

MEMORIES AND REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS OF THE
GEORGIA ASSOCIATION OF HISTORIANS

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I first heard of the organization which would later be named the Georgia Association of Historians (GAH) in a casual conversation with Bob Everett in May 1973. Robert B. Everett had come to Macon Junior College (now Macon College) in June 1971 as Chairman of the Division of Social Sciences where I was an Instructor of History. Prior to his appointment at MJC, he had served as Chairman of the History Department at Wesleyan College, also in Macon, where the idea for such an organization originated. According to Everett, he and Orville Taylor, the "founding father" of the GAH and Chairman of the History Department at Wesleyan prior to Everett's appointment to that post, first discussed the need for "a general organization of historians in Georgia" when they were colleagues at Wesleyan.²

Georgia did not lack a good historical society. In fact, the Georgia Historical Society (GHS) is one of the premier state historical organizations. The major purpose of the GHS, however, is the preservation and promotion of Georgia history. Therefore, by 1973 many historians in the state believed that the GHS did not adequately meet their needs.

After Taylor assumed the chairmanship of the Department of History and Geography at Georgia College in Milledgeville in 1969, he continued to promote the concept of an organization of professional historians in Georgia. By March 1973, Taylor, with the assistance of Calvin Billman of Augusta College, James Alexander of the University of Georgia, and Everett, called a meeting of all those interested in establishing such an organization. On 26 March 1973, Taylor and his associates sent over one hundred letters to history faculty members in Georgia's various colleges and universities inviting them to a meeting in Macon, Georgia, on Saturday, May 5, "to discuss a general historical organization and presumably to get one organized."³ The meeting was held at the Ramada Inn West and began with a luncheon at 12 noon, thus establishing the tradition of incorporating social events into our meetings.

Although the record of this initial meeting lists thirty-six historians attending the session, I recall counting at least forty persons in the dining room.⁴ In addition, sixty-nine others who could not attend the meeting had indicated an interest in

joining the organization.⁵

To avoid the imposition of a pre-determined agenda,⁶ Taylor proposed a free discussion after officially convening the business meeting. Following a motion to form a professional organization, made by Willard Wight of Georgia Institute of Technology and seconded by William Gabard of Valdosta State College, considerable discussion ensued. When the vote was finally taken, the motion was carried 26 to 8. Most of those who opposed the formation of the new organization believed that the historical profession in the state was adequately served by the Georgia Historical Society.

I personally welcomed the opportunity to meet once a year with other persons teaching history in Georgia to discuss the state of the profession (in the 1970's the major topic of conversation was the "glut" in the profession) and to benefit from the presentation of scholarly papers on European, African, Latin American, Asian, and Middle Eastern topics as well as all aspects of American history. It seemed to me and to many others, that Georgia could support two historical organizations and that the state would benefit from having both. The decision was made by a two-to-one margin, to call the new organization the "Georgia Association of Historians" as opposed to the "Georgia Organization of Historians."

On the subject of what activities the new society should undertake, suggestions included annual meetings either in October or May and a bi-monthly newsletter, which was favored by Kinsley Romer, Jr., of Kennesaw Junior College (now Kennesaw State College). The subject which evoked the most lively discussion was the nature of annual meetings the organization should offer. Suggestions included sessions that would feature "previously prepared papers which would be passed out to members before the meeting and discussed at the meeting" and "panel discussions on matters of importance without formal papers." Papers "dealing with problems existing within the discipline of history" were also suggested along with those emphasizing "the relationship between public school teaching of history and that taught by professional historians in the colleges and universities."

After approving a motion made by Calvin Billman (Augusta College) to elect a slate of temporary officers to plan the first annual meeting and "to act as a constitutional and by-laws committee," nominations and elections for a temporary president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer were held. Those nominated for temporary president were Gabard

and Taylor with Taylor being elected. W. Benjamin Kennedy of West Georgia College, Blanton Black of Savannah State College, and Gabard were nominated for the temporary vice-presidency, with Kennedy elected. Finally, Joseph Kitchens of Georgia Southwestern College, Bernadette Loftin of Middle Georgia College, and Wilfred Platt of Mercer University were nominated for temporary secretary-treasurer. Platt was chosen for the post.

Following the election of the new association's officers, Thomas Shurbutt of Georgia Southern College (now Georgia Southern University) moved that a second organizational meeting be held during the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association (SHA) scheduled for November 1973 in Atlanta. It was also proposed that at the forthcoming meeting prospective members would vote on a constitution and by-laws prepared by the temporary officers. Gordon Teffeteller of Valdosta State suggested that the date of the first annual meeting should also be determined and announced by the November meeting. Before adjourning, Carlos Flick of Mercer suggested that those present contribute \$1.00 each to defray expenses incurred by the temporary officers and \$32.00 was duly collected.

As a follow-up to the meeting, on 22 May 1973, Taylor mailed letters to those who had attended the meeting and to all persons who had indicated an interest in the new association summarizing the results of the organizational meeting. He also invited those interested to contribute \$1.00 to defray operating expenses.

During the summer of 1973, the temporary officers made considerable progress in drafting the basic framework of the GAH. Meeting on 4 June at the History Department of Georgia State University in Atlanta, Taylor agreed to prepare the first draft of the GAH constitution, using the constitution of the Georgia Political Science Association (which Taylor had helped organize)⁸ as a model. In previous discussion of the GAH's constitution at the initial Macon meeting, the founders and the prospective members had differed on the question of a membership policy. Those meeting in Macon favored limiting the membership to "college and university teachers of history," while the founders and temporary officers favored a more liberal membership policy. The temporary officers finally decided to submit two different statements on "membership and purpose"⁹ to those attending the meeting in Atlanta in November.

In response to the proposal for a GAH newsletter, the officers approved the concept but only

on the basis of the availability of funds for duplication and distribution. Utilizing the Mercer University and the Georgia College departmental secretaries and the funds collected at Macon, Platt mailed the first *Newsletter of the Georgia Association of Historians*¹⁰ to prospective members on 25 October 1973, in time to publicize the Atlanta meeting.

During the meeting at Georgia State University in June, the officers also began to plan the first annual meeting, which they decided to schedule at Macon Junior College on 5-6 April 1974. Tentative plans called for registration to begin on Friday afternoon, 5 April, with a formal dinner featuring a guest speaker as the major event of the evening. It was also suggested that Saturday morning be devoted to two sessions (9:00-10:30 a.m. and 11:00-12:30 p.m.) with a coffee break between the two sessions. The annual meeting would then conclude with a business-luncheon meeting. To this day, the GAH has maintained essentially the same format for the annual conference, the chief difference being the occasional substitution of a business-breakfast meeting for a luncheon meeting. Finally, it was decided that the annual dues of the organization would be \$4.00 and that all persons paying dues by the end of the first annual meeting in April 1974 would be enrolled as charter members of the GAH.

Although Taylor was concerned with finding the time for this project, he succeeded in preparing a draft of the constitution for the GAH by the November meeting date in Atlanta. It was quite an achievement in view of the fact that during the summer of 1973 all of the temporary officers were away from their home bases for considerable periods of time. Thus Taylor made a 6,000-mile journey through fourteen countries in Europe,¹¹ Kennedy spent nine weeks in Europe,¹² and Platt participated in a six-week NEH Summer Seminar at Brown University.¹³

Unable to secure a meeting space at the Sheraton-Biltmore, the headquarters for the SHA meeting,¹⁴ the GAH's second organizational meeting was held at Fan and Bill's Restaurant, directly across the street from the Biltmore, on Thursday, November 8, from 5:00-6:30 p.m. The cost of the meeting room was \$50.00.¹⁵ By 8 October, Platt had collected only \$47.00¹⁶ for the treasury, some of which would have to be expended on postage for distributing the newsletter. However, Taylor offered to cover the costs until the treasury could reimburse him¹⁷ and, by November 8, the treasurer had collected \$80.00.¹⁸

The most important item on the agenda of the meeting was, of course, the proposed constitution of

the GAH, which was discussed with each section duly approved by a majority vote.¹⁹ The membership issue evoked considerable discussion and it was finally decided to omit the phrase "teaching in colleges and/or universities" from the statement which now asserted that membership of the GAH would consist of "professional historians" who were identified as

those persons who, as enunciated in W. Stull Holt, *The Historical Profession in the United States* (New York, 1963), (1) have a knowledge of history acquired by systematic study, (2) have been admitted to the historical profession after a specialized program of education or training, (3) practice the historical profession, and (4) are recognized as members of the historical profession by members of the group and by the public.²⁰

Thus, the GAH offered its membership to high school teachers, archivists, graduate students, and independent scholars as well as college and university history faculty.

Except for some "cosmetic" changes, the constitution was approved as it had been presented to the membership at the meeting. However, the document was altered during the following year (1975) when the By-laws were amended to require two nominations for each office and to set the annual subscription for graduate students at \$2.00 per year and for Life Members at twelve times the annual dues. Even though it has been altered several times since 1975, the GAH's constitution has proved to be remarkably durable and stable during the Association's first two decades.

No attendance statistics and no official minutes were recorded of the November meeting in Atlanta; nevertheless, Taylor estimated that approximately sixty persons were present.²¹ On 31 January 1974,²² Taylor sent a second progress report on the state of the GAH to all members and "friends" of the organization which also provided the preliminary program of the first annual meeting scheduled for 5-6 April. Platt followed up Taylor's letter with a second newsletter 6 March 1974 in which he published the completed program of the forthcoming meeting and informed the membership that the GAH's "prosperity" necessitated a change of hotels for the Macon meeting. Because the Ramada Inn West's dining facilities could not accommodate the 68 historians who were now members of the GAH, the meeting was moved to the Holiday Inn West on I-475 where the room rates for singles were \$10.00 and \$16.00 for "two or more."²³

It was at this point that I received my first GAH committee appointment when I was requested to serve on the Local Arrangements Committee for the first annual conference, which was being held at my college.²⁴ My major task was to prepare the coffee break which consisted of Danish rolls and coffee. My associates in preparing for the comfort of the GAH membership while in Macon were Platt (who served as chairman), Everett, Paul Fuller of Wesleyan, and Eugene Alvarez, also at Macon Junior College.

Ninety-one historians attended the first annual meeting of the Georgia Association of Historians, a most encouraging attendance for the Association's inaugural year. All of the officers appreciated the importance of providing an attractive and stimulating program for the meeting, and Ben Kennedy, as Vice-President and program chairman, had the important task of recruiting a good keynote speaker, an assignment made somewhat more difficult by the fact that the GAH was unable to offer a "respectable" honorarium to the honored guest. Fortunately, a visiting Fulbright Scholar at Emory University's Oxford College, Professor Norimoto Iino, a professor at the International Christian University of Tokyo, consented to give the keynote speech at the dinner meeting in the Holiday Inn. For providing "An Easterner's View of Western Historical Tradition," Professor Iino received an honorarium of \$50.00 plus room and travel expenses.

The Saturday morning session of the 5-6 April meeting featured two different formats. First, there were small seminar-type sessions devoted to professional concerns which included "Teaching Western Civilization," "Teaching the United States Survey," "Women in the Historical Profession," "Historical Organizations in Transition," "Black History in the Curriculum," and "Historians and Local History." The program committee initially proposed limiting each session to 15 participants to facilitate ample discussion time for all participants. However, with six different sessions for GAH members to choose from, it was not necessary to "assign" the members to any particular section.

Following a brief coffee break from 10:30 to 11:00 a.m., all members assembled for a general session entitled "Two Interpretations of History: Christian and Marxist." Douglas Unfug of Emory University presided; Willis Glover from Mercer University spoke on "The Christian Interpretation"; and Ara Dostourian from West Georgia College discussed "The Marxist Interpretation," with Wilbur Jones of the University of Georgia providing a critique.

The final event of the meeting was a business-luncheon meeting held at the Holiday Inn, also provided by the registration fee of \$10.00 (which included the Friday evening banquet and the meeting costs as well). Following expressions of gratitude to the Local Arrangements Committee, the Program Committee, and Macon Junior College for their contributions to the successful meeting, Taylor requested Everett to present the report of the Nominating Committee, which consisted of Everett, Bernadette Loftin, and Oscar Page (Wesleyan College).²⁵ As its first business, the committee moved that Taylor, Kennedy, and Platt be named Charter President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer of the organization, thus removing the appellation "temporary" from their titles. The motion was unanimously approved, and the committee proposed that the following persons become the organization's officers for 1974-75: Lester Stephens (University of Georgia) for President, Calvin Billman (Augusta College) for Vice-President, and Platt (Mercer) for Secretary-Treasurer. In addition, Bob Dubay (Bainbridge Junior College, now Bainbridge College), Julia Smith (Georgia Southern College), and Elmer Dean (Savannah State College) were proposed as the organization's first three-member Executive Council. Additional nominations from the floor indicated that the elections were not routine and dispelled any notion of officers being "hand-picked" by "old-boy networking." In the ensuing election, Stephens was chosen over Kennedy for the Presidency, Billman was favored over Gerald Davis of Georgia State University, and Platt was elected to his onerous post unopposed. For the Executive Council, Dean was unopposed to a one-year term; and Julia Smith selected for a two-year term over William Hair (Georgia College) and Paul Fuller. The three-year term on the Council was accorded to Kennedy over Dubay and Joan Huffman.

After the elections, Taylor opened the floor for "comments and suggestions" from the members for the new organization. Among the items proposed were the publication of a directory of historians and the creation of a committee to study "the feasibility of establishing a journal for the association." It was also proposed that in the future the Nominating Committees should circulate the name and biographical sketches of its nominees for office prior to the annual meetings. Paul Dobson, noting the late hour and the dwindling audience, suggested that the Association consider holding its business meeting earlier in the session.

Finally, after Taylor yielded the chair to

Stephens, the new President thanked the members for their support and averred that he "did not own a home at Key Biscayne or San Clemente" and that "he would not donate his Presidential papers for tax purposes," thus reminding historians of the recent presidential resignation of Richard Nixon. The meeting, which had commenced at 1:55 p.m., was adjourned at 2:55 p.m., 6 April 1974. The charter members of the GAH now totaled 136.²⁶

And so the Georgia Association of Historians became a reality and through the years prospered and evolved considerably. There are now many more committees, more officers, the annual *Proceedings and Papers*, three major awards, and an enlarged and expanded newsletter. Yet with all these changes, the organization has remained essentially the same, an association of historians administered by historians for the benefit of historians who serve the cause of history in Georgia.

Why has the GAH succeeded? First, it was an idea whose time had come. As Bob Everett recently recalled, "It was as though everyone was just standing around waiting for someone else to take the lead. . . ." ²⁷ By the 1970s, there were twenty-eight colleges and universities in the University System of Georgia, and a similar number of private colleges in the state. Especially important was the large number of new junior and senior colleges created since 1945 which generally added to the corps of historians to be served by such an organization. There is also the fact that the "glut" of historians in the profession during the late 1960s and early 1970s had enabled many junior and senior colleges, which heretofore might have employed persons with only a Master's or Ed.D. degree, to recruit Ph.D.s from throughout the nation. These new faculty members were intent on pursuing their professional interests and scholarship. Indeed, many of the GAH's hardest-working members, especially in these early years, were young, enthusiastic professionals who were new to the state and to their occupation.

The post-1945 era also witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of historical specialties. No longer did almost all U.S. historians major in some aspect of American history and minor in English history or Modern Europe. This meant that there were many more historians whose interests and teaching requirements necessitated a broader perspective which could be enhanced in a statewide as well as a regional and national historical organization.

But the GAH's success during its early years can also be accounted for by the support which the

organization received from historians at the University of Georgia, Emory University, and Georgia State University, the major liberal arts universities in the state. Indeed, two of the founding members of the GAH were James Alexander and Lester Stephens of the University of Georgia. And, among those who led sessions and participated in the first program of the GAH were J. O. Baylen and Gerald Davis, both from Georgia State University, Douglas Unfug from Emory, and Wilbur Jones from the University of Georgia. Other prominent historians who supported the organization in its earliest years were Joseph J. Matthews (Emory), J. Russell Major (Emory), Lee Kinnett (UGA), Bell Wiley (Emory), E. Merton Coulter (UGA), and Kenneth Coleman (UGA). Equally significant is the fact that the historians at the state's better-known institutions made no attempt to monopolize or dominate the leadership of the GAH or exclude the talent from the lesser known and smaller institutions of higher learning.

Of course, the programs of the GAH were also highly significant in assuring the success of the organization. All of the GAH Program Chairmen made a concerted effort to include a wide variety of topics and a great diversity among the participants. While offering mostly academic sessions, the GAH always arranged to have at least one session at the annual meeting devoted to the methodology and technique of teaching history.

Another major factor for the success of the GAH was the devoted work of its standing and ad hoc committees. While the first two membership committees almost doubled the membership of the organization (to 213 members),²⁸ the program committees persistently sought to provide sessions at the annual meetings which attracted an increasingly large number of participants and enhanced the Association's position as a leader among state historical societies. Every effort was made to recruit outstanding keynote speakers with the result that the annual meetings featured such historians and statesmen as Mack Thompson, Executive Director of the American Historical Association; Carl Gustavson, Professor Emeritus at Ohio University and author of *Preface to History* and *Mansions of History*; Richard Kirkendall, Executive Secretary of the Organization of American Historians; and Dean Rusk, former Secretary of State and faculty member at the Law School of the University of Georgia.

The hard work and enlightened guidance of the temporary officers during the Association's organizational year certainly rank high among the

factors which assured the success of the organization. Orville (also called Tom) Taylor, Ben Kennedy, and Wil Platt patiently listened, planned, and ultimately helped create an organization which aspired to serve all professional historians encompassing all fields and periods of history. The success of the GAH is in no small way a tribute to their perseverance and determination to achieve this goal. Especially important was the contribution of Taylor, whose concept of what the organization should be helped determine the sort of organization which the GAH became. In 1975, Taylor enunciated his ideas on the organization for Platt, who was preparing an essay on the inauguration of the association. It seems appropriate to use Taylor's words to conclude this story of the beginnings of the GAH:

As to our accomplishments, . . . I really do believe we have formed a sound base for an organization which should endure permanently. This has been achieved by careful planning, systematic organization and promotion, and imaginative and non-stereotyped meetings.²⁹

Two decades later, this assessment is still valid. The GAH has survived and continues to thrive, thanks to the foresight of men like Taylor, Platt, and all the charter officers and members who worked so diligently to create an organization which would "endure permanently."

NOTES

¹Orville W. Taylor, Calvin J. Billman, Robert B. Everett, and James L. Anderson to "fellow historians" in Georgia, 26 March 1973. This article was originally intended to be a history of the GAH, but the Association's archives, supposedly created several years ago, were never established. Thus, since the pertinent materials were not readily available, the time constraints imposed on the author precluded a more comprehensive history of the organization. Arrangements are now (1992) being made to deposit all the records of the GAH either in the state archives in Atlanta or in the library of one of Georgia's universities. In addition to the Association's Newsletter, I used the files of Wilfred C. Platt, Charter Secretary-Treasurer of the GAH; W. Benjamin Kennedy, Charter Vice-President of the GAH; Lester Stephens, President of the GAH 1974-75; and, of course, my own files.

²Robert B. Everett to Joan B. Huffman, 14 July 1991. See also Taylor to author, 31 January 1992.

³Taylor et al., March 26, 1973.

⁴"Minutes of the Georgia Association of Historians," May 5, 1973. Unless otherwise indicated, all materials concerning this meeting were taken from these minutes.

⁵See Platt files for the list of those present at the organizational meeting of the GAH, 5 May 1973, as well as for the list of those indicating interest in the association who did not attend the organizational meeting.

⁶See Taylor to Platt, 11 December 1975, part of which is published at the end of this article.

⁷Platt to Taylor, 15 May 1973.

⁸Taylor to Huffman, 31 January 1992.

⁹"Minutes of a Meeting of the Temporary Officers of the Georgia Association of Historians," n.d. but after 4 June 1973.

¹⁰Platt, who edited both, later designated the first issue of the GAH Newsletter of the year 1974-75 as Volume I, No. 1 of the Newsletter. Nevertheless, his first newsletter, as indicated in the narrative, was issued in October 1973.

¹¹Taylor to Platt, 17 September 1973.

¹²Kennedy to Taylor, 2 October 1973.

¹³Platt to Taylor, 15 May 1973.

¹⁴Kennedy to Taylor, 2 October 1973.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Platt to Kennedy, 8 October 1973.

¹⁷Taylor to Kennedy, 18 October 1973. Taylor also offered to "deficit finance" the Association's mailing and duplicating expenses until the Association could reimburse him. See Taylor to Platt, 18 May 1973.

¹⁸Platt to Taylor, 15 November 1973.

¹⁹Notes made by Platt of the 8 November 1973 meeting at Fan and Bill's. Platt apparently never turned them into formal Minutes.

²⁰"Constitution and By-Laws of the Georgia Association of Historians (Adopted in Atlanta, Ga., on November 8, 1973.)."

²¹Taylor to members and friends of the GAH, 26 March 1973.

²²Ibid.

²³Newsletter of the Georgia Association of Historians, 6 March 1973.

²⁴Taylor to author, 3 March 1974.

²⁵"Minutes of the First Annual Business Meeting of the Georgia Association of Historians," n.d. but shortly after 6 April 1974. All references to this meeting were taken from these minutes unless otherwise stated.

²⁶"Charter Members of the Georgia Association of Historians," n.d. but after 6 April 1974 and letters to Annette Brock, W. P. Roberts, O. P. Hoffman, William Casey, and Benjamin Tate, 31 March 1975.

²⁷Everett to author, 15 January 1992.

²⁸My remarks, untitled, to the GAH membership made at the third annual business meeting held 2-3 April 1976 in Savannah.

²⁹Taylor to Platt, 15 December 1975.