



## THE ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES & HISTORY

### ORIGINS & EARLY HISTORY

Founded in 1901, the Archives was the first state-funded archival and historical agency in the country. Although it had been a state for more than eighty years and boasted a rich, centuries-old history, Alabama previously had no formal system in place for the collection and preservation of its records. Consequently, those materials were scattered throughout the state. Early Alabama historians by necessity traversed the old towns and former capitals of the state, seeking out its recorded history. The desire to correct this deficiency, combined with interest in improving public education and professionalizing the field of history, was the impetus needed to create the agency. Broad concern for the preservation of Confederate history and materials provided momentum.

Thomas McAdory Owen emerged as the most ardent proponent for an Alabama Archives. Born in Jefferson County in 1866 and a lawyer by profession, Owen developed a deep interest in history. Upon graduating from the University of Alabama, he held a variety of positions, including justice of the peace, assistant county solicitor, and chairman of the Jefferson County Democratic Executive Committee.

Owen worked in Washington, D.C., for three years as chief clerk for the U.S. Postal Service's division of inspectors. His time in the nation's capital deepened his interest in history. Owen befriended Ainsworth R. Spofford, the librarian of Congress, who encouraged his pursuits. In 1898, the American Historical Association published a lengthy Alabama bibliography compiled by Owen, followed by one on Mississippi the next year. The pieces earned accolades for the young historian and established his credentials within the profession.



*Thomas McAdory Owen, 1900*

Owen returned to Alabama in 1897 and took up the practice of law in the town of Carrollton. The following year, he and like-minded individuals revived the Alabama Historical Society, which had been dormant for over two decades. In June 1898, the group met in Tuscaloosa. It was clear at that meeting

that Tom Owen would be the organization's "guiding light," as an early biographer described him. The members elected Owen secretary of the group. In that capacity, he set about rebuilding the society, distributing 1,500 membership invitations. The results were impressive. Within a year, he added more than 250 new members to the rolls and an additional twenty-five "corresponding members," which included eminent American historian Herbert Baxter Adams and two historically minded future presidents of the United States: Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

In December 1898, Owen authored two bills and submitted them to the state legislature. The first appropriated \$250 annually to support the work of the Alabama Historical Society. The second bill called for the creation of a commission to research, catalog, and preserve Alabama's scattered history. The measures received the prominent support of the *Montgomery Advertiser*. "The State owes it to her sons to preserve her history," an editorial noted, "and the beginning...made in this behalf will reflect credit on those who support the measure long after the ordinary incidents of this [legislative] session are forgotten." Representative William W. Brandon of Tuscaloosa, a member of the historical society, sponsored the appropriations bill and lobbied vigorously for its passage: "We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to all the people of Alabama, we owe it to all that is high and uplifting in life."

In the legislature, Owen's bills benefited from good timing, caught up in patriotic fervor surrounding the dedication of a new Confederate monument on the north lawn of the Capitol. At the unveiling ceremony for the monument, Gov. Thomas Goode Jones, himself a member of the society, called for Alabama to fulfill its obligations to preserve the state's history. The bills passed both chambers easily.



Tom Owen sorting records in the Capitol, ca. 1901

Owen became chairman of the new, five-member commission. He proved to be an able leader of the group. He was fastidious by nature, a necessary quality for the task before them. Owen modeled the work on an eight-volume compilation of the public records of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. He marshaled the commission's members to locate and catalog records of state and local government agencies, religious and educational institutions, benevolent societies, military services, the state's public men, its artists and authors, and the locations of historic homes and battlefields. "So far as can be ascertained," he wrote, "no where has a similar effort, quite so ambitious and comprehensive, been put forth." A circular produced by the commission summarized the work:

In all parts of Alabama are individuals who have facts in their knowledge on some, if not all, of the topics embraced in the proposed investigation. Hid away in old trunks, drawers, book-cases, and chests, are numbers of manuscript treasures: private letters, letter books, diaries or journals, weather notes, manuscript maps, account books, surveyor's notes or field books, etc.... The location, extent and present ownership of all such materials is earnestly desired; and if possible a gift of the same to the Historical Society.



*Marie Bankhead, ca. 1885*

Politically astute in his own right, Owen also benefited from the considerable influence of the family into which he married. In 1893 he wed Marie Bankhead, daughter of John Hollis Bankhead, who served in the U.S. Congress for more than thirty years, first in the House and then the Senate. The Bankheads were among the most powerful families in the state, with a coterie of attorneys, state and local officeholders, bankers, and businessmen among their ranks. William Bankhead, Marie's brother, would later serve as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. John II followed their father in the U.S. Senate. Marie Bankhead Owen shared her husband's interest in history and worked alongside him to make the commission a success.

In December 1900, Tom Owen submitted to Gov. William J. Samford a thorough report more than four hundred pages in length noting the locations and conditions of Alabama's historical records. In the report the commission also called for the creation of a state department of archives and history to institutionalize and continue the work of the group and to ensure that the records of Alabama could be properly preserved and utilized. During the winter of 1900–1901, the state legislature took up a bill authored by Owen creating the Alabama Department of Archives and History. On February 27, 1901, Governor Samford signed it into law. In an organizational session of the new board of trustees on March 3, Owen was appointed the agency's first director.



*Marie Bankhead Owen and her brothers John, William, and Henry Bankhead, ca. 1910*

Owen initially ran the new agency from the Senate cloakroom in the Capitol. Although cramped, the space afforded the Archives maximum exposure among Alabama's elected officials. Owen collected broadly, acquiring the personal papers of prominent Alabamians including politician and education reformer Jabez L. M. Curry, antebellum fire-eater William Lowndes Yancey, and Albert James Pickett, one of Alabama's earliest historians. He sought out books, artifacts, political ephemera, unpublished manuscripts, and Civil War battle flags. Ainsworth Spofford, whose tutelage of a young Tom Owen in Washington had been crucial, offered the Archives duplicate copies of Alabama newspapers held at the Library of Congress. When the legislature was not in session, Owen set up displays in the legislative chambers.

Owen's nimble lobbying and public-relations efforts proved fruitful. In 1907, upon completion of the new south wing of the Capitol, the Archives received dedicated space to house its diverse and growing collections. Other southern states soon followed the example set by Alabama. Mississippi, Arkansas, and the Carolinas all established state archives. The Mississippi Valley Historical Association



*Collections of the Archives on view in the Senate chamber*

and the American Historical Association both recognized Owen for his trailblazing work in the professionalization of state history and records preservation.

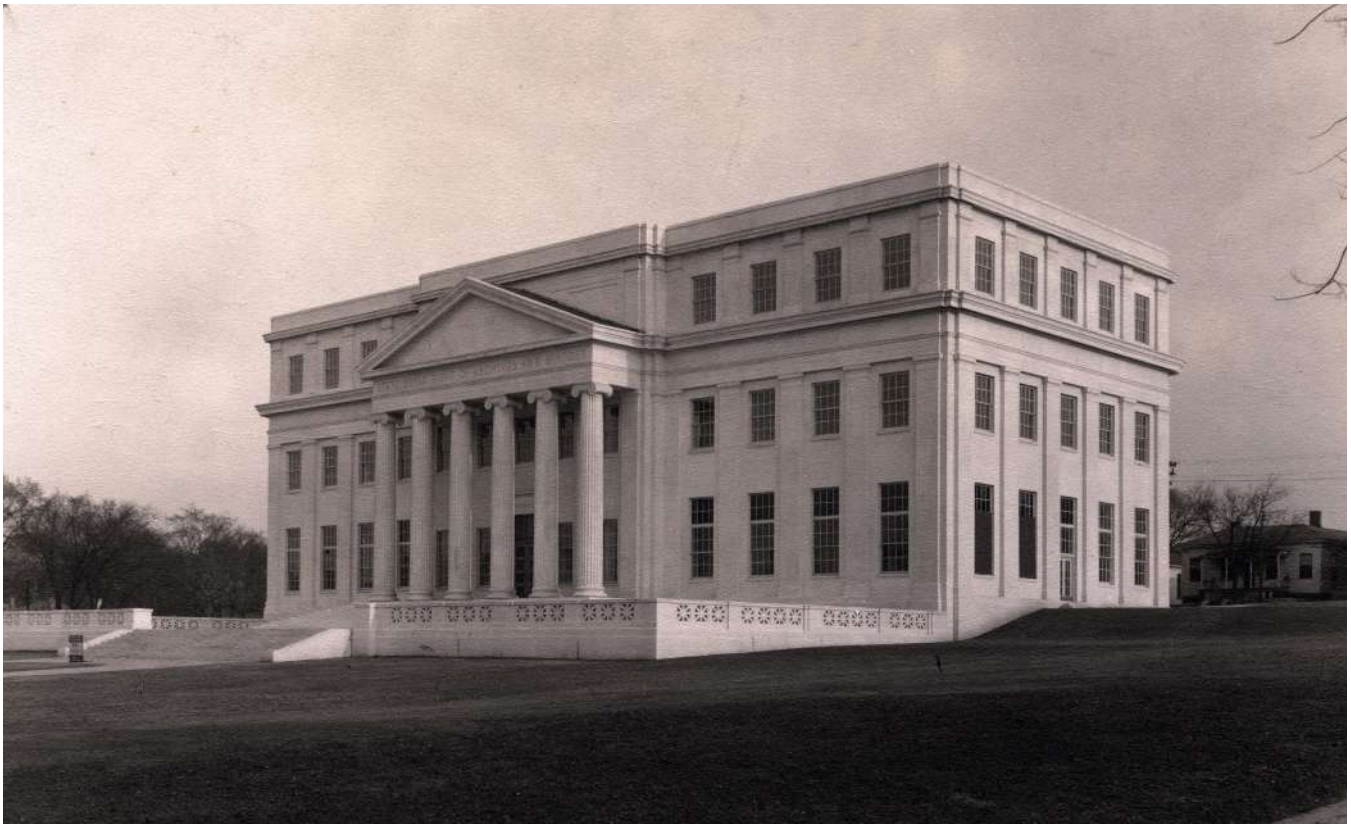
In 1915, a new state law mandated that public officials transfer all non-current agency records to the Archives for preservation. The law served two purposes: It allowed the Archives to take possession of early Alabama records still held in various state agencies, and it accelerated discussion of the need for a separate Archives building. In 1919, as part of the effort to honor Alabamians who died during the Great War, the legislature authorized a commission to make plans for a World War Memorial Building that would also house the Archives. The state procured land opposite the Capitol but lacked funding for construction of the new building.



*Marie Owen, ca. 1940*

“The Department is in every sense one of service and help,” Owen wrote in 1919. “It aspires to be an uplifting, refining and stimulating force in State life, and in a high degree it is meeting these ideals.” But Tom did not live to see his dream of an adequate home for the Archives become a reality. He died in 1920. His widow, Marie Bankhead Owen, succeeded him as director.

The second woman to lead an Alabama state agency, Marie served the Archives for the next thirty-five years. Her most lasting contribution was to secure federal funding for the construction of the World War Memorial Building, the permanent home of the Archives. The ornately detailed facility, filled with richly veined white marble quarried in nearby Sylacauga, opened to national acclaim in 1940. Permanent exhibit galleries in the new building added significant capacity to the dual missions of the Archives—preservation and education.



*The Alabama World War Memorial Building, home of the Archives, 1940*

The agency continued to advance in this mission under the leadership of successive directors. And while some services begun under the auspices of the Archives have become standalone agencies, including the Public Library Service and the Historical Commission, the original commitment to collect, preserve, and share the records of Alabama remained central. In addition to housing permanent state government records, the Archives is the principal repository of Alabama's newspapers and microfilmed county records. It boasts digital collections containing hundreds of thousands of photographs, maps, and documents used by teachers, students, and researchers across the globe. Its historical and genealogical resources are widely used, both in the research room and through numerous online partnerships

Additions to the building in 1974 and 2005 completed the original architectural design for an H-shaped structure and provided more space for records storage, exhibits, and educational and public programming. The final expansion, which included a spacious, state-of-the-art research room, also paved the way for an overhaul of the Archives' exhibit spaces. The result was the creation of the *Museum of Alabama*. Galleries focusing on the geology of the state and its Native American history opened in 2011. The museum's centerpiece, *Alabama Voices*, opened in 2014. This 10,000-square-foot, Smithsonian-quality exhibit uses nearly 1,000 artifacts, two dozen audiovisual programs, and immersive scenic elements to tell the story of Alabama from the dawn of the eighteenth century through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

*Adapted from We the People: Alabama's Defining Documents exhibition catalog, 2019.*