

*This article is written as a part of Georgia Archives Month, recognized every October by the Society of Georgia Archivists. This year, the theme of Georgia Archives Month is “Come on in, y’all! Accessible Archives in Georgia.”*

## “A Labor of Love: Bringing the Past to Light”

October 3, 2017 - Allison Young, Registrar

As an Archive, our purpose boils down to one primary goal: keep history accessible. We do this by collecting and preserving records and photos of historical importance. Donated or transferred to us, these records give snapshots into the past we can use to learn and connect with our heritage. The following is a story of some of those records, which we at Thronateeska now refer to as “the D.A.R. Project.” It resulted in over 9,545 unique digital pages from 18 books of historic records spanning 1837-1934.

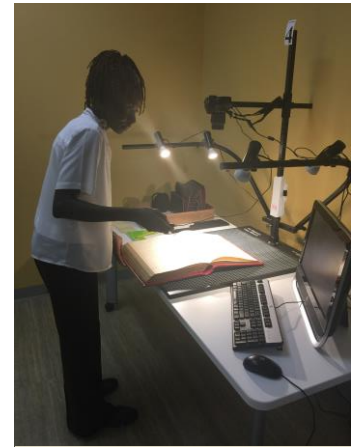
When the books started coming to us, the gravity of what we were trying to accomplish began to sink in. Local officials had recognized the books' importance and readily agreed to transfer them to the Archives. The books had not been read or moved for who knows how long before. Some had been on shelves in offices, others tucked behind boxes or in cabinets in warehouses. That we knew of, they were some of the earliest written records of our pioneer town's growth. Their information documented the earliest official decisions of the community. Marriages, properties, news of the day -- all manner of information was now at hand in these books.



The sheer size and weight of the books proved to be the first challenge in deciding what to do. They were inconsistent in size and construction. The smallest was about the size of a thin, 3-ring binder, while the largest could take 2 people to move. Their average

weight of 15-20 pounds along with their oversized dimensions made them very awkward to handle. Some of them easily surpass 30 pounds, a far cry from library paperbacks! We had to be sure whatever long-term home we decided on could actually support their bulk and not be hard to reach.

Some of the books are core civic records. Many are still in almost mint condition, showy in their glossy red leather and gold embossing. But other accessory records are very poor, and fragile to the point of being ready to fall to pieces. They demand constant mindfulness during handling. Many of the covers flake with the slightest touch, leaving reddish-brown debris on everything they contact. Several are velvety-soft with rich green, blue, or blackened corduroy covering their hardbacks. This makes them beautiful, but also unfortunate “magnets” for picking up dirt and dust. Some are bound only in thick sheets of century-old heavy paper, cardboard, and canvas sewn around their spines. Some of the spine covers have cracked and separated from their books completely. It was almost a miracle none of them showed signs of active mold.



*Njemile Ali, one of our volunteers, digitizing a book.*

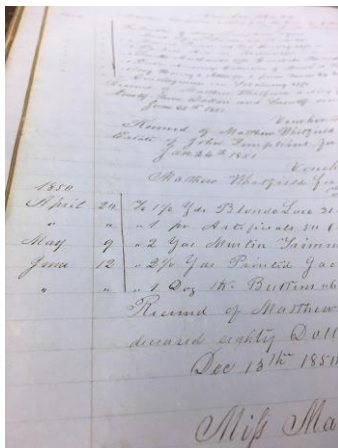
The first step after transporting them to the archives was to decide how we could make their information available to the public. Given their condition, they were not up to the task of hands-on reading. Digitization was the only way to go. After having their pages imaged, they could live out the rest of their retirement contentedly chilling in storage. Any future handling would be minimal and limited to only additional cleaning or preservation work. Although

there are dozens of books, we prioritized the oldest 18 of them for imaging through the project.

As a small non-profit, we knew we needed help. Our local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution spearheaded an effort to award us a matching grant. We needed new equipment that was both large and flexible enough to handle the books for imaging. After digitization the books would need permanent boxes to protect them in their fragile state. The grant the DAR provided us covered equipment, software, and boxes for the process of digitizing and housing those oldest of books.

Next came the work of actually photographing the books. This took a small army of volunteers and staff the better part of a year. Given the condition and nature of the books, there was no way to streamline the process. Each book was processed one at a time. It had to be positioned, the image quality checked, a picture of the page taken, the page turned, and then repeated through hundreds of pages until you reached the end of the book. Then, you prepared the next book and began all over again. Without our volunteers we could not have completed the project by the grant's deadline. Each volunteer put in dozens of hours over months to see this through.

We took the photos at the highest resolution possible to ensure the most detail. The resolution allowed viewers to magnify the pictures and see far more detail. This can be important for deciphering challenging handwriting in ink washed out by the years. However, the files turned out so large most standard PCs cannot open them. The images needed to be converted to smaller, standard file types. Conversion, depending on the quantity of pages in a given book, could take hours. This process monopolized a work station computer during that time, and so demanded more logistics for us to work around.



*Transcribing cursive is another accessibility challenge.*

After digitization, each book was placed in its custom-built archival box. The boxes ensure an extra layer of protection against the possibility of airborne contaminants, pests, re-shelving stresses, or the event our fire suppression system is ever triggered.



*Several of the books in their new boxes.*

So now, we have come to the end of that project. The books are safe, resting in their boxes in our cool, dark storage. We can be proud, knowing they are readable without being in jeopardy.

Our staff looks forward to new possibilities we see on the horizon. We are exploring opportunities for making records of this sort available online. We have also found many of them need to be transcribed. Why? The handwritten text is in old-style cursive, which many people are not able to read. The writing may as well be in a foreign language. Overcoming this is another step in maintaining accessibility for future generations. With the success of the project and these new goals in mind, we look forward to photographing the rest of the books.

Regardless of these new challenges, we remember the help we had. Had it not been for the assistance received along the way, we could not have done it. It took a whole team of people working together to get the grant. Not counting staff time, our volunteers donated at least 252 hours of their time to this project. Without their care, attention, and dedication, the books may as well still be tucked away somewhere. Concerned members of the community joined with us to make this happen. Their support ensured these books can enrich the lives of future generations. Their labor of love, with every day they switched on the camera, brought the past into the light.

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