. In Norton's mind librarianship was a logical choice ("because Margaret likes to read, she should become a librarian"). (4) Norton enrolled in the New York State Library School at Albany, earning a bachelor of library science degree in 1915. She graduated at a time of tremendous growth in the number of women in the library profession. From 1876 to 1900 the percentage of librarians who were female skyrocketed from 19 percent to 74.7 percent. (5) While men continued to dominate many of the high-level administrative positions, educated women like Norton were attracted to librarianship. With her degree Norton began her career working in the library at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Norton's first professional position, however, did not provide the fulfillment she sought. While working at Vassar, Norton found herself to be "a complete misfit" and decided that librarianship was "too cut and dried [and] inflexible." (6) She quickly determined that "library work was not for me unless I could get into the historical library field." (7) It was shortly after beginning her

work at Vassar that Norton attended the 1914 American Historical Association meeting and became fascinated by Leland's presentation on governmental archives and the need for a national archives.

Soon thereafter Norton left library work for that of archives and manuscripts. After a brief period spent calendaring manuscript collections in the Department of Archives and History at the Indiana State Library, Norton began a two-year fellowship for further study at the University of Chicago. After completion of her fellowship in 1920 Norton began work as a cataloger in the Missouri State Historical Society in Columbia. From there she was recruited to head the new Illinois State Archives in Springfield. On January 10, 1922, at the age of thirty, she accepted the position, although with some reservations. She had been under the impression that this position was to head an existing division, "not very important because I had never seen any reports on the Illinois Archives." She noted, "I felt like crawling under something." Norton, however, "braved up, and told myself--I cannot do anything worse than fail. Take the job." (8) After spending the next three months touring archival facilities across the United States, Norton arrived in Springfield and began her work as archivist of Illinois in April 1922.

### Developing the Illinois State Archives

At the time of Norton's arrival in Springfield the few state archival agencies that existed were primarily passive in nature, accepting whatever records came their way. The agencies she visited before beginning her appointment did not provide her with the guidance or examples she wished to find. Shortly after beginning her work at the Illinois State Archives, she traveled to Des Moines for a meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association. There she met with Cassius Stiles, head of the Iowa State Archives. In Iowa Norton found an institution grappling with many of the issues she needed to address, issues related to the management of modern government records. Stiles had arranged his records by provenance (office of origin) and prepared contextual administrative histories of Iowa state departments. (9)

Supplementing this practical example was Norton's discovery of the European archival tradition exemplified by Hilary Jenkinson, whose work *Manual of Archive Administration* was published in late 1922. Norton immediately was drawn to Jenkinson's emphasis on the importance of provenance and the value of records in documenting government and other official business. She declared that "this manual firmly established the principle of provenance as the only correct method of arrangement of archives, and explained clearly the reasons therefore." Norton noted

that the publication "did not stir as much excitement among American archivists as it should have." (10) For her, however, Jenkinson's manual was "my Bible." (11)

Confident in her belief in the administrative importance of records, Norton began building the archival program in Illinois. At times the work was tedious and dirty. She later described her earliest work finding and identifying records that had been misplaced or disregarded for years. Tying back her hair and wearing a black smock to protect her clothing, Norton set forth on expeditions throughout the Illinois capitol. Armed with a piece of lead pipe that she could use to make noise and disperse the "largest rats I have ever seen," Norton soon recovered records that had remained hidden for years. Within a month of her arrival she found the governor's letter book for 1823, which contained important evidence that the state had forwarded to the federal government the Post and Paul survey map of the Illinois and Michigan canal route. This notable source, which possibly saved the state over a million dollars in a pending lawsuit over a land claim, was uncovered "in a sub-basement vault under the east steps of the Capitol building in an area which was used as a depository for sweepings." After ascending an unsteady ladder to the capitol attic, Norton discovered a package containing the official territorial census of 1818. A later search through the Office of the Department of Registration and Education produced the records of the General Assembly during the period of Abraham Lincoln's membership. (12)

With the completion of the Centennial Building in June 1923 Norton was given dedicated space and opportunity to begin transferring state government records to her holdings. In her 1924 biennial report to the secretary of state, the government official in charge of the archives, Norton emphasized that "the chief function of an archives department is to preserve records for which presumably little official demand exists, but which are of historical or other potential value." She noted that "in transferring records to this department, no arbitrary date has been set behind which records shall be counted as archives, but each series of papers is brought over as soon as the head of the department concerned considers them no longer in current use." (13)

Two years later her next report expanded her plans, detailing the ways in which an archival agency would directly benefit government officials. She noted that "increasing business and congested quarters make it more and more difficult for state officials to care properly for the current records of their departments, and practically impossible to care at all for the older and seldom used documents, which, however, because of their historical and legal value must be preserved and made available for use when needed." Clerks were called away from other business to attend to questions related to these documents, many of which were buried under the current materials and field in out-of-the-way locales. In the archives, however, "records are filed and inventoried scientifically, needed repairs and binding are done, and persons wishing to

consult them can be served quickly and easily." Norton positioned the archives as a fundamental service that aids all government officials by relieving the burdens of overcrowding and making staff more efficient. (14)

As a result of her effectiveness in persuading government officials to deposit in the archives office records that had accumulated through the decades, Norton was forced as early as 1929 to begin lobbying for increased storage space. In a report to the secretary of state she explained that "recently the Archives Division has had to transfer a large bulk of its records to a new storeroom because they were obviously overweighting not only the stacks but also the workroom." In the design of the work and storage spaces for the archives "it was assumed that because the Archives Division is a unit in the State Library, it is a library and administered as such." The design for the space was based on the assumption that the archives consisted primarily of bound volumes stored on shelves, similar to the storage needs of a library. As Norton adamantly asserted, this assumption was "erroneous." In addition to articulating the need for additional space necessitated by the increase in the bulk of records housed in the archives, she emphasized that to facilitate use by the creating agencies and other officials her records "are chiefly stored in steel filing cabinets instead of as books on shelves." (15)

Two events in the early 1930s greatly enhanced Norton's need for additional space. In 1933, when Democrat Henry Horner became the new governor of Illinois, bringing a change of party to the capitol and an overall change in administration, outgoing administrators transferred records to the archives before leaving office. Norton noted that "so much material came in so fast that a complete physical reorganization of all files in the Archives Division had to be made. All files have been condensed as much as possible and transfer cases piled much higher than either convenience or safety warrants." She added that "space for not more than one year's normal expansion has been thereby provided." Adding to the immediacy of Norton's argument for more space was a 1934 fire that destroyed the State Arsenal Building and many of the adjutant general's records. This destruction reinforced to state officials the importance of proper preservation of records, leading them to transfer more and more records to the archives. After only ten years of existence, the archives found that "because of space limitations it was impossible to accept all the records offered and accessions had to be confined to records from departments already using the Archives Division as a depository." (16)

Norton used these events in concert with her emphasis on the archives as an important administrative function to successfully lobby the state for a new facility. In 1935 the General Assembly appropriated \$500,000 for the construction of the building. An additional \$320,000 was added by the federal Public Works Administration. In the design of the building Norton's

belief in the legal and administrative role of the archives shone through. She proudly stated that the building "is unique in that, unlike the other two archives buildings in this country, the National Archives in Washington and the Maryland Hall of Records at Annapolis, this building will house not only the older non-current records of historical importance, but also semi-current records still under the jurisdiction of the departments of origin." (17) Departmental vaults were provided to give individual state departments secure storage for records that were valuable but still faced semifrequent administrative use. Departments were issued keys for accessing their individual vaults, and the departments themselves maintained legal custody for the records stored therein. These records could be removed from the building by department officials and returned to the creating office when needed. Upon depositing materials in the departmental vault, the creating agencies worked with the archives staff to keep general inventories of records to ensure that the vaults were used for records storage purposes only. In this way the archivist could more readily identify the location of the records that needed to be transferred to the archives and could more easily facilitate the transfer to the archival storage vaults when the records had passed through the phase of semifrequent use.

With this new facility and new storage options came a need for an increase in trained staff dedicated to the organization of and access to these records. Even with funding, however, Norton faced difficulty in procuring qualified staff, as "unfortunately there is at present no school in the United States offering specific training in archives work." She required "professional archives assistants" and deemed it a mistake to assume that "because archives are made up of files, anyone who can be trained as a file clerk would make a good archives assistant." She argued that "because no formal training is yet offered, it is a mistake to assume that none is needed." (18) Norton then turned her efforts to promoting professional archival training programs in Illinois and throughout the United States.

## Identifying and Addressing National Archival Issues

Norton first entered the national scene with a presentation in front of the Conference of Archivists at the AHA's annual meeting in 1929. Speaking to the crowd of historians, Norton presented a paper entitled "The Archives Department as an Administrative Unit in Government" and argued her belief that archival records existed primarily to serve the parent government. While noting that considerable archival legislation had been passed in recent years, she pointed out that "in reality only about a dozen states in the whole country [provided] sustained and systematic care to their official records." This, Norton argued, was due to the popular misconception of archival records as useful primarily for historical research. Inadequate funding and, in some of the newer states, lack of a separate archives department were a result of this

mindset. In order to thrive archives must be seen as holding legally and administratively valuable records, "the destruction of which records might seriously inconvenience the administration of state business." Archivists, she asserted, must see their primary service as being "in business efficiency, and only secondarily" in history. (19)

Norton's presentation to the historians was met "in stony silence." At the conference she received encouragement only from the historian Milo Quaife of the Burton Historical Collection in Detroit, whom Norton recalled saying, "Margaret, you done [sic] noble. You are way ahead of them and they don't know what you are talking about." Later she received a letter from Solon J. Buck, future archivist of the United States, who saw a reference to Norton's paper in the conference's published proceedings. To help build support for the fledgling National Archives, he requested a copy of her paper, "hoping it would help dispel the all too common attitude held by the public and some officials that the National Archives was no different than a library, museum, or historical society." (20)

A few months later at the 1930 meeting of the National Association of State Libraries Norton delivered nearly the same address but was met with a strikingly different reception. In American State Archives Ernst Posner declared Norton's presentation to be "perhaps the most important and influential paper" to come out of the professional meetings of this time. The state librarians were much more open to Norton's emphasis on the administrative function of state archives and de-emphasis on the historical use. "Since service to public officials was a tradition with them, they understood what she was talking about." (21)

The presentation theme was repeated yet again at the 1937 conference of the American Library Association. In a paper entitled "Scope and Functions of a State Archives Department" Norton drew a sharp line between archives (records) and historical manuscripts, which she referred to as "private archives." She argued that "private archives need no particular discussion here, because, strictly speaking, ... they belong, so far as the archivist is concerned, in the category of historical manuscripts. They may be cataloged and classified in accordance with archival principles; they may be housed in a state archives establishment; but they are not records of public business and should not be regarded as part of the archives proper." (22) Within her strict terminology she defined archives in a way that highlighted the aspects of archival work that made it a critical part of a functioning government.

These presentations served multiple purposes. In addition to promoting her definition of archives and archival work Norton was able to reach out beyond historians to groups of professional librarians. This fusion of library and archival science was a groundbreaking idea among educators in these professions. In 1937, in response to Norton's letter requesting information on established courses in archival practice, Victor H. Paltsits, historian and chief of the manuscript department of the New York Public Library, wrote that "a school for archival science should be as distinctive, professionally," as the school for library science. He added that "you could not find five librarians in the United States who know what archival science is." (23)

As many of the state archives were administratively housed within state libraries, Norton saw great importance in educating librarians in archival practice. (24) During her tenure at the Illinois State Archives she frequently contributed a column to *Illinois Libraries*, the official publication of the State Library, in which she presented basic information on archival practice and the role of the archives in the government. She also stressed the importance of educating librarians who might be asked to take charge of or who might become interested in the preservation of local archives.

In spite of the differences Norton saw many similarities between the two professions. Having education and training as both a historian and a librarian, Norton understood both worlds and was an active participant in the American Historical Association as well as the American Library Association. She argued that "an archivist requires more technique than simply training in historical research, just as a Ph.D. in English does not per se qualify a person to be a librarian. Archivists need training in their technical fields, analogous to that of a library school." While she did not think that a library school degree alone qualified one for professional archival work, she did feel that, "because there are certain overlapping techniques--for instance, the physical preservation and repair of manuscripts and old books," it would be possible to add archival coursework to an existing library school curriculum. (25)

For many years Norton sought to establish an archives curriculum at the University of Illinois or the University of Chicago. She crafted a detailed proposal that included coursework in administrative issues, classification and cataloging, preservation, editorial work, and bibliography and reference. She emphasized most strongly, however, the need for courses in governmental organization and for opportunities to perform fieldwork. Norton suggested that students be instructed on political parties; federal, state, and local governmental organization; and other aspects of political science. In fact, she hoped that, if successful, this type of program would resolve "the long and bitter struggle between librarians and historians for dominance over archival training. I think Political Scientists could and should have taken the leading role there."

(26) In regard to fieldwork, Norton emphasized the need for a "practical experience in the Illinois Archives or the National Archives, supplemented by such instruction as cannot well be given at the University." She argued that "most of the technical work in an archives school must be taught by archivists still actively engaged in archival work. Archival science in America is still in the experimental stage and the contact with these experiments will be most beneficial to the student." (27) Norton believed that this level of education was necessary in order to produce quality archivists who could effectively fill the professional opportunities available.

### Building a Distinct Profession

A need for qualified archivists and professional training opportunities grew from the numerous archival establishments founded in the first three decades of the twentieth century. By the end of the 1930s almost every state, influenced by the work of the American Historical Association's Public Archives Commission, had an established archival management agency or had designated an existing agency to be the depository for official government records. (28) The founding of the National Archives in 1934 contributed further to the need for professionals. Publicity for this new government agency generated popular interest in archives and records. The Historical Records Survey, a New Deal program established in 1936, surveyed and indexed historically valuable state, county, and local records. In Norton's words, "All in all, no more propitious time could have been found for the proclaiming by archivists that they were now a distinct profession." (29)

The 1934 annual meeting of the American Historical Association--a celebration of the organization's fiftieth anniversary--proved to be a source of growth for archival professionalism. Robert D. W. Connor, the newly appointed archivist of the United States, spoke on the issues confronting him in the development of the National Archives and provided members with a tour of the National Archives Building, which was nearing completion." (30) At the meeting Norton approached Connor about his opinions on a distinct professional organization for American archivists. He told Norton that "he felt very strongly that a separate organization was necessary if archivists were to be recognized as professionals and our organization to be kept out of politics." (31) He emphasized the need for archivists to have their own professional journal and sets of standards for training. Connor did, however, recommend expanding the potential membership qualifications to include historians, manuscript curators, and editors of published manuscript collections to assure a sufficient number of members to support the organization.

It was Connor's desire that he and the National Archives not dominate the new professional group. Therefore, Norton joined with Thomas M. Owen, Jr., national historian of the American Legion and former assistant director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, and Thomas P. Martin, head of the manuscript division of the Library of Congress, to form an informal committee to gauge interest in a professional archival association. After contacting a number of archivists, the group was assured that the interest indeed existed. (32) At the AHA meeting in December 1935 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, according to the *American Historical Review's* summary of the conference, "the archivists decided to form an association of their own and took the first steps toward such a goal." (33) The Committee of Ten on the Organization of Archivists, with Norton a member, was charged with drafting a constitution for a distinct professional organization. (34) The committee declared that "the objects of the Society of American Archivists shall be to promote sound principles of archival economy and to facilitate cooperation among archivists and archival agencies." (35) A draft constitution was adopted, officers and a five-member council were elected, and the new organization was officially established.

Membership in the Society of American Archivists (SAA) required application to the council, which included Norton as vice president. On December 30, 1936 the council admitted 125 individuals as founding members of the SAA. Twenty-nine (23.2 percent) of these were women. With the election of 101 more archivists in 1937, the percentage of women in the SAA rose to 28 percent. Despite the fact that nearly a quarter of the membership was female, Norton was the only woman to present a paper at the first SAA meeting. (36)

Norton's involvement in the SAA intensified in the ensuing years. After serving as vice president (1936-37) and council member at large (1937-42), Norton was elected the first female president of the SAA in 1943, serving until 1945. During this time she continued emphasizing the administrative importance of archives and the need for further development of the profession. Earning respect from her fellow state archivists as well as from the staff of the National Archives, Norton became a bridge between the two groups, advocating cooperation and equal involvement from both groups in the growth of archival practice. She chaired the program committee for the SAA's annual meeting in 1950, and, at the request of SAA president Philip C. Brooks, she planned a session "in which state and national archivists would present papers outlining what professional contributions and obligations each group expected of the other." (37)

In 1945 Norton assumed a role of great influence in the profession when she became editor of *American Archivist*. When the first issue was published eight years earlier, Norton had expressed a desire for the SAA's professional journal to serve as a resource for archival educators and

professionals. She hoped that, in light of a lack of textbook material, *American Archivist* would be a forum for the development of archival techniques. Theodore Pease, the journal's first editor, disagreed, however, and focused instead on the use of archives in historical writing. A number of archivists, Norton included, expressed an interest in *American Archivist* becoming more of a "trade publication," allowing for the investigation and development of professional practices. In her 1944 presidential address to the SAA Norton noted concern over "a feeling have in reading the *American Archivist*, that we archivists are, consciously or unconsciously, trying to impress each other with our erudition. ... Surely all of us are thinking about our work constantly, and surely each of us is doing something distinctive which is adding bit by bit to our efficiency as archivists." (38) Tensions rose, and in 1945 Pease resigned his editorship. Norton was selected to the position, and, for the next three years, "the journal was purged of the influence of historical scholarship, no longer publishing articles that detailed the scholarly use of archival materials." (39) Instead, she stressed a need for case studies and focused the journal on articles devoted to the practical aspects of archival work. Shorter technical pieces were solicited in an effort to "facilitate the exchange of ideas as to methods, equipment, and archival theories." (40) She began the practice of publishing the annual reports of the SAA's committees, allowing members to more closely monitor the activities of the SAA and the issues and advancements in the profession. Norton's emphasis on practical professionalism carried forward throughout the rest of her career, as she remained a vocal proponent for the need for a greater understanding of the functional needs of the archivist.

**\*Figure 1 has been omitted from this formatted document.\***

### Creation, Destruction, and Records Management

From the time she began at the Illinois State Archives, Norton was faced with the challenge of dealing with a large quantity of records and selecting for retention those that had long-term value. During the 1930s she took pride in the departmental vault space afforded in the new State Archives Building. Records stored in this space, however, were controlled by the departmental staff, with archives staff serving only as overseer of the space. In a February 1943 report to the secretary of state Norton noted that overcrowding in offices and the demand for greater protection of the records during World War II resulted in "important legal files previously not considered for transfer because of their current use ... being brought to the [archives] building because of its relatively greater security." (41) She began to urge her colleagues to formulate both a definition of "record" and a decision process for the long-term retention of records. Her 1944 presidential address to the Society of American Archivists emphasized the importance of such a definition in the disposal and retention of this growing volume of information.

The accumulation of information and the haphazard transfer of records to the archives continued, and in 1946 Norton formally requested that "the Archives Department [be permitted to] advise State Officials in relation to the creation of records and the Public Records Commission Act which recognizes its interest in the final disposition of the records." Because "the archivist had a participating interest in the State's records from the time they are created until they are either deposited in the archives or destroyed as useless," the archivist should be allowed to control the bulk of records throughout the records life cycle, she declared. (42) Not until five years later, in 1951, was this authority granted. Norton chaired the committee charged with scheduling and destruction of records, but its members were not given the staff necessary to enforce the schedules. Five more years would pass before records management was funded as a permanent staff function of the archives.

The year 1956 also saw the opening of the new Illinois State Records Center. Under the auspices of the archives, the building was constructed specifically to "house and service those semi-current records which are under retention schedules." Those working in the State Records Center took responsibility "for the destruction of records which have been retained for the prescribed periods." Permanent records continued to be housed in the State Archives Building. The primary benefit Norton saw for her department was an "improved quality of records coming into the State Archives." Archivists would be better able to plan for growth because of the well-defined retention schedule. Reference services would improve as the total volume of records decreased. Overall, she believed that records management would allow the State Archives to become "a well organized group of significant records, no longer a hodge-podge of miscellaneous odds and ends with serious informational gaps." (43)

Norton used her platform as a well-respected member of the state and national archival community to argue for cooperation among archival and records management professionals. In a 1956 article in *Illinois Libraries* she argued that, while the "training of records managers in management engineering qualifies them to tailor records to fit the need of the administrator, ... the archivist's training in research methods, his intimate knowledge of the history of his government, and his experience with the various ways in which records are used for purposes other than administration qualify him to take an active part in the creation of government records." In an event she described as "one of the happiest occasions of my professional career" Norton was made the guest of honor at a reception given by the National Records Management Council at the 1956 Society of American Archivists meeting in Washington, D.C. (44)

Upon Norton's retirement in 1957 the Illinois secretary of state praised her leadership in instituting the records management program, writing to her that "were it not for your good work that program might never have been inaugurated in Illinois. ... The records management program is turning out just as you predicted it would--one of the finest programs the state of Illinois ever inaugurated. ... I am confident that the State will benefit down the years because of that fine program." (45) By the time of Norton's retirement the state of Illinois had the nation's first state-level, fully integrated archives program with a formal records management component.

## Conclusion

In retirement Norton withdrew from professional involvement, expressing a desire to step aside and allow a new generation of archivists to determine the direction for the profession. She made only a few public appearances and then only upon special invitation. She turned down numerous requests from colleagues to write a book on archival operations. Instead, Norton argued that she "preferred to travel and to sit in her home on the shores of Lake Springfield and watch the rabbits." (46) Although she left the professional spotlight, Norton never left behind the profession or her devotion to the advancement of archival practice. When she died on May 21, 1984 at the age of ninety-two, Norton left her entire estate to the Society of American Archivists. When the contents of her home were examined, a small framed photograph of the Illinois State Archives Building was discovered on her nightstand. (47) In 1995 Norton was honored posthumously with the rededication of the building in her name.

In 1973, in response to a request for an interview centered on her role in the early years of the American archival movement, Norton modestly stated, "I was not a leader, rather, a good follower, but I was articulate, being a woman, therefore well documented." (48) Despite her unpretentious nature, Norton's influence on the profession continues to resonate. In the early years of the development of the American archival profession Norton stressed a need for independence as well as practicality. By refocusing archivists' attention on their parent institution's needs, she provided a framework for advocacy as well as a justification for the profession's growth.

Nationally, her involvement in the founding of the Society of American Archivists offered archivists professional independence, separate from historians. The profession was allowed to develop its own conference and professional publication. At a time when archivists were struggling to define their role in the records universe, the founding of the SAA allowed for

exchange of information on practical issues in the management of records--management based not solely on their interpretation and use by historians. Norton's writings and professional involvement put a spotlight on the differences between the management of archives and that of historical manuscripts as well as the importance of the principles of provenance and original order. She focused the profession on itself and on its own developmental needs. By encouraging archivists to question and report on their own methods and theories, Norton gave voice to the functional needs of a growing profession. She provided archivists with a forum for discourse and development.

Norton's emphasis on the legal and administrative functions of archives and on the use of archives by governmental officials instigated a shift in the American archival mindset and provided a basis for professional respect. Archivists no longer existed primarily to serve the research purposes of a third party. While she never denied the usefulness of archives as a documentary resource, she was quick to focus on the importance of the archives to its parent organization. Instead of serving historians, the archives' core purpose was to serve the practical needs of its parent organization through the retention and disposal of records, a critical role in a world of exponential growth in information production.

With training in management, organizational history, and preservation, archivists alone, Norton argued, were specially trained to manage this growth. Positioning themselves as critical to an organization's core functions and efficiency, archivists were better able to argue for funding and for professional recognition. Through her work at the Illinois State Archives she provided a concrete example of this mindset and laid the framework for governmental archives that would function independently of state libraries or historical societies. This mindset would extend beyond the governmental realm with the establishment of corporate and organizational archival collections formed chiefly to document the administrative and legal demands of a parent institution.

At a critical time in the profession's development Norton provided archivists with guidance through an emphasis on practicality. She demonstrated the importance of professional archival training to the efficiency of an organization, arguing for a broad system of formal education that would encompass library science, history, business, and political science. For Norton, archives did not exist primarily as a historian's playground, and archivists did not simply perform the work of a file clerk. In the early years of the profession in America, through her writings and her professional experience, Norton helped define what an archives is and what an archivist can and should do.

## Notes

- (1.) "The Meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago," *American Historical Review* 20 (April 1915): 520.
- (2.) Margaret Cross Norton to William Birdsall, May 24, 1973, reel 3, Margaret Cross Norton Working Papers (microfilm), Illinois State Archives, Springfield (hereafter cited as Working Papers). The Illinois State Archives' biographical sketch of Norton ([http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/norton\\_bio.html](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/norton_bio.html)) also derives many facts about Norton's life from these Birdsall letters.
- (3.) Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (4.) Norton to Birdsall, May 24, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (5.) Carolyn Kenady, *Pay Equity: An Action Manual for Library Workers* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989).
- (6.) Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (7.) Norton to Birdsall, May 24, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (8.) Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (9.) Illinois State Archives, "Margaret Cross Norton: A Biographical Sketch," Cyberdrive Illinois, n.d., [http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/norton\\_bio.html](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/norton_bio.html), accessed March 30, 2008.
- (10.) Norton to Birdsall, October 26, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (11.) Norton to Birdsall, May 24, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (12.) "Founder of State Archives Resigns," *Illinois State Journal Register*, March 24, 1957, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (13.) "Biennial Report, 1922-24," reel 1, Working Papers.
- (14.) "Biennial Report, 1924-26," reel 1, Working Papers.
- (15.) Ibid.
- (16.) "Biennial Report, 1932-34," reel 1, Working Papers.
- (17.) "Biennial Report, 1934-36," reel 1, Working Papers. The officers and council members of the Society of American Archivists regarded the facility's opening highly and chose to hold their second annual meeting in conjunction with the building's dedication.

- (18.) "Biennial Report, 1936-38," reel 1, Working Papers.
- (19.) William F. Birdsall, "The American Archivists' Search for Professional Identity, 1909-1936," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1973, 134, 136.
- (20.) Ibid., 139, 187-88.
- (21.) Ibid., 192.
- (22.) Margaret Cross Norton, "Scope and Functions of a State Archives Department," in *Archives and Libraries: Papers Presented at the 1937 Conference of the American Library Association*, ed. A. F. Kuhlman (Chicago: American Library Association, 1937), 274.
- (23.) Victor H. Paltsits to Norton, February 8, 1937, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (24.) A 1930 survey revealed that out of twenty-seven states having some sort of official archival agency, twelve were located within the state library (Birdsall, "The American Archivists' Search," 192).
- (25.) Norton to Birdsall, May 31, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (26.) Ibid.
- (27.) Margaret Cross Norton, "The Training of Archivists: Informal Discussion," in Kuhlman, *Archives and Libraries*, 305, 299.
- (28.) Established in 1899 by members of the American Historical Association, the Public Archives Commission was charged with surveying all state archival repositories. Between 1900 and 1917 its members created lists of holdings and focused attention on public records and the conditions in which they were housed.
- (29.) Norton to Birdsall, October 26, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (30.) "The Fiftieth Anniversary Meeting," *American Historical Review* 40 (April 1935): 432.
- (31.) Norton to Birdsall, May 31, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.
- (32.) Birdsall, "The American Archivists' Search," 148-49.
- (33.) "The Association at Chattanooga," *American Historical Review* 41 (April 1936): 456.
- (34.) The group included one other female member. Ruth Blair, the state archivist of Georgia, also played a key role in the founding and early years of the Society of American Archivists.
- (35.) Quoted in J. Frank Cook, "The Blessings of Providence on an Association of Archivists," in *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, ed. Randall C. Jimerson (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000), 376.

- (36.) Michele F. Pacifico, "Founding Mothers: Women in the Society of American Archivists, 1936-1972," *American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 373, 380. Norton repeated her paper "The Scope and Functions of State Archives." Helen Chatfield, archivist at the Department of the Treasury, participated in this meeting as a session chair but did not present a formal paper.
- (37.) Cook, "The Blessings of Providence," 155-56.
- (38.) Margaret Cross Norton, "Some Legal Aspects of Archives," *American Archivist* 8 (January 1945): 3.
- (39.) Luke Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History," in Jimerson, *American Archival Studies*, 131.
- (40.) "The Change in Editorship of the *American Archivist*," *American Archivist* 9 (July 1946): 234.
- (41.) "Budget Justification Report," February 27, 1943, reel 1, Working Papers.
- (42.) "Biennial Report, 1944-46," reel 1, Working Papers.
- (43.) "Biennial Report, 1954-56," reel 1, Working Papers.
- (44.) Margaret Cross Norton, *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival & Records Management* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975; repr., Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), 248.
- (45.) "Founder of State Archives Resigns," reel 3, Working Papers.
- (46.) Thornton W. Mitchell, introduction to Norton, *Norton on Archives*, xxi. Mitchell explains in his introduction how he and Ernst Posner determined that, if Norton was not interested in writing a book, they would compile some of her best writings and ideas. In 1964 they began collecting Norton's works from a variety of sources, including writings from Illinois Archives and the *American Archivist* and presentations from a number of professional conferences. The volume was reprinted as part of the Society of American Archivists' Archival Classics Series in 2003.
- (47.) Illinois State Archives, "Margaret Cross Norton: A Biographical Sketch."
- (48.) Norton to Birdsall, October 26, 1973, reel 3, Working Papers.