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# A woman in the archives: the legacy of Margaret C. Norton

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**A WOMAN IN THE ARCHIVES: THE LEGACY OF MARGARET C. NORTON**

By

Stephanie Brown

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

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Stephanie Brown  
February 25, 2010

**A WOMAN IN THE ARCHIVES: THE LEGACY OF MARGARET C. NORTON**

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Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

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Of the Requirements for the Degree  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Margaret C. Norton (1891-1984) was the first state archivist of Illinois and a prominent personality in the early history of the archival profession. She made an indelible mark on the history of the early archival profession through her many written works, her work concerning the “nuts and bolts” of the archival profession, her involvement with the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and other organizations. Drawing from numerous influences she was a prolific writer, thinker and worker who held strong opinions at a time when it was not common for women to do so. This thesis uses Norton’s personal papers and supplemental secondary resources to analyze the views and writings of this strong woman who was one of the pioneers in her profession.

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## INTRODUCTION

From 1922-1957 Margaret C Norton was the head of the Archives Department of the Illinois State Library, commonly known as the Illinois State Archives. Hired in 1922 in haste, Norton would become one of the most prominent archivists in the early history of the profession in the United States. Norton arrived in Illinois from a job in Missouri and quickly got to work doing her job in Illinois. The archives had just recently been created and was in a state of chaos when she arrived. Norton quickly organized the archives and turned it into a model operation admired by archivists from all over the country and world.

Beyond the “nuts and bolts” of organizing an archives, Norton greatly influenced the development of the archival profession in general and more specifically, discourse on issues such archival theory and practice. Her willingness to combine pragmatism and theory was a model that, while not followed exclusively by the profession during her lifetime, became more appreciated later on when she had retired. She was a hard worker dedicated to the profession, which showed in her involvement with organizations such as the Society of American Archivists and the American Historical Association. Her archives in Illinois became a model of efficiency and order which many people tried to emulate in the United States and around the world. She built an archives from the ground up, and her example of how to do so is still followed.

How did Norton rise to such heights? Who influenced her and encouraged her to have such a good work ethic? The answer lies in many places, including her childhood experiences and upbringing. Norton was raised in a family of record keepers and

government employees and from an early age was taught to understand the importance of recordkeeping and serving the public. She was trained as a historian, but she ultimately relied on her upbringing in a family of recordkeepers to guide her in forming her opinions and business philosophies. Norton was also influenced by her contemporaries in the archival field.

However, throughout her life Norton placed a great deal of emphasis on original thought and always tried to not rely too strongly on what others thought. She did not even like to discuss her “influences” because she felt doing so diminished the accomplishments she made in a field that in her day was mostly dominated by men. Norton was a model for professional women at a time when many women did not have careers of their own. She had been taught, however subtly, by her mother that a woman could be educated and have a career and did not necessarily need to just dedicate herself to being a homemaker and raising a family if this was not their ambition.

She acknowledged that some may have been puzzled by her lack of a husband and family, but she was quite happy with the course of her life. She remained active and engaged in meeting people throughout her life and cultivated a wide circle of friends in and out of the archival field. To all those who thought she was lonely because she had no husband she replied that she was doing a job she loved and had plenty of friends; she was happy and did not need a husband who would supposedly make her even more happy. This was the message society sent to women and often still sends them. Norton was a member of a group of women who in the 1930s and 1940s defied what society taught and took a different path. The reasons these women remained single are varied, but they stood



on their own at a time when it was not common for women to do so.

In her work Norton was influenced by some of the most important archivists of the age including British archivist Hillary Jenkinson. She even corresponded with and visited J. Franklin Jameson in Washington D.C. when she was organizing her archives in Illinois. When she was first hired there, she had to organize the whole department from the “bottom up” and thus learned how to run an archives very quickly. Norton had a wide range of influences that shaped her thinking on archives and they all played a part in the kind of archivist she became. There are some who contend that she was rigidly devoted to Jenkinson and his principles but this was not the case. She would adhere to him in many circumstances but it was her pragmatism that makes her so interesting. If there was something she felt would not work in her archives or rules being proposed for the profession in general that she felt would not work she let people know it.

Norton was also a prolific writer and wrote many articles and papers over the years dealing with many issues of concern to her in Illinois and in the profession in general. She always stuck to what she believed in and could articulate her ideas well on paper. Her writing was clear and concise and she gave good advice that archivists of today can look to. Some of her advice and writings are outdated today, but much more of it can still be studied. Her writings serve as one of her greatest legacies, even though they were not always well appreciated in her lifetime.

Norton also served as president of the Society of American Archivists from 1943 to 1945 and was its first vice president. She was very active in the early founding of the society and was determined, along with a group of dedicated colleagues, to make sure

that everyone who worked in the archival profession had a voice in the organization. She also served as editor of the *American Archivist* from 1946 to 1949. One of her greatest contributions to this journal was the inclusion of a new technical section. She believed that archivists knew too little about the technical aspects of their work and thought a technical section in the journal would do much to remedy this. She parlayed her energy and good work ethic into running one of the most successful and efficient archives in the country. As is evidenced by her personal correspondence, archivists from all over the country and world came to find out about Norton's methods and wanted to know what she did to make the Illinois State Archives so successful.

Even those who were experienced archivists asked for her advice on everything from what kind of boxes certain materials should be placed in to what kinds of salary they should get for their jobs. The language of the correspondence may have been polite and professional but underneath it all these letters convey deep sense of respect for Norton and the operation she ran in Illinois. They would certainly not have asked for her advice if they did not respect her and had not heard good things about the Illinois State Archives.

This MA thesis will examine the legacy of Margaret C. Norton by analyzing her early life and influences, her views on archives and records management, and her legacy. I have looked extensively at Norton's personal papers made available by the Illinois State Archives and found a wealth of information regarding Norton and her professional and personal activities. Much of the primary source material used in this paper comes from a series of interviews Norton gave to historian and archivist William Birdsall in 1973.

Some of the things she says in these interviews must be taken with a grain of salt, because Norton appears apolitical and apathetic when she actually was not, but these interviews were nonetheless an excellent source of information. The papers also contain important information such as archives monthly reports, and letters she wrote to her fellow archivists. I have used many different secondary sources from published articles to books to supplement my discussion of what was going on in the archival and historical professions at the time Norton was working. These sources will give the reader a better understanding and context to the primary sources examined.

I also consulted a thesis written by Auburn University graduate student Donnelly Faye Lancaster in 2000. Her thesis read as a “life and times” of Norton and was very well written and helpful in giving an overall picture of what Norton was like. It was also interesting to discover what kind of perspective a fellow student who studied her so closely had to offer on her. However, Lancaster did not provide a real analysis of Norton’s career and her impact on the archival profession or her views on archives and records management. This thesis will be unique from Lancaster’s in that it will analyze Norton’s views and accomplishments and why they are important in understanding the archival profession, and not simply discuss her life and times, although it is important to include some of this information in order to provide basic background on Norton’s life. I believe that this thesis will add to the body of literature already written by and about Norton and will enrich archivists’ understanding of her, and help those not in the profession understand her as well.

## **CHAPTER ONE : NORTON'S EARLY LIFE AND CAREER**

In order to understand why and how Norton developed her ideas about archives and records management, one needs to look at her early life and career. Her ideas about archives and records management are very important in understanding the kind of archivist she became, but her early life and upbringing also had an impact on her views. Her views on archives did not develop solely as a result of her education and work experience. They came from other important sources as well.

Margaret Cross Norton (or better known as Margaret C. Norton) was born in 1891 in Rockford, Illinois and was the only child of Samuel Norton and Jennie Adams Norton. She came from a family of public servants; when she was born her father was a deputy county clerk and her mother was a deputy county treasurer. One of Norton's uncles, Marcus Norton was also in public service; he was also a county treasurer. Jennie Norton left her job when she married and had a child, as was customary at the time, but she nonetheless had a lifelong love of learning and curiosity about the world that was passed on to her daughter. Norton did not consciously acknowledge her mother's contribution in this area of her life, either during her working or her retirement years, but the influence was there.

Norton remembers visiting her relatives at work as a young child and observing the work they did. Often her father would take her to work with him and allow her to play in the record vault while he was working. Years later in a 1973 interview with historian William Birdsall, Norton recalled there being a cartoon in this vault featuring an

exasperated clerk with the words “Put that back where it belongs!”<sup>1</sup> Birdsall asked Norton some interesting questions about who her professional and personal influences were and she responded with a good deal of information about her family. In this interview she also provided some revealing information about her early professional life as well.

She also recalled in this same interview how her parents would “talk shop” with each other when her father returned home from work in the evening. Not only this, but her father would often enlist her mother’s math expertise. For many years, Jennie Norton helped her husband keep assessment books for the county collector.<sup>2</sup> In an era where few men talked about their jobs with their wives, let alone ask them to help them with their work, Norton’s parents were unique. They were a team that worked together to get their jobs done and raise their daughter. This was a sharp contrast to the social norm of the day where women were expected to look after the home and men went to work, only to return home to “escape” from work.

Norton received an excellent education from her parents and uncle in the value of public records and service and the value of collaboration between men and women. Her early life strengthened her personality and made her a symbol of what a well educated woman could accomplish if she had the desire to do so. She was influenced by her parents to obtain a good education and be an independent woman who did not need a man to look after her financially. Perhaps if she had not had a mother who was well educated

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<sup>1</sup> Norton to William J. Birdsall, June 18 1973, in *The Margaret Cross Norton Working Papers 1924-1928* microfilm edition (Springfield: Illinois State Archives, 1993), roll 3, frame 1221 (hereafter cited as: in MCNWP 3/1221).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

and a father who was not as supportive, her future would have been different. While she did not consciously prepare herself for a career in archives while growing up, she seems to have absorbed the lessons she learned from her parents and grew to see the value of archives as places for preservation of public records, and their importance to the governments and businesses that used them. She stands as a symbol of an educated woman, even today.<sup>3</sup>

Norton provided moral and financial support for her parents her in their later years, perhaps as a way to give back to her parents who had given so much to her when she was growing up. Indeed she later called her parents “The primary influence on her life” and her successes in life must be attributed in some part to her parents’ support and encouragement, for this was crucial for women of Norton’s day who wanted an education beyond the secondary school level.<sup>4</sup> Norton must have been grateful for what her parents had done for her because as an adult she tried to be a good daughter to them in any way she could. She was their only child so she felt a special responsibility to do so.

For example, Norton invited her mother to come live with her after her father died, and the two women lived together until Jennie Norton died in 1947. Norton enjoyed her mother’s companionship and felt her loss keenly. She wrote of her death to a friend that “although I did not expect anything else at the age of 87, it is a terrible thing to be the last of the line and to know that happens to you is never going to matter to anyone ever

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<sup>3</sup> Donnelly Faye Lancaster, “Margaret Cross Norton; Dedication to the Development of the Archival Profession,” (MA Thesis: Auburn University, August 2000), chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1985), 62.

again.”<sup>5</sup> One might think while reading these comments that Norton was a lonely woman. Despite these comments, the evidence shows that Norton was not a lonely person because of her lack of family, and she let people know it.

Norton came of age and graduated from Rockford High School in 1909 and attended Rockford College for three years. In 1912 she continued her education at the University of Chicago and completed an undergraduate degree. In 1914 she received a Master of Arts in History. After graduation she had to decide, as everyone, does, “What next?” Many single, well educated women of her social class asked this same question and showed interest in having a “home and a garden of their own,” where they could be the head of their own household apart from their family, without a husband. For the most part, unmarried women like Norton did not want to live at home with their families. They wanted to have the independence that came with living on their own.

This created some problems, especially when it came to thinking about what would be done to take care of these women. <sup>6</sup> It was not considered proper for women to live alone, however many women did so. Norton shared this ambition and wanted to earn a living with her education, but she recalled that job opportunities were limited. She said that the only career opportunities open to her were either “teacher, nurse, or librarian.” <sup>7</sup> She decided to omit social work from a list of possible careers which coincidentally, was a field that recruited many women from her alma mater, the University of Chicago. She also decided not to become a professional historian.

After some consideration, Norton decided to go into the library field. She believed

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<sup>5</sup> Norton to Karl L Trever, September 17,1947, in MNCWP, 7/0324.

that she would do well in this profession because she “liked to read.” She continued her studies and earned a library degree from the New York State Library School. She held a series of library jobs in her first years out of school, and her first was at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, an elite women’s college. She remained at Vassar for three years as a cataloguer. This job had a reputation as the dullest task in library work and Norton grew disinterested in it. She described herself as a “misfit” in library work.<sup>8</sup> However she remained on the job for many years. When asked by William Birdsall as to why she left the library profession she replied:

I do not care to discuss my disillusionment with the library profession. Among other things, I felt it too “cut and dry” inflexible, too much infused with the missionary spirit; people ought to be made to read whether they want to or not; the work monotonous with little opportunity for originality.... I do not care to go into personalities as I would have to do to explain why I left Vassar after three years, the ostensible reason being to accept a fellowship in Chicago.<sup>9</sup>

While at Vassar Norton kept up an interest in academia. During her summer vacations from Vassar she used her spare time to begin work on a PhD in History through the University of Chicago. This ended up changing the course of her career. In December 1915, Norton attended the national meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington, D.C. Years later, she called this meeting “the turning point of my career.” The conference was devoted the topic of archives and archival work. While at the meeting Norton listened to presentations by Waldo Gifford Leland and Leo F. Stock of the Carnegie Institute. The two men made a presentation on European Archives and the

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<sup>6</sup> Solomon, 119.

<sup>7</sup> Norton to Birdsall, May 24, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1204.

<sup>8</sup> Norton to Birdsall, May 24, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1231.

<sup>9</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1231.



poor condition of American archives and records in comparison.<sup>10</sup> While listening Norton found a topic she discovered she was very much interested in.

The presentation stimulated her interest in the care of American records. While a library science student in New York she had heard stories of the 1911 fire at the New York State Library which destroyed countless old Dutch colonial records. The presentation also affected her because of her upbringing. As the daughter of government employees Norton knew what the loss and neglect of records could mean to a business or government agency. These entities could not function well without good recordkeeping and attention to detail. The field of archival work thus seemed worthwhile and essential, and captivated Norton's imagination. An archival career would allow her to use the understanding and respect she had developed for records since childhood. She returned from Washington, D.C. determined to become an archivist.

When Norton decided that she would use her discipline and resources available to her to work on her career and do something she liked, she threw herself into it with full force. This is really where Norton's archival career began, and where she would start to carve out a legacy for herself. It became necessary for her to know more about the archival profession and figure out exactly what her core professional beliefs were.

Norton immediately started asking her fellow librarians at Vassar what needed to be done to prepare for an archival career. Norton also spoke with Lucy Maynard Salmon, who was the head of the history department. Maynard Salmon was a distinguished academic and known for her views on educated women. She advised Norton to "Get

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

ready” for an archival career by “Reading everything you can on the subject, and if the opportunity comes you will be ready.”<sup>11</sup> Following Salmon’s advice Norton “read everything about archives that I could get my hands on.”<sup>12</sup> She continued to work at Vassar but also began to think that she might find a more fulfilling job at a historical society.

Norton left Vassar in 1918 when she was awarded a two year fellowship which would enable her to continue her PhD work. During the summer she worked as a cataloguer at the Indiana State Library. When her fellowship ended in 1920, and she had nearly completed all the requirements for a PhD in History, she took a position as a cataloguer for the State Historical Library of Missouri. She enjoyed this full time position and developed a good relationship with her colleagues. In 1921 her boss was preparing to promote her to head cataloguer. However she realized that she could only go so far in Missouri and agreed to meet with the Illinois Secretary of State about a position as the first state archivist of that state. She had heard about this job possibility when a colleague informed her of it, and urged her to write to the secretary of state to tell him of her qualifications for the job. The job had been highly publicized and many in the archival profession had heard that Illinois was in the process of creating a new state archives.<sup>13</sup>

Coincidentally, the creation of the Illinois State Archive can be traced back ten years before Norton arrived on the scene in that state, when one of the men who had inspired her interest in an archival career, Waldo Leland, prepared a report in which he recommended the creation of a department of archives in Illinois. He gave

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<sup>11</sup> Norton to Birdsall, 5/24/1973, MCNWP 3/1205.

recommendations as to what records should go into the archive as well as what the physical building should look like. The building would house the state archive and administrative offices as well as the state library and history museum and be 80,000 square feet. It was not until 1921 after much advocacy and activism on the part of history professors from the University of Illinois and Jessie Palmer Weber of the State Library that the state legislature passed a bill that reorganized the State Library and divided it into three divisions, Archives, Extension, and General.<sup>14</sup>

Not thinking she would be offered the chance to be head of this new archive, Norton was quite surprised when on January 10, 1922, Secretary of State Edward Emmerson notified her that “Miss Norton I have decided to appoint you to the first archivist of the state to organize the new department.”<sup>15</sup> She then took the necessary exams that were required of a state employee and began her work. The work would prove rewarding and very daunting at the same time.

When Norton discovered that that the Illinois General Assembly had created the archives out of the state library only months before, she later remarked that she “felt like crawling under something.”<sup>16</sup> She was “appalled” and nervous that she would be organizing an entire department on her own but she believed that she “could not do any worse than fail,” and took the job. One can hardly blame her for her initial apprehension. During the time she was state archivist the Illinois State Archives became a model institution that people from all over the world looked to when setting up their own

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<sup>12</sup> Solomon, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973 in MCNWP, 3/1233.

<sup>14</sup> Lancaster, “Margaret Cross Norton,” chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 973, in MCNWP, 3/1232.

archives. However her early years in Illinois were very hard and often involved a combination of hard physical labor and the “intellectual” labor of determining the theoretical direction she wanted her institution to take. She built on her family experience and education by also seeking out people in the archival profession to get their opinion about how to best run the Illinois archives.

Norton may not have known it in 1922, but her experiences in the library profession, as well as her early family life had laid a strong foundation for her successful career as an archivist. Had Norton grown up in a more traditional home she might not have developed such strong ideas about records and recordkeeping which helped her with her job. In her later years, after describing the times that she played in her father’s office, and her parents’ discussions at home she asked, “Is it so strange, therefore, that to me archives have always been primarily records of official business?”<sup>17</sup> This belief would later form the cornerstone of Norton’s views on archives. Her first job in the library profession had left her bored and as an academic librarian she had worked as a cataloguer and felt that the job was in many ways unfulfilling as well. She found no interest in the jobs that were traditionally offered to educated women. The archival profession gave her an opportunity to be unique, to do things her own way, to try new things.

Norton came to Illinois at a time when there was great concern for the care of archives and records. Traditionally in American history papers of private individuals and government records had been collected together with little regard for order or proper archival principles. There was no real distinction between private archives and

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<sup>16</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1233.

government archives. At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which saw an explosion in the amount of public records being created, Europe was far ahead of the United States in classifying and bringing order to these new records.<sup>18</sup> People such as the Dutch archivists Muller, Feith and Fruin and British archivist Hilary Jenkinson wrote extensively on their ideas about archives and records. In the United States, Waldo G. Leland and J Franklin Jameson attempted to persuade Congress to fund a national archives. The historical profession got involved in document preservation as well, with the creation by the American Historical Association of the Public Archives Commission and a Historical Manuscripts Commission. These committees saw to it that historical documents and government documents were being preserved so they would be available for research.

During Norton's early years in Illinois, she decided to seek the advice of specific people around her as to what to do with this new archive. She used her skills to make contact with people from across the county whom she could question about the profession and their experience in putting various archival theories into practice. She met with J. Franklin Jameson, whom she admired and believed understood a great deal of the theory and practice that went into running a good archives. She did not see Waldo Leland at the time, whom she had also wanted to meet, and suspected he was traveling in Europe.<sup>19</sup> She had made a great effort to see Jameson and Leland and was happy that he had gotten to see one of them. She left Washington, D.C. very energized and Jameson for his part was very pleased that Illinois had created an archives and even more pleased to

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<sup>17</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1233.

<sup>18</sup> Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, in MCNWP,

know that it was in the hands of a woman who was so passionate about the archival profession. He felt the budding Illinois State Archives was in good hands.<sup>20</sup> Norton also visited the Library of Congress in Washington and told Birdsall that she was treated quite well by her hosts.

Norton also met with many people outside of Washington, D.C., most notably a “Mr. Stiles” as she called him. Though she only referred to him as “Mr.” in her interview with Birdsall, this actually was Cassius Stiles, who was the head of the Iowa State archives. Under Stiles’ leadership the Iowa State Archives became noteworthy for the publication of a book *Public Archives: A Manual for Their Administration in Iowa*.<sup>21</sup> His work was well known in archives circles, and from her interview with Birdsall it seems that Norton learned a great deal from him. She also visited archives in Connecticut and Massachusetts and learned a great deal as well. She decided right away that her archive in Illinois must be made more accessible to ordinary people for she told Birdsall that when she visited the archives to interview the archivist in charge of vital statistics she was told that “No one uses the archive except old fellows with tobacco on their beards...”<sup>22</sup> Norton wanted to make sure her archives had materials that everyone would be interested in, and that everyone knew the archives had information everyone would consider important.

In Connecticut, she was surprised and “horrified that there were no procedures in place for how to deal with disasters such as fire. Once again her background as the

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<sup>20</sup> Lancaster, “Margaret Cross Norton,” chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> Berner, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1233.

daughter of government officials came back to her and she believed important documents would be lost if they were not properly protected. This was not the kind of institution she wanted to run in Illinois. Her horror was compounded when she visited Massachusetts and found out that that state's archives had actually been recently damaged by a fire. She recalled that the state archivist did not seem "the least bit perturbed" by the disaster. Norton did not visit the Alabama or Mississippi state archives (important archives in the United States because they were two of the first in the country) due to lack of time.<sup>23</sup>

Norton also sought advice from many of her coworkers in Illinois, and told by the state historian Jessie Palmer Weber that she needed to prepare all she could in the future to defend the archive any time it needed funding. As any archivist knows lobbying for funding is often an important part of one's job. In the 1920s it was no different. Norton would have to convince state legislators that the archives needed to be funded, which was no easy task. Some of the state legislators were not aware of the importance of archives and archival principles. She was also advised to tread carefully because, "In Springfield ladies don't work."<sup>24</sup> It was uncommon for women to work outside the home, much less be assertive in matters of government that men controlled. Norton eventually did win over the legislators and proved that she could do her job and work just as hard as any man. After her research was done, Norton decided to take the Illinois archives in a very specific direction that she thought would best serve the people of Illinois. More about this will be discussed later. It is sufficient to remark for now that Norton continued on in her job in Illinois and eventually developed a strong career that was very successful and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

personally fulfilling for her.

In 1938 when Norton had been at her job for 16 years the archives reached a milestone that included the dedication of a new archives building, which was the result of a long period of convincing politicians and other state officials that it was essential to have a well run archives in order to have an efficient, responsible state government. The process of getting funding for this new archives had taken 10 years, during which Norton really got down to the business of the “nuts and bolts” of archival work. She did everything from meet with architects to lobbying state legislators for money. Norton invited SAA to celebrate with her, and was described by many that day as “modest” when asked about what she had accomplished for the Illinois State Archives.<sup>25</sup>

Norton and her coworkers settled into this building, which was quite different from the environment many had been accustomed to since the early 1920s. In the 1940s Norton was free to turn her attention to archival work again after spending a great deal of her time in the previous years working on her new building. She did so by focusing on the new technology of microfilming. She decided that she wanted to microfilm county records and this project took many years, and ended up being an important project the Illinois State Archives carried out under her direction. Her plans even extended beyond this, and went on to include state census records. Norton focused on microfilming because it was the new technology that was being used extensively in order to make archives more accessible to people. She also believed that microfilming would be the best protection against loss and carelessness her archives could have. In her papers there is

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<sup>24</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 18, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1221.



correspondence with a Mr. Kerrins the head of a company in Indianapolis that had ten years of commercial microfilming experience, whom she eventually hired to carry out the job.<sup>26</sup>

Another interesting aspect of the “nuts” and bolts” work that Norton came to be involved in and particularly interested in was records management. She realized that with the proliferation of records that was taking place in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century work needed to be done more than ever in deciding which records would be permanent records and those which could be destroyed after time. This is where the profession of records management came in during Norton’s time. Archivists could now work closely with records managers to help identify early which records could be saved and which ones could be destroyed. Because she was so interested in records management, Norton realized early on in the history of the archival profession that records managers could become valuable colleagues to archivists.<sup>27</sup> Today they still are and even more archivists appreciate this.

Norton entered another part of her career and was very happy to do so. Her early work efforts had paid off. The Illinois State Archives had become a model archive, in thanks in no small part to Norton’s tireless work and that of her coworkers as well. She continued to work through the 1940s and 1950s and after many urged her to, retired from the state archivist position in 1957, 35 years after she had first arrived in Illinois.

It is interesting to note the fact that Norton came of age and started her working life at a time when women were making headway into many educational institutions, yet

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<sup>25</sup> Lancaster, “Margaret Cross Norton,” chapter 2.

<sup>26</sup> Lancaster, “Margaret Cross Norton,” chapter 4.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret C. Norton, *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival Records and Records Management*, ed. Thornton W Mitchell, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003),

were still often discouraged from finding real careers as Norton later acknowledged. One of the reasons why Norton is such an interesting person to study is because she was a single woman (and a highly opinionated, educated one) who had a high profile job at a time when many women did not work outside the home. In addition to examining her family life and early career, it is also important to mention the times that Norton grew up in in order to understand what might have influenced her to choose the career that she did. Many women of Norton's day treated college merely as a way to get a husband thus ending up in their only "proper role" as wife and mother. There were often "separate spheres" for men and women in coed colleges.

Women were kept segregated from men in dining rooms and dormitories and often developed closer relationships with their female classmates than their male ones. They were closely chaperoned.<sup>28</sup> Women were taught that they needed to develop their minds and bodies in order to become better wives and mothers, and that this was the primary purpose of a college education for those lucky enough to obtain one. Many women took up athletics in addition to their academic obligations. Students who were athletic as well as intelligent were praised as "ideal" women, and would make good wives in the future.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, many women enjoyed a well rounded college experience balancing their academic duties with social time, often mixing with both male and female students, especially at coed universities and colleges. Their years in college were a time to develop their full potential and better themselves intellectually, physically and socially. Norton

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was undoubtedly part of this college scene. The Progressive Era was an interesting time in which to come of age. Norton was influenced by the Progressive Era in terms of its emphasis on order and government efficiency, among other things.

Many women who were college educated in the Progressive Era as Norton was married after or during the pursuit of their education. Others such as Norton remained single in order to pursue career interests. Her career path confirms what many people today know and understand of women who are well educated and focused on their careers, they tend to marry late in life or not at all. Many of these women who married late had fewer children and the single women had no children. Norton was confident that she did not need a man in order to do well in her life and succeed, in many areas. No reason can be given for her lack of relationships with men other than that it seems she stayed single in order to pursue career interests. Indeed she described many women she knew over the years who left jobs to marry as “not liberated.”<sup>30</sup> Despite Norton’s own personal confidence that what she accomplished in her career was the right path for her, some around her did not think so. These opinions inevitably stemmed from ideas people had about the “proper” view of women in society.

In the late 1940s early 1950s she suffered a number of health problems for which she sought medical attention. Some of the doctors who treated her attributed her ailments to what she called “Freudian frustrations.”<sup>31</sup> They interpreted her stress and ill health as frustration over not having a husband. Norton believed this was nonsense of course and

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<sup>28</sup> Solomon, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Solomon, 103.

<sup>30</sup> Lancaster, “Margaret Cross Norton,” chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> Norton to Roger Thomas, January 31, 1952, in MCNWP 8/0672.

carried on with her work. Her doctor must have assumed that she was bored and alone because she was unmarried. She wrote that at times she was in the hospital she had many visitors, (indeed, sometimes too many) and that she was *not* bored and lonely simply because she was not married. Norton in her later years grew to have many friends and colleagues who cared a great deal about her. They definitely cared when things happened to her.

Whatever the choices she made in her life, Margaret Norton blazed a trail that many women had before her and certainly many more have taken since her time. Her choices should be regarded with respect. Norton made the right decisions for her life and was a successful individual in so many ways.

She did not see the need to do things the way that people thought they should be done, either personally or professionally. This is one of her greatest achievements that professional archivists can look to today, especially women who might look to balance work, family and everything else they consider important. Norton set the standard for professionalism and love of one's profession that can be followed today. Even those who do not work in the archival profession can follow her example. Norton's early life and early career were in many ways unconventional, and prepared her for her chosen profession. Norton had many characteristics that are important in shaping a person, parental support, good education, and a drive to work hard. One of the most important of these is discipline; desire to do hard work to achieve ones goals.

Norton's hard work is exemplified in the way she managed to pull together a department from scratch when no one had ever done anything of the sort in her state

before. As mentioned, she did extensive “homework” in deciding how to organize the Illinois State Archives and did a very good job doing this. She also continued to work hard throughout her career often to the chagrin of many around her. She wrote to one colleague that she was reading his letter with “my eyes propped open“ she was exhausted from working at her demanding day job and all the extra projects she had her name attached to as well.<sup>32</sup> Norton was fortunate to have been given many tools in life to succeed but if she had not had such an excellent work ethic all those other tools would have meant nothing.

In putting a department together from scratch Norton followed a career path similar to her counterpart in Mississippi, Dunbar Rowland. Both used their previous training in history, library science and law, respectively, in order to go about developing the archives programs of their states. They were both hardworking individuals who brought prestige and credit to the archival profession. However, according to Patricia Galloway Rowland saw his career and mission as an archivist quite differently than Norton. Rowland and his archival colleagues were members of the Southern elite and Galloway argues that Rowland used this status in order to collect documents that would portray a particular version of the South, the idea of the “lost cause” an idea held in the south about the Confederacy popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In other words, politics were very influential in the creation of the Mississippi state archives.<sup>33</sup>

Norton did not design the Illinois State Archives with a specific political agenda in mind, nor did she bring overt political opinions into her daily work. When researching

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<sup>32</sup> Norton to Richard G. Wood, January 22, 1947, in MCNWP, 7/0090.

Norton's career I was able to find some information in her papers regarding her possible opposition to censorship but otherwise could not find any other evidence of her political opinions unrelated to issues concerning the archival profession. She did not incorporate her political beliefs into her work. This does not believe that she was not political outside of work. I believe outside of her work she would not have agreed with Rowland's ideas about archives or the position of blacks in Mississippi society but she certainly would have agreed that he was entitled to his opinions.

Norton's hard work paid off and her career flourished. The next chapter of this paper will discuss Norton's views on archives, which developed and crystallized in Illinois and were the results of influences briefly discussed in this chapter, and other important influences as well.

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia Galloway, Archives, Power and History: Dunbar Rowland and the Beginning of the State Archives of Mississippi," *American Archivist* 68 (Spring/Summer 2006): 79-116.

## CHAPTER TWO: NORTON'S VIEWS ON ARCHIVES

Norton's views on archives and records came to full fruition during the time she worked in Illinois. She articulated a vision for archival management and organization that while not completely new gained more respect thanks to her. Her views are well known in the archival world, and are still studied extensively today. They are important to study because of what they tell us about her beliefs concerning archives and records management. They were developed in the context of the times she lived in, and her professional and intellectual influences, not in a vacuum. It is important to remember this but her views also stand alone and can be analyzed for what they contributed to the archival profession.

In her writings, Norton set out to define what archives were in the first place. This was very important if she were to go forward with her analysis in later writings. According to her interpretation archives were "a collection of records and memoranda relating to an individual, a corporation or a government agency. The archive comprises chiefly, though not necessarily exclusively, manuscript material and it relates primarily to the business affairs of the individual, corporation, or government body which keeps the records for its own use."<sup>1</sup> This is a standard definition of archives that students studying archives and records management learn even today. It is the core definition of archives.

Norton then built upon this definition and continued to argue throughout her

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret C. Norton, *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival Records and Records Management*, ed. Thornton W Mitchell, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), 87-

career that archives should be primarily government operations which serve the people. This is *the* important cornerstone of her views on archives. A good archives was essential to the running of any type of government, federal, state and so on. Archivists provided important services to the public and she believed that these services should be made known. Many people did not know, and this holds true to this day, what kinds of records to find in archives, or that archives as the repository for government records provided people with important protections that were theirs because of their U.S. citizenship. Many archivists today interpret this to assume that Norton was interested in abstract concepts such as government accountability or overall documentation of society.<sup>2</sup> This is not the case. She was interested in the legal protections that documents could provide rather than an interest in abstract concepts.

From studying her letters and reading her many essays on archival theory, I believe Norton would have been proud to see many archivists engaged in activism for government accountability and transparency today because of her assertive nature. Despite this, it was not something she was particularly interested in during her career. She was not passionate about that area of the profession and more interested in the technical aspects of the profession. She was more concerned with the everyday details of her job, the “nuts and bolts.”

Like many archivists, however, Norton was interested in making sure that state officials provided sufficient funds for the archives and she found that speaking about

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<sup>2</sup> Randall Jimerson, “Margaret C. Norton Reconsidered” in *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival Records and Records Management*, ed. Thornton W. Mitchell, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), xxxi.



abstract concepts just would not fit the bill. Indeed she believed that if she wanted to reach out to any group of people to convince them that archives were worth keeping and funding she had to adopt a certain sense of pragmatism. She wrote in a letter to Francis Philbrick in 1939 in which she stated that archivists should not focus on the historical value of records created by the government but their legal implications she claimed that “few people care very much for history..... everyone does or should care for archives as legal records.”<sup>3</sup>

Norton was a prolific writer throughout her career and produced many writings in which she articulated her many views. In her writings she skillfully explained her views on archival theory and management. Through her writings she answered many questions that people had about archives and records management. She had a talent for making sure that archivists understood at a very basic level what they did and how they were supposed to do it. Norton also articulated why archivists do what they do based of course on the principle that archivist should serve the government. In doing this, she particularly emphasized the difference between archives and libraries. She wrote that the main difference was based on legal uses for archival documents as well as cataloging techniques and uniqueness. Archival documents, unlike library books are often not duplicated elsewhere. If an archivist wants to find a copy of a document they have in another archives they will most often not successful.<sup>4</sup>

Norton acknowledged that many archivists came to the profession from a

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<sup>3</sup> Norton to Francis S. Philbrick, November 13, 1939, in *The Margaret Cross Norton Working Papers 1924-1928* microfilm edition (Springfield: Illinois State Archives, 1993), roll 4, frame1341 (hereafter cited as: in MCNWP 4/1341).

<sup>4</sup> Norton, *Norton on Archives*, 87-88.

historical background, but argued that they should not come into the profession with the mindset of a historian. They should be open to new ways of thinking. A historian would not always make the best archivist. Many American archivists' views on the fundamental definition of archives in the early days of the profession can be divided between two schools of thought, the "public archives" and "historical manuscripts" traditions. The former group wanted to promote archives as public records produced by the government and the latter group felt that archives should support historical research, not government. The archival profession in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century was dominated by historians who saw archives as essential tools for the idea of scientific history that was coming into vogue. These archivists were the heirs to an indigenous tradition in the United States which saw caring for historical documents and keeping historical records as the most important job of the archivist.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note, however that archivists at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and in Norton's time would not have thought of themselves in this way, and that the idea of the "public archives" and "historical manuscripts" traditions were coined by author Richard C. Berner in the 1980s in order to provide an analysis of the views that different archivists in the early days of the profession had. For purposes of my own analysis, I am using Berner's terminology to place Norton in the "public archives" tradition although she would never have used this terminology in her lifetime.

Norton must have also been influenced by trends in the historical profession, apart from archival interests. She was influenced by the way archives can act as collective

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<sup>5</sup> Luke Gilliland- Swetland "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and

memory for nations and people. Although she was a proponent of archives as public records she was educated about ways people learn about and know the past. This was an important component of her thinking. As mentioned in the last chapter, she also had a library science degree. The fact that she had a library degree and grew up in the Progressive Era with its emphasis on order and efficiency combined with her upbringing as the daughter of government officials in order to create a way of thinking about archives that would be firm yet pragmatic enough to adapt to change. However because her writings ultimately dealt more with the practical issues and concerns of archives she was more of a librarian than a historian but she recognized that she came from both worlds and that the two could mix, sometimes.

When Norton accepted her position in Illinois in 1922 the United States had entered an era of historical nostalgia. As the archival profession was in its infancy at the time, it is easy to understand why those favoring a more historical approach to archives were widely heard. America was still searching for a sense of itself, and references to archives as historical documents was something people could understand and appreciate.

People longed to have a better connection with the past. This emphasis on history continued in the 1930s during the years of the Great Depression when Franklin Roosevelt appropriated Lincoln as a symbol of hope and unity amidst the early problems of his administration. There was a notion, real or perceived that schoolchildren knew too little about American history and their “American” heritage. Better and more extensive teaching of U.S. history in schools was promoted and historical sites were created to

reinforce this history. During this time many new national parks and other places of historical interest, such as the National Archives, were created.<sup>6</sup>

After World War II the nation's interest in history and heritage grew according to Michael Kammen. There was an even greater longing for the past and people wanted to feel connected to it. The notion that Americans did not know enough about their history was especially prevalent during the Cold War years when the United States engaged in a bitter rivalry with the Soviet Union. Studying American history was a way for people to counter what was going on in the world at that time. If American history was understood students would adopt this history as part of their identity and be better equipped to combat communism. They would come to learn that the principles the United States and the Soviet Union stood for were in complete opposition to one another.<sup>7</sup>

Historian David Lowenthal argues that the past is everywhere, and influences everyone to various extents. The past can be a burden for some, and to others a blessing. Some people dread the past while others embrace it as part of themselves. Part of the way people can look at history is through collective memory, influenced to some extent by archives. Archives tend to make tangible what other stories and tales about the past cannot. They can make the past come alive and shape people's perceptions of their past. In archives the past is recorded for all to see and examine. This presents some problems which have been discussed in both the archival and historical professions for years, which are beyond the scope of this paper, but the main idea is that any kind of old document

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory, The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf 1991), 537.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

embodies with it a concrete sense of the past, of history. Even those who are not well educated about history or do not particularly care for it as a topic of conversation or study seem to always say that they like “old things.” Archives and the services they offer, in a way, satisfy a need in people to look at the past tangibly, and connect with the past. This is as true today as it was in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

Historians at the beginning of the 20th Century felt this way as well. It logically followed that adherents to the newly forming historical manuscripts tradition at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century also believed that archivists should be able to interpret documents if they felt inclined to do so.<sup>9</sup> It was consistent with the emphasis on scientific history and was important part of the research they conducted. These twentieth century historians were following an idea that had existed in United States since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, when document conservationists such as Jeremy Belknap and Jared Sparks collected documents and proposed copying them (done in those days by hand ) as a way to deal with records that might be lost. Copying and interpreting records would ensure that records would be preserved for future generations.<sup>10</sup>

Another group of archivists such as Norton, who were part of public archives tradition, wanted to acknowledge the historical value of records, but believed that the primary purpose of archives was to serve the government; government records *were* archives. The idea of archives as government records was not a prominent theory of archives in early America, indeed historical collectors often collected things together

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<sup>8</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

without thinking about the way they might fit together or organized. Many classification systems were proposed, but there was not one universal system that could be agreed on. Scientific classification that was tested and proven was seen as a way to bring order to an increasingly complex world. Supporters of the public archives tradition argued that these principles could be applied to archival material and could be used to train those who worked in archives. “Professionalism” and “efficiency” were the buzzwords of the day.<sup>11</sup> Many archivists started to look to Europe to find answers to their problems and tried to classify according to European principle of provenance. It was seen as an answer to many problems.<sup>12</sup>

In order to provide more guidance as to what archivists should do to classify and look after their documents, the American Historical Association in 1899 established the Public Archives Commission, which ended up being separate from the already existing Historical Manuscripts Commission established in 1895. One of the first “fruits” of this new commission was the establishment of the Department of Archives and History in Mississippi and Alabama.<sup>13</sup> After its creation the Public Archives Commission played an active role lobbying the federal government to make sure that repositories would be created which would make it their mission to preserve historically important materials.

There was initially some confusion between the purpose of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, as both groups seemed to adapt as their mission statement the preservation of historical manuscripts that were created by historical personalities *and*

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<sup>11</sup> Gilliland-Swetland, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Berner, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Berner, 14.

governing bodies. Many archivists had a hard time synthesizing the information coming out of the AHA's annual meetings, and deciding which ideas would be best for the archives they managed. How should one decide which tradition to follow? What were their own personal opinions regarding the nature and purpose of archives? It is from within this group of dedicated (though sometimes confused) academics that the archival profession can date its origins.<sup>14</sup>

Under the leadership of Herman Ames, who began to chair the Public Archives Commission in 1902 the committee began to concern itself with government records, while the Historical Manuscripts Commission would concern itself with the manuscripts and papers produced by private individuals, while the Public Archives Commission would sponsored numerous inventories of state and municipal archives which ended up being published in the AHA annual reports.<sup>15</sup>

This was also a time in the United States when the call for a National Archives began. Although this dream did not become a reality until 1934, the movement for a repository of all the nation's most important documents began before the 1930s. The movement for a new national archives was spearheaded in the early days by such prominent historians as J. Franklin Jameson and Waldo Gifford Leland.

When Jameson was appointed as the head of research at the Carnegie Institute in 1905 he took advantage of being so close to the seat of government to lobby Congressmen and Senators for the creation of a national archive. A series of bills, sponsored by prominent Senators such as Henry Cabot Lodge, were introduced in

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<sup>14</sup> Gilliland-Swetland, 160.

Congress in the 1910s and 1920s to promote the creation of a national archive but they all for one reason or another failed.<sup>16</sup> It was not until 1934 that President Franklin Roosevelt would lay the cornerstone for what is now the National Archives building in downtown Washington D.C. <sup>17</sup> The length of time it took to make a national archives a reality gave fuel to the argument many Europeans subscribed to, that Americans simply had a disregard for records and were “lazy” about documenting their government and society.

In the midst of all this news regarding the principles and purpose of the newly emerging archival profession and trends in the historical profession, Norton made a decision when researching the best way to run the new Illinois State Archives. She decided to take her archive in the direction advocated by the Public Archives Commission. Although she had a historical background and appreciated history and the work that historians did, Norton believed that too many archivists were historians by trade who used their positions as archivists to engage in “subsidized research.” Norton shocked the archival world when in 1929 she delivered a paper at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association’s Conference of Archivists.

This paper was entitled “The Archives as an Administrative Unit in Government,” and in it she declared that “The archivist should be a public official whose first interest is business efficiency and only secondarily should be history.” Norton was the first among American archivists to challenge the domination of her profession by historians. Her

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<sup>15</sup> William J. Birdsall, “The Two Sides of the Desk, The Archivist and the Historian 1909-1935,” *American Archivist* 38:2 (April 1975): 159-173.

<sup>16</sup> Victor Gondos, *J. Franklin Jameson and the Birth of the National Archives* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 42.

<sup>17</sup> Gondos, 174.



speech as one can imagine was not received very well by the AHA audience. In her later years though, she said that “one man, Milo Quaife” did some up to her at that meeting, and told her “You’ve done well, you are way ahead of them and they don’t know what they are talking about.”<sup>18</sup> She did a great deal to try to dispel the misconception of Europeans that Americans did not care about public records.

Like many who were influenced by Progressive era ideas, Norton articulated what many other state archivists were thinking at the time. She targeted state archives as critical institutions that needed better efficiency to serve the public. Archivists, she wrote “should be intent on building archives as an “efficiency proposition” dedicated to the “scientific handling of official records.”<sup>19</sup>

This clearly shows how influential Progressive Era thinking was to Norton’s thinking. However, it is curious to note that in her interview with William Birdsall she did not believe she was influenced at all by progressive principles. Her claiming she was not a populist should be taken with a grain of salt, as there is evidence that she indeed was. When one says they are *not*.... , that is just as much of a position as if they were to say they *are* something. When Birdsall asked her whether or not he was influenced by what some considered the “Bible” of the progressive movement she said that she was not, as much as people reading her writings might like to think she was.

Norton’s views about archives and recordkeeping are consistent with the Progressive Era thinking about government and society. She did not think of herself as being completely wedded to progressive roots, but they did play an important role in her

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<sup>18</sup> Norton to Birdsall, May 24, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1206.

thinking. Norton's views on archives are important to study because of the way they were influenced by pragmatism as well as theory. It is not known whether or not Norton was attempting to downplay her progressive and populist beliefs in her interview with Birdsall or if she really was not a progressive at heart. Only Norton herself could answer that, but perhaps one should be cautious of someone who protests too loudly that she is *not* a Progressive thinker.

Norton was also influenced by daily practical concerns that came up as she did her job. This is where her pragmatism really came into play. She believed that if a technique worked which did not fit with her philosophy worked than it should be used, no matter how much it departed from the theoretical ideas she explained so well in her writings. Although she did not like the historical idea of archives in her writings though she did acknowledge the value of a historical education for archivists and argued that "Because of his historical background the archivist knows the necessity of rounding out his collections making sure for instance that reports of commissions actually get filed; that memorandums of important verbal decisions are preserved...." <sup>20</sup> Historical training could indeed be useful to an archivist.

She also showed pragmatism when she argued that perhaps standardization of the archival profession was moving too fast. Norton thought that the archival profession needed to "find out more about who it really was" so to speak before concrete rules were set. More trial and error needed to take place before the profession had real standards. The profession should not rush to set standards and become too wedded to something that

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<sup>19</sup> Norton, *Norton on Archives*, 7-8.

might change in the future. Many archivists of Norton's day shared her opinion. Heading this call for standardization was Ernst Posner of the National Archives. Of him Norton wrote "that is the Prussian in him. I don't believe we are ready for uniformity, we need to do a lot of experimenting before we can crystallize."<sup>21</sup>

Despite her pragmatism, Norton remained consistent in her views throughout her career and did not alter her message to please particular groups. She did not pander to groups that she wanted to reach.<sup>22</sup> She was not afraid to tell people what she thought and sincerely believed in what she espoused. She found justification for her views through her work and made it clear that she was doing what was right for her and the archives she managed in Illinois. She had no reservations about either her theoretical or practical beliefs and always believed that they were right for the way she managed things.

Because she was pragmatic, Norton was like another interesting American archivist and prolific writer, T.R. Schellenberg, even though they would have disagreed in many respects. The two were also very different personality wise, with Schellenberg being described sometimes as difficult to work with and very demanding.<sup>23</sup> This may explain why, despite the fact that he was a tireless worker, he was never asked to become president of the Society of American Archivists. Norton was accorded such an honor, and this was a tribute to her congenial personality and her eagerness to work with people.

Schellenberg's general emphasis on pragmatism as a way to deal with archival problems such as the proliferation of records might have brought him and Norton to some

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<sup>20</sup> Norton, *Norton on Archives*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Norton, "Archives Monthly Report," November 1940, in MCNWP, 1/433.

<sup>22</sup> Jimerson, xxxii.

<sup>23</sup> Jane F. Smith, "Theodore R. Schellenberg: Americanizer and Popularizer," *American Archivist* 44 (Fall

agreement. He came up with practical solutions to problem of proliferation of modern records keeping by developing a concept of “informational value.” However this is where the similarities of Norton and Schellenberg end. This concept may have been a little too much pragmatism for Norton. This is a very important concept of Schellenberg’s to understand and is the core of his philosophy. He argued that documents are valuable for archivists to preserve because of the information contained in them, not just because of the way they were created or because they had legal value.

According to Norton the legal value of records was what gave archives power, not the information contained in them. Schellenberg argued that his concept of informational value could then be used in appraising records, and that archivists were particularly qualified to identify documents for their informational value because of the historical background many had.<sup>24</sup> Indeed Schellenberg wrote that “The best preliminary training an archivist can have is advanced training in history.”<sup>25</sup> Schellenberg was very much a product of the National Archives where he worked, and in turn was influenced by historians. Norton agreed that an archivist could have a background in history but it was not as important as Schellenberg believed it to be.

As alluded to Norton had a very strong grasp of theory. She counted the noted British archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson among those who had a major influence upon her thinking. Although influenced by other books on law and government, particularly John Henry Wigmore’s *A Treatise on the Anglo-American of Evidence in Trials at Common*

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1981): 313-326.

<sup>24</sup> T.R. Schellenberg, “Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques,” (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), 148.

<sup>25</sup> Schellenberg, 151.

*Law*, Jenkinson was by far Norton's most important theoretical influence. He applied legal principles to archival records, which is what Norton went on to do in her archival career. Active in the 1920s Sir Hilary Jenkinson was looked to as one of the premier archival theorists. He argued that archives are:

Documents drawn up or used in the course of a business transaction of which itself formed a part and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.<sup>26</sup>

It is sometimes tempting to paint Norton as a “female Jenkinson” or an “ivory tower theorist” who overlooked the historical value of archives and did not make room in her beliefs for any nuisances of interpretation and did not acknowledge that archivists could be just as biased as historians. The prevailing wisdom for a long time in the archival profession for some after Norton came on the scene and followed her views seemed to be that archivists needed to beware of the historian who wished to do research in archives, that history in archives was simply “velvet,” as Norton herself put her view of historical content in archives. Archivists in the 1980s such as George Bolotenko and Patrick Dunae publicly bemoaned the way Norton and Jenkinson looked at archives, and felt that the principles of history and historical research do have merit for archives.<sup>27</sup> In the 1950s Schellenberg was part of this school of thought and also bemoaned the way Jenkinson and those who influenced him looked at archives. He even called Jenkinson “That old fossil” and Schellenberg's ideas on appraisal were called “dangerous” by

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<sup>26</sup> Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. Ltd. 1966), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Jimerson, xii-xiii.

Jenkinson.<sup>28</sup>

Norton's idea was that technical concepts such as appraisal and patron service were the "meat" of the archival profession, and that history contained in archival documents was what made the profession interesting to most people. She believed that this interest should be secondary and people should be educated on what records produced by the government can do for them as citizens. Jenkinson and Wigmore influenced Norton's thinking about how archivists should be good custodians of government records in order to maintain their important legal value. Despite what Schellenberg and others thought of him, Jenkinson provided a theory for archives and their management that would not really be challenged until 70 years after he wrote down his thoughts. The archival world owes a great debt to this very important person.

In addition to Jenkinson Norton also cited Waldo Gifford Leland as one of her most important influences even referring to Leland as "my archival Godfather."<sup>29</sup> After all it was Leland who had first drawn her attention to the possibility of an archival career. She was thankful that he had inadvertently recommended a career to her that fit her well, and that she enjoyed very much. Leland had been influenced by a combination of U.S. Public Archives tradition and the Historical Manuscripts tradition and passed on that influence to those who he worked with and those he never met, but were influenced by him from afar.

All of her influences demonstrate that Norton was a blend of old and new, of

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<sup>28</sup> Reto Tschan, "A Comparison of Jenkinson and Schellenberg on Appraisal," *American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002): 176-195.

<sup>29</sup> Norton "Archives Monthly Report" October 1956, in MCNWP, 3/136.

pragmatism as well as clearly defined theory. She can be considered a middle ground between Schellenberg's pragmatism and Jenkinson's rigidity. She ultimately based her theoretical ideas off of a sense of pragmatism and her early family life, and her education as mentioned in chapter one. These influences provided credibility and justification for what she would go on to say in her own writings. She placed stock in reading what others had written about archives before her and they too provided justification for what she wrote.<sup>30</sup> She was able to blend her practical experience as the daughter of government employees with her education to produce interesting viewpoints. These viewpoints were interesting in Norton's time and they will remain so for a very long time.

What Norton did at her job and what she wrote about were sometimes necessarily different. This is her pragmatism at work. Norton recognized that things might not always work according to theory and sometimes needed to be amended so that things could get done as quickly and efficiently as possible. Most everyone during the course of their professional or working life may come to this realization at some point. Often one finds that a policy or procedure that looks good on paper might simply not be able to work in the long term, and rules need to be amended so things can work in the daily workplace. If they can be changed it would make things better.

Despite the fact that Norton was a pragmatist she acknowledged that there were instances where experiments could prove unsuccessful, and theory could trump pragmatism. In 1936 she was a part of one of these experiments "gone awry" when the Illinois State Archives published a detailed book of cataloguing standards, and distributed

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<sup>30</sup> Jimerson, xxxi.

the book to other archivists. Only two years later she decided to abandon the project, telling an SAA roundtable discussion that the catalogue was “obsolete, and I hope all of you who possess copies will throw them in the wastebasket. Please don’t follow it, it is all wrong!”<sup>31</sup>

Even now in this new century the archival profession is still a relatively new one. In some ways it is still coming to terms with its identity and how to best adapt to new ways of caring for and ordering documents and making sure that research patrons come away with a sense that they got what they wanted. The debate about online information particularly comes to mind when one thinks about this. The debates over new technology such as EAD and electronic records as well as the general implications (copyright issues, etc.) for putting things online have been debated back and forth for many years.

New electronic ways of creating and storing records inevitably raises new questions about the fundamental nature and definition of archives. What will the fundamental definition of archives be when records go electronic? What will change? What will stay the same? Sometimes new ideas and practical applications need to be adapted in order to make a profession better. They may not succeed but this won’t be established without first taking risks.

This debate going on now in the archival profession can be compared to what was being discussed in Norton’s time. Even though now the profession is more confident and has, for the most part, agreed to abide by certain rules and codes there are still challenges that must be dealt with. These new challenges could have the effect of redefining the

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<sup>31</sup> Transcript of Proceedings, SAA Roundtable Discussion on Classification and Cataloguing, October 25,



profession. Norton would be excited about the new technological developments such as the internet and concepts such as e-government, because they make archives more accessible to people. She was interested in laminating and microfilming, as mentioned in Chapter One, because these were the new technologies that made archives accessible in her day. How the profession deals with these new developments will reverberate and have special implications for archivists of the current generation and those of the future. They must be encouraged.

Norton took the best of theory and practice and molded it together to create an whole new way of thinking about archives that is important to study. She contributed a great deal of new ideas to both archival theory and practice. Her views fit exactly what was needed at the time and it is important to note that she was a woman doing all this at a time when many other working women were not so lucky to have such a voice in their professions. Norton and other women were definitely met with resistance. William Birsdall asked Norton interesting questions during his interview with her in the 1970s about her influences. His intent was to know who and what had an impact on what she thought. However Norton grew uncomfortable about the constant quizzing, calling it “male chauvinism.”<sup>32</sup> Despite being uncomfortable with being interviewed she was generous with her time and was ultimately happy to talk.

She believed that there was a misconception that because she was a woman she could not have her own thoughts and that she learned all she needed to know to do her job simply by reading the works of great men who came before her. She was a woman

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1938, in MCNWP, 4/151-152.

with very original thoughts and opinions and was certainly not afraid to express them. She had been taught by her family that she should not shy away from her opinions because she was a woman. She was an educated woman and this gave her confidence to express her opinions in a way that was intelligent and people would appreciate. She was an inspiration to her female colleagues and proved that women could have thoughtful opinions which were just respected and admired as those of their male counterparts. Her example encouraged women not to be afraid to speak out.

Norton left a formidable legacy for those who study and practice the archival profession today. She contributed a great deal to theory and practice and left a solid legacy that archivists can draw on today. The next chapter of this paper will deal with Norton's legacy and the spirit of service and activism she left behind for her successors and colleagues.

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<sup>32</sup> Norton to Birdsall, May 24, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1204.

### **CHAPTER THREE: NORTON'S PROFESSIONAL LEGACY**

As mentioned, Norton left a formidable legacy which archivists can draw on today. Not only did she achieve great success with her writings, but she contributed much in the way of professional development and opportunities for archivists to become involved in the profession beyond their own institutions. She was particularly involved in the creation of and then the leadership of the national organization for archival professionals, The Society of American Archivists. Some background on the society and how Norton came to be involved in it are important to mention here.

In the 1930s there was a sense that the archival profession was becoming separate from the historical profession from which it developed, as mentioned in Chapter Two. Thus a new kind of professional organization was needed in order to meet the needs of those who wanted to be archivists, and not historians. Many who were members of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association became dissatisfied with the way the AHA emphasized access to and interpretation of manuscripts. These were not the issues that archivists were primarily concerned with. The members of this society had come through the great depression and finally saw the development of the National Archives in 1934. They had also witnessed the funding of survey works during the Great Depression by the Works Progress Administration of federal, state and local records. All these were important milestones in establishing how important the keeping of records could be to the nation and in giving members of the general public not

interested in history a way to relate to the way records were made and kept. <sup>1</sup>

With the National Archives finally a reality the Public Archives Commission of the AHA came to an end. Being members of the AHA alone would not be sufficient any longer. Thus, many archivists believed that a different type of organization was needed to meet the needs of archivists. A Committee of Ten on the Organization of Archivists was created in 1935 in order to help lay the groundwork for a separate archival professional society. The Society of American Archivists (hereafter referred to as SAA) held its first meeting in 1936. The WPA survey provided some framework for determining where to go as a profession. The society performed rudimentary business during this first meeting and established a constitution, elected a president and vice president, and other officers. <sup>2</sup>

Even with the benefit of an organizational framework, the society's start was not smooth when it came to more intellectual matters. There was no clear idea as to what needed to be accomplished or what kinds of issues should be discussed. However, one of the first, and most important issues discussed was who should be eligible for membership in the society. Many wanted to restrict membership to those people "who are or have been engaged in the custody and administration of archives and historical manuscripts, or those who because of special experience or other qualifications are recognized as competent in the archival economy."<sup>3</sup> There were others who felt that the society needed to have a broader base in order to make membership worthwhile for people. They argued

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<sup>1</sup> J. Frank Cook, "The Blessings of Providence on an Association of Archivists," *American Archivist* 46 (Fall 1983): 374-399.

<sup>2</sup> Luke Gilliland -Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History," *American Archivist* 54 (Spring 1991) 160-175.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

that those in the archival profession needed to be welcoming to all people interested in and actually practicing archival work. In 1937 the society held its first meeting, chaired by President A.R.

Norton had been heavily involved in the establishment of this new society, thus agreeing that the establishment of an archival society was a very good idea; it was an opportunity for archivists to come together and discuss common issues and ideas. She had been a member of the Public Archives Commission, as well as the Committee of Ten on the Organization of Archivists and had been dissatisfied with the way that the commission was running things. She felt that the head of the Commission, who was a historian, had never asked for her or any other colleague's opinion as an archivist about anything, and never even bothered to call a meeting separate from the AHA.

Thus it was necessary for archivists to go their own way, to develop an identity which would be separate from historians and librarians. There was some concern that the society might be too small to function properly and meet its goals but Norton later recalled that she believed the society would be successful ultimately but perhaps that the archival community should not completely cut its ties with the AHA yet. Once again, Norton showed her pragmatism. She still thought that the archival profession ought not to cut its ties with historians. Although she agreed in principle with the founding of a professional archival society, and felt it might eventually be necessary, Norton at the time felt that disbanding the Public Archives Commission altogether was not a good move yet in 1936.

She recalled that she felt this commission would continue to give archival

profession “sufficient clout” until they were a better organized, better funded organization.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Norton wanted a professional organization to be established, one that would serve the needs of working archivists and not just historians who were interested in archives only for their research value. She cautioned Birdsall that the views she expressed to him were those of “one person” and did not want him to think that her opinion necessarily reflected that of all in the archival profession.<sup>5</sup> There were many who felt that the AHA would serve the needs of the fledgling society. She said that she requested that the Public Archives Commission have regular meetings again, which evidently did not happen.

Norton was active in early meetings of the new society and kept abreast of the latest developments in the society as well when she could not attend meetings. She was dedicated to the society and participated on a regular basis on the councils and various committees the society eventually made. She served as its vice president from 1936-1937 and was a council member from 1937-1942. All through that time Norton held leadership roles that were unusual for women at the time, in the archival profession and elsewhere. According to Michele Pacifico, 28% of the founding members of SAA were women. Norton was one of the women present at the 1935 AHA meeting along with Ruth Blair, the state archivist of Georgia, and both women had been appointed to the Committee of Ten that eventually decided to establish SAA. Coincidentally, both Norton and Blair had been active participants in the AHA and were interested in the development of a separate

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<sup>4</sup> Norton to William J. Birdsall, May 24, 1973, MCNWP, in *The Margaret Cross Norton Working Papers 1924-1928* microfilm edition (Springfield: Illinois State Archives, 1993), roll 3, frame 1211 (hereafter cited as: in MCNWP 3/1211).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

professional associate of archivists. In the early days of the society, however participation of women was still relatively small.

From 1936-1972 women only held 15% of all program chairmanships and about the same number regularly participated in annual meetings. During this time, many female archivists also were paid less than their male counterparts, even if they had the same type of education and experience, as was common in many other professions. Female archivists also tended to remain in low or medium level positions with men taking most of the administrator/managerial positions. Female archivists were also less likely to join SAA at all. Some like to think that there may have been some sort of “sorority” amongst early female members but this does not seem to be the case at least not until 1972.<sup>6</sup>

Many women who were active in the early days of the society were criticized later on years for supposedly upholding the male status quo and not acknowledging those women in the society who were not leaders in their institutions. Nonetheless women were a vital part of the early years of SAA, and compared to their female colleagues at the American Historical Association and at the American Library Association they fared quite well.<sup>7</sup> An even smaller number of female historians participated in the AHA and it had only one female president during Norton’s archival career, and it took a long extensive campaign to get her elected. Women were also not well represented at AHA meetings and their articles were published even less frequently in the *American Historical Review* (the AHA’s official journal) than women were published in the

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<sup>6</sup> Michele F. Pacifico, “Founding Mothers: Women in the Society of American Archivists 1936-1972,”

*American Archivist.*

At the American Library Association women were just as underrepresented. Women belonged to the ALA in great numbers, but from 1876-1972 only fifteen women served as president and the female membership in general held relatively few elected offices in the organization. This comparison between the AHA, ALA, and SAA illustrates how the women of SAA were relatively well off for their time compared to their historian and librarian counterparts.<sup>8</sup>

Norton rose above the debate about gender roles and representations within SAA to make an indelible impression on both her male and female colleagues because of her professional competence, her congenial personality, and her willingness to work well with others and do hard work.<sup>9</sup> These traits were typical of women of her time who wished to advance in a man's world, but Norton was not this way simply because she was trying to get ahead. This is evidenced by the many personal relationships she developed with her colleagues. She was genuinely passionate about her work in and outside of Illinois. Colleagues were quick to notice this and acknowledged this dedication when they elected her the first female president of the society in 1943. It was a historic day for the society and a great honor for Norton.

Norton was astounded that people would elect her as president, although there had been a campaign to get her elected, and was aware that she was a woman with a leadership role in a world dominated by men, but she surmised at the time that her

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*American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 370-389.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Pacifico, 370.

<sup>9</sup> Illinois State Archives, "Margaret Cross Norton, A Biographical Sketch," n.d., Illinois State Archives



colleagues elected her as president of SAA because they wanted a competent professional in the position, not because they wished to make some sort of statement regarding women's equality.<sup>10</sup> Norton immediately set to work in order to see to it that the issues she cared about were acknowledged.

The debate between those in the public archives tradition and the historical manuscripts traditions still raged while Norton was president. Norton did the best she could to make sure both sides in this seemingly never ending debate were heard. Norton also tried to quell concern expressed by people that those in the National Archives were becoming too prominent in the SAA membership and leadership pool. She felt this issue was dividing the archival community at a time when it should be united. Since Norton served as SAA president during World War II, she was especially concerned about maintaining a united front during wartime. She argued that the country, and SAA in general, needed to support the war effort. Norton continued her close association with SAA after her service as President when she took on duties as the editor of the *American Archivist*. The first issues under her editorship appeared in 1947.

The way Norton came to her new job as editor of the *American Archivist* is interesting to mention here, because it shows that although she could be congenial and work together with others when necessary, she could also be very assertive in getting what she wanted. In 1944 while president she privately made clear that she was dissatisfied with the way Theodore Calvin Pease, the editor of the journal at the time, was handling his job. She believed that he published too many scholarly articles and she was

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Website, [http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/norton\\_bio.html](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/norton_bio.html).

concerned that archivists would as a result “try to impress others with our scholarship” instead of focusing on more practical issues.<sup>11</sup>

Specifically, she felt that “the archivist of a small struggling agency would find little practical help” in reading the journal. She claimed she had never visited an archival institution where she didn’t come away with some practical suggestions for how to do specific tasks, and wanted the *American Archivist* to acknowledge practicality over scholarship.<sup>12</sup> Norton wrote that she would address the issue in a president’s message and acknowledged that she would probably “stir up a hornet’s nest,” but that SAA was now strong enough to engage in open debate on this issue.<sup>13</sup> Working behind the scenes Norton gained enough support to change the direction of the journal that Pease stepped down as editor, with Norton being named as his replacement after her term as SAA president had ended.

Despite the controversy, Norton welcomed the opportunity to be the *American Archivist* editor just as much as she welcomed the chance to be SAA president, leaving behind a formidable legacy there as well. She set out with her trademark energy to deal with the many issues that editors of any journal face.

As editor, Norton had to deal with issues such as typesetting and making sure that those who wrote articles for issues met their deadlines. She also had to deal with more serious questions such as what kinds of articles should be included in the journal. Norton

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<sup>10</sup> Norton to Lester J. Capon, November 17, 1943, in MCNWP, 6/0193.

<sup>11</sup> Norton to Lester J. Capon, January 15, 1944, in MCNWP, 6/214-215.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

felt that the way the journal was laid out at the time was too impractical. She lobbied hard to include a totally different article in the journal, articles on practical issues. In her correspondence with Solon Buck, SAA president at the time, she indicated that she wanted the new layout to consist of three sections, a technical section, a foreign section owing to the new attention given to foreign archives and archivists post World War II, and illustrations. <sup>14</sup> The illustration section would be complimentary to the technical section. Norton was very happy to see more technical issues discussed in her edited issues of *American Archivist* and wrote to a friend who was a document repairer that “Archivists know altogether too little about the technical aspects of archival work and it was time they learned more!” <sup>15</sup>

Norton sought the advice of Solon Buck from time to time regarding her editing duties, and wrote to him often. She sent him ideas for issues and he sent them back to her, often stating that they were good ideas. He told her that she was doing a good job, and that he did not see the need to give her a lot of guidance. He seemed to say “Take my advice if you want it, but you are doing very well!” This is a testament to Norton’s tenacity and ability to get things done. She was a capable editor and was able to work with everyone to get the job done. Whatever issues she faced she remained professional and collected.

Norton had to deal with many stressful issues when she was editor of *American Archivist*. She dealt with exhaustion for one and wrote one colleague that she was reading his article he had submitted “with my eyes propped open.” She had to deal with

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<sup>14</sup> Norton to Solon J Buck, December 13 1945, in MCNWP, 6/0393.

deadlines, reading many proofs of issues, and even did battle with the American Archivist copiers. Midway through her tenure as editor she was told by the George Banta Press that they would no longer be able to publish the *American Archivist* due to labor costs. The company simply had too many other clients and not enough labor to work with SAA anymore. In her personal papers Norton does not give any indication specifically why the *American Archivist* might have been dropped but she was understandably distressed over this. After working very hard overtime she secured a different publisher who agreed to take the journal on. While she liked the first publisher she also grew to like the people she was in contact with at the new publisher.

Norton felt a little sorry for this new publisher and tried hard to establish a good relationship with them. Norton wrote to the publishers that SAA liked the job they were doing and would be assured of their business for a long time to come. She claimed that they would not be viewed in the way that “second husbands feel about their predecessors, who are ‘the only perfect men.’”<sup>16</sup> The publisher was worried about the way that they would be treated by SAA, judging by the way Norton worded her letter, but once again her affable nature reassured people that she was doing all she could to cultivate good relationships with people and institutions that mattered to SAA. Norton’s likeability got the job done and made people want to do business with SAA. This accounts for her success in the SAA.

Norton’s congenial yet forceful personality helped her get through many challenges in her career and helped her secure a good favorable opinion amongst her

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<sup>15</sup> Norton to William Barrow, April 4, 1948, in MCNWP, 8/0179.

colleagues. Even when they did not agree with her, they managed to stay on good terms with her. For example, Norton wrote many essays which dealt with the standardization archival professional and the kind of training that archivists would need. Her colleagues did not always agree with her.

For a brief background, the need for standardized archival education gained wide momentum in the mid-1930s, especially when the National Archives sought to fill various staff positions when it opened in 1934. Work on standards was also hampered by lack of general interest in the profession as well.<sup>17</sup> People engaged in a profession will not be motivated to teach people about their profession if no one expresses interest in it. There was also concern that the value of archivists was not taken into account, and that resource allocators appreciated archivists work no more than they valued the work of less qualified technicians and do not understand the full implications of the work archivists do.<sup>18</sup> This is just as true today as it was in Norton's time.

Norton was the kind of woman who wanted archivists to get a good, well rounded education and made this known. When SAA was working on setting professional standards for archivists in 1938 it was suggested (mostly by committee chairman Samuel F. Bemis) that archivists should have a background in history and should be trained in their professional craft by university study and by apprenticeship. He also described two kinds of archivists that he thought would be required in the future. The first group should have a PhD in history and the other group would require less scholarly training. Most

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<sup>16</sup> Norton to Harold J. Bachman, September 17, 1948, in MCNWP, 7/0757.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Cox, *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States*, (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press Inc. 1990), 98.

<sup>18</sup> Cox, 102.

SAA members praised the ‘Bemis Report’ that eventually was made from this suggestion, and thought it was an important study but Norton did not.<sup>19</sup>

She did not agree with the standards set forth in the Bemis Report because he was not an archivist; he was a historian. She did not think he had the qualifications necessary to judge what kinds of experience and education would be necessary for an archival education. She thought he completely misunderstood ideas of archival theory and practice. She believed that if he ever found himself confronted with the task of managing an archive he would not know what to do! Being in the archival profession would require more than just a PhD in History. Norton believed that archivists should have a University level education, but that practical experience was also very important for archivists. This is her pragmatism at work once more. Her support of this balanced type of educational training came from her being very pragmatic in her views about the archival profession in general.

Unsatisfied with the way SAA was dealing with the topic of archival training, Norton took matters into her own hands. She had discussed a possible joint educational program between the Illinois State Archives and the University of Chicago. However, by 1938, to her disappointment, the program had little to offer archival students. Some classes were given that dealt with archival science, but overall she believed that the curriculum was vague and did not deal enough with specific issues that archivists in training needed to know about. In the summer of 1940 she continued to be involved in archival education when she taught the first class in archival science at Columbia

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<sup>19</sup> Donnelly Faye Lancaster, “Margaret Cross Norton: Dedication to the Development of the Archival

University in New York. She speculated she was selected to teach the course not because she really wanted the job but probably because she was the most qualified of all those who had expressed an interest in teaching the course.<sup>20</sup>

Ernst Posner, another prominent contemporary of Norton's had been interested in teaching this course as he had done the previous year, and there was some controversy as to whether or not he would be invited back. Norton did not think his views on archival education suited American archives as of yet. She believed as, when writing her views on theory that pragmatism was what ought to dictate which topics in archives classes would be taught. This pitted her against Posner and others like him who thought that archival training curriculums should be rigidly standardized. Overall, Norton was quite modest in speaking about her contributions to the state of archival education when speaking with William Birdsall. She comes across in these interviews with Birdsall as a woman who was just interested in doing her job and doing it well, and not in any kind of recognition.<sup>21</sup>

Once she was selected to teach the class, she was very rigorous and expected a lot from her students. She prepared daily lesson plans that covered a great deal of material in a day and also prepared exams for her students. In her correspondence with a man whom she knew, and had been considering taking her class but later found out he would not be able to, she wrote that "it was just as well that you can't for the sake of your standing with me!"<sup>22</sup> Norton was a hard worker and expected nothing less than this from others around her. Ever the perfectionist (and pragmatist) she was also concerned that her class

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Profession," (MA Thesis: Auburn University, August 2000), chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> Norton to Birdsall, June 16, 1973, in MCNWP, 3/1243.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Norton to Edwin Davis, March 5, 1940, in MCNWP, 4/0350.

at Columbia was too theoretical as designed and that the students needed to be given more practical experience.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately the class turned out to be very successful. Norton became a respected teacher among her students and colleagues. She did not need to worry about the content of her course.

In the 1940s and 1950s Norton grew very respected in her role as Illinois State Archivist and SAA member, and for her contributions to the profession and her theoretical ideas about archives and records management. People from all over the country and world wrote to her for advice. Her replies, and the topics she wrote about in general throughout her career, tell the reader a great deal about her views on archives. Whether she wrote about disaster preparedness in a scholarly journal or giving out advice to a colleague her views about the legal value of archives could always be detected. As has been discussed she was very interested in writing and communicated her views very well through her clear understandable prose. When she wrote to fellow archivists who asked for advice, or for journals such as *Illinois Libraries* she always had something interesting to say.

Norton received many letters from people all over the country asking her for advice about organizing their archives. Some of the most interesting letters to Norton arrived at her desk during World War II. During this time while the whole country was understandably very nervous, and the archival community was no exception. At about the same time, Norton was corresponding with members of the Alabama state archives to inquire about their plans for wartime preservation and disaster preparedness.

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<sup>23</sup> Norton to Solon Buck, February 23, 1940, in MCNWP, 4/0352.



Norton had been doing research in order to see what repositories around the nation had disaster preparedness plans. The timing of this letter was very interesting. It was only four days after the Pearl Harbor attack and America had entered World War II. In this new environment no one knew just what would happen.<sup>24</sup> Archivists, like those in many other professions had to prepare disaster plans and had to anticipate what might happen if the U.S. came under attack. Indeed, during the war archivists had the very important job of keeping custody of records people would need to access in order to rebuild their lives in the event of an attack. Norton and her colleagues, from their correspondence between one another, evidently took this job very seriously. They wanted to do all they could to help and provide this service to people.

By writing to others and determining what their disaster plans were, Norton was being prepared and organized for whatever would happen during the wartime years. Norton wrote about the preservation of records in wartime in a formal essay in February 1941, before the United States entered the war. Like many other Americans at the time she was thinking about what would happen if the United States entered the conflict that was going on in Europe, which seemed increasingly likely. She argued that three of the most important groups of records that needed to be protected in a disaster of any kind were records that documented people's identities (vital statistics) records which documented property rights, and records that documented state and national laws. Norton also argued that other kinds of records needed to be preserved in varying degrees of intensity, but that records in the categories above were the most important. In this article,

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<sup>24</sup> Norton to Leslie Bliss, December 11, 1941, in MCNWP, 5/801.

she also stressed the importance of making sure one has the proper documentation to all types of property in order to get back what is rightfully theirs after any kind of disaster.<sup>25</sup>

In all of the correspondence sent to Norton before, during and after the war, a common thread seemed to run through all of it, namely a deep respect for her and the archives she ran in Illinois. People looked to her for advice and respected what she had to say even if they disagreed with her. This was one of Norton's most important contributions to the archival profession, she gave a sense of respect and professionalism that others had been trying to give but had not had her wide reach. She was crucial in establishing the legitimacy of the archival profession in its formative years in the United States.

Norton worked with many in the archival profession in the 1940s and 1950s to ensure that the profession had the respect it deserved, and make it seem like an attractive profession to people from all walks of life. She was optimistic that the profession would grow and was interested in mentoring students who wanted to enter the profession. However Norton was aware that the profession during her time was not what it should be that it had a long way to go before it finally arrived at a place of respect that it should have. She felt that the profession was not what it should be due to disagreement about professional and educational standards. This was an issue that obviously affected the students she mentored.

Her correspondence with many archival students demonstrate this, and she often encouraged students to think twice before embarking upon an archival career, especially

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<sup>25</sup> Norton to Carl Ranery, May 16, 1952, in MCNWP, 8/0647.

those who thought archival work might complement an interest in history. For example, in a letter to a young student she advised him that going into an archival career might not be the best path for him. He specifically told him that he would need additional education and practical training first if he was to become qualified. This man was interested in history and she told him that her archives was “not a historical society” and that if he was primarily interested in history he ought to look elsewhere for work.<sup>26</sup> Norton felt that archivists should be highly qualified individuals who were the best in their profession, and those who were interested in history but were not really interested in working in an archive might be better served becoming historians who could do research and teach effectively. They might not be interested in a job at an archives.

Throughout the history of the archival profession different people have come along who have influenced the profession and made it what it is today. Margaret Norton was one of these individuals, and all her hard work in the profession was lauded when she retired from her post as Illinois State Archivist. She had also contributed to a new definition of the profession, one that would push it forward and ensure it would survive. By steering the archival profession away from its close association with history and historians she helped give it a new identity and a new reason to see itself as useful. Gone were the days of the archives simply being dusty hallowed collections of long ago history. Norton envisioned archivists being active useful members of their civic communities. Today Norton would be proud to see so many archivists advocating for government efficiency and accountability.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

Norton retired from the Illinois State Archives in April 1957. She was toasted on the occasion by many well wishers, for she had done much to raise the profile of the archival profession in the United States. From being so instrumental in the early days of SAA to becoming its first female president, to her many writings, archivists appreciated the legacy of leadership and service she left behind. Archivists were also thankful for the wonderful program she created in Illinois; before Norton came on the scene there were only a few states that had any kind of government archives that would later become familiar in the field. Norton's firm views made possible a new era in archives and established a model for a well run, efficient state archives that we know today.

When she died in 1984, her contemporaries and a new generation of archivists alike paid tribute to her. After she died, members of the Illinois State Archives entered her home and found a framed photograph of the state archives building on her nightstand next to her bed, a good reminder of her devotion to the profession right until her death, and it shows how proud she was of the building she had worked so hard to get funding for. She may have been modest at the dedication of the building in 1938, but I believe that Norton was ultimately proud of this accomplishment. Maynard Brichford echoed the sentiments of archivists everywhere when he praised Norton for her writings and service to the public as "landmarks in the archival campaign for professional recognition."<sup>1</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Maynard Brichford "Margaret Cross Norton," *American Archivist* 47 (Fall 1965): 473-474, quoted in Randall Jimerson, "Margaret C. Norton Reconsidered" in *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival Records and Records Management*, ed. Thornton W Mitchell, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), xi.

is Norton's greatest contribution to the archival profession, a legacy of service and constant dedication to professional development. As an only child with no siblings and no other family, Norton left her entire estate to SAA.

It is my hope that the reader has gained a new respect for Norton by reading this paper. Her drive to become the best she could be and to serve the public to the best of her ability is admirable. Archivists must do their best to meet the needs of all who come to them and always conduct themselves in a professional manner and serve their "customers," the public. Norton was arguably one of the first archivists to believe that archives could be used to serve everyday purposes. Gone were the days of the archive simply being a dusty collection of long ago history.

Because Norton believed that archives and archivists could be guardians of people's rights as citizens, she paved the way for archivists to become active members of their civic communities, a crucial part of ensuring that the government was doing its job to protect documents that would help people. Although she did not write explicitly about this issue, it is a definite theme that one can find in her writings.

The archival profession has truly evolved from Norton's time. The majority of archivists of Norton's day, trained in history did not yet have the sense that archivists could be servants of the public and thus have a practical effect on people's lives. Many archivists now have acknowledged this and serve the public honorably in the day to day course of their jobs, but it must not be something that becomes routine, taken for granted. Archivists must remember to bring a balance of pragmatism and theory to their jobs.

Norton gave a human face to archives at a time when archives were considered to

be the domain of the learned and elite. She turned the profession into something that ordinary people could pursue and relate too. She argued that archival documents did not have to be documents that dealt with people and events that seem distant. They could be documents that concerned people and their everyday lives, documents that documented people's daily lives and were important. Through all her work and prominence, Norton made ordinary people and government officials alike want to support the idea of archives, because she made the concept relatable to them. People are more likely to support something they can understand and that will be relevant to their everyday lives. Norton was passionate that archives should serve this purpose and made sure her archives in Illinois did so, with great success.

The archival community was somewhat divided over the best way to go about its business when Norton came on the scene. It was a new profession that had yet to establish many rules and regulations that archivists follow today. It was a profession with a clear mission. Many people had opinions on issues that they wanted heard. Everyone had different ways of thinking about the various issues, and this lively debate really enriched the profession. There are many theorists from this era whose works have survived to this day, Theodore Schellenberg, Waldo Gifford Leland, to name a few. Norton's writings survive as well and are particularly noteworthy because of what shaped her thinking. Norton articulated ideas and concepts while not entirely original were influenced by her childhood experiences, her education, and her early years of on the job training as an archivist.

By learning all she could from books and colleagues she encouraged those around

her to do the same, and never stop learning, never stop being passionate about archives and what they could do for government and society. Norton was a woman who lives life on her own terms and had very original thoughts at a time when it was considered unorthodox for a woman to do so. She was passionate about her chosen profession, couldn't have imagined doing anything else, and always gave it her all. For this she is to be commemorated and celebrated. Following her example, archivists of this generation and the next ought to do the same.

Norton presented an important new way of looking at archives which had long been accepted in Europe, the idea that the most important function of archives is to serve the public and provide access to records created in the course of business. She took archival traditions and principles which were very European and made them accessible to an America audience, an audience that might not have been all that familiar with them and had come a uniquely American tradition of historical document preservation. It caused some concern on the part of people, as historians were thought of as the primary beneficiary of archives and the services of archivists before Norton came on the scene.

It was not until Norton was retired that her views were really appreciated and valued. Those who were historians by trade still played a dominant role in the profession in United States and not did not always acknowledge that Norton was someone who held valuable theoretical and practical views. She has been at the center of many debates the archival profession has had over the years concerning where the profession is going and where it will end up. Many people feel that she was too strict with her ideas and that her views left no room for those in the archival profession who came in with a history

background. Historians have made a great contribution to the archival profession and many feel Norton was downplaying their significance. She did not. Her detractors must understand that she was pragmatic and while she had her beliefs she was willing to compromise as well and was not as rigid as they imagine. If archivists can take one thing away by reading this thesis, they would do well to remember this.



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