

GEORGIA ARCHIVES UPDATE

Call To Action: Support The Archives, Get Involved

by Vivian Price

The situation is grim.

Staff has been cut to the point that carrying out the Archives mission of collecting and caring for public records and making them available to the public is a challenge. The Georgia Archives now is open to the public only two days a week, the least of any Archives in the nation. Combined with holidays, the Archives was open only four days during the month of November.

Supporters of the Archives are now being called upon to get involved in an effort to restore at least a part of the Archives budget.

Kaye Minchew, director of the Troup County Historical Society and Archives and chairman of the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board, is leading the effort.

The issue, Minchew says, is not just the inconvenience to hobby genealogists who want to look up facts about their ancestors.

The Archives Matters

"The holdings of the Georgia State Archives matter to many different aspects of our daily life. Archives help us prove our legal positions in court cases plus they contain extensive family information. Georgia, Florida and Alabama are currently involved in 'water wars' related to the water in our rivers. As a Georgia taxpayer, I hope every needed document can be found and used in Georgia's legal defense.

"Archives also matter because they house records about the people of our state – the very people who helped make us a great state to live in. They have genealogical and historical documents about individuals plus they often have photographs and stories about families."

Jurisdictions from the smallest town to the state of Georgia itself look to the Archives for records that aid in resolving legal disputes.

Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp said he recently negotiated a dispute about the Bibb-Monroe county line. "Two



"We have got to have people out there who understand and advocate."

Brian Kemp, Georgia Secretary of State

surveys were done, but no records could be found. The two counties spent \$1.5 million fighting. Settling disputes can be very expensive if you don't have the documents."

The Bibb-Monroe issue is one example of how adequate funding now could save the state much more in the future.

The Georgia Archives (and the adjacent National Archives) also is a tourist destination. People who schedule visits to the Archives, sometimes annually, now are likely to plan their research trips elsewhere.

The average Archives visitor comes from 130 miles away, according to a 2010 University of Michigan study, Minchew said.

Visitors Help Economy

"Businesses in the area, along with state tourism and the economy as a whole, are losing out on dollars that visitors to State Archives spent when they were not actually in the reference room. When you drive at least 130 miles to get somewhere, you often stop to eat, buy gas, maybe spend the night in a local hotel, and may go shopping in conjunction with a visit to the Archives. Being open fewer hours has a definite negative impact on the local economy."

Because of the budget cuts, Georgia has lost a good bit of prestige

as having one of the nation's top archival facilities. The cuts also have resulted in the loss of a significant number of personnel. The Archives has lost not only staffers who know about Georgia's history but about the Archives itself.

"Certainly Georgia's reputation as one of the best state archives in the country is being hurt by the limited hours," she said. "Also with staff retiring and leaving their positions, much expertise and knowledge has been lost. Archives' staff members continue to work five days per week on state records. They collect state records and provide access when state officials request records. That said, I worry that having fewer staff members at the Archives might mean that records we need in, say, 50 years for a legal case might not have been collected. The cut-back in staff has been great, as much institutional knowledge about the Archives and its holdings has been lost."

Don't Wait Until January

Both Kemp and Minchew agree that citizens should not wait until the legislative session begins in January to make their voices heard. The pre-budget process begins before opening day.

Please see reverse side

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Linda S. Hughes

Dear GGS Member,

The 2011 session of the Georgia General Assembly saw the budget of the Georgia Archives slashed, yet again. The situation has become so dire that the Archives is open to the public only two days per week. This once proud and nationally respected institution is but a shadow of its former self. Staff positions have been eliminated, and programs abolished or much diminished.

Of all state archives, the Georgia Archives has the dubious distinction of being open to the public the fewest number of hours per week.

It is time for a change. It is time that our elected officials be made aware that we, the citizenry, are outraged that our access to public records is limited to seventeen hours per week (Friday and Saturday, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.).

The following chart from the Friends of the Georgia Archives and History illustrates the decline in Archives budget and staff over the past 30 years:

YEAR	BUDGET	BUDGET IN 2011 DOLLARS	NUMBER OF STAFF
1982	\$3,297,000	\$7,523,000	90
1992	4,166,000	6,538,000	65
2002	5,409,000	6,620,000	54
2012 (projected)	4,819,000	4,819,000	18
REDUCTION SINCE 1983		-36%	-80%

Source: <http://www.fogah.org> 2011

Action is needed now. Do not wait until the 2012 session, or it may be too late. I urge you to contact your officials.

Your expression of support will boost Secretary of State Brian Kemp's efforts. Secretary Kemp may be contacted through the link on the Secretary of State's website: <http://www.sos.georgia.gov/> or send a letter to: Secretary of State Brian Kemp, 214 State Capitol, Atlanta, GA 30334.

Write your legislators, as well as Gov. Nathan Deal, to request that the Archives budget be restored and public access hours expanded.

You can find the name and contact information for your state representative and senator at: <http://www.legis.ga.gov>.

You may e-mail Governor Deal through the "contact us" link at: <http://www.Gov.GA.Gov>, or send a letter to: Gov. Nathan Deal, State Capitol, Atlanta, GA 30334.

Thank you.

Linda Hughes, President
Georgia Genealogical Society

"Now we all need to be prepared to speak to our members of the state House of Representatives and the state Senate about the need to increase funding for state Archives," Minchew said.

Funding Needed For Staffing And Rent

Minchew would like supporters of the Archives to ask for enough additional funding to keep the Archives open to the public five days a week.

"I have been telling state leaders that Georgians and local and state agencies need records at the state Archives on a daily basis to help meet their basic legal requirements. In addition, people need access to records to document their own genealogy and do research on local, regional and national historical topics. We realize that the state budget is hurting, but we are not asking for much money. We need to get our state Archives back to a functional level."

Many Archives expenses, such as rent and utilities, are fixed and cannot be reduced even when the budget is cut.

Kemp is focusing on a single part of the budget. The Archives is required to pay rent to the state for occupying its building in Morrow. The lease includes an annual "escalator," an increase of 1.5 percent per year.

"For three years running the legislature has not funded the escalator. That's a total of \$120,000," Kemp said. "If they don't fund it this year, it amounts to almost \$200,000 cut from the budget."

Kemp also urges citizens to support the Archives, and he has some specific suggestions on how to go about it.

"What have to do is to make the legislature understand why the facility and the mission are important," he said. "We have to continue to educate. We haven't done a good job of that in the past."

He said supporters should write personal letters emphasizing the Archives' critical mission and its potential to generate revenue and foster economic development.

"Don't just write to governor or appropriations committee members, write to local legislators," he advised. "If people have an Appropriations Committee member from their district, all the better. Personal letters from people in their district get read. Personalize it. Say you're with this organization and they (members) are concerned about this."

With help from the public, Kemp is hoping that the Archives will be "in better shape than last year."

"Some people are beginning to listen."

Tell Your Elected Officials

- How the reduction of Archives hours affects you personally.
- As a constituent and voter, the Archives is important to you.
- How the budget reduction affects the state of Georgia.
- Ask that funding be increased to: 1. provide enough staff to keep the Archives open five days a week and 2. provide full funding for the Archives' rent.

CHECK THE "FRIENDS" SITE FOR UPDATES:

<http://www.fogah.org>