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Mary Margaret Lea & Celia Emmelhainz

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In 1879, the United States funded care for the records of government-funded geological, ethnographic and archaeological explorations in the American West, in what later became known as the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) within the Smithsonian Institution. But who was doing the organizing of library and archival sources so integral to this scientific mission? This article highlights eight women working in the Bureau of American Ethnology library and archives in the early 20th century, including head librarians and archivists Jesse Thomas, Ella Leary, Miriam Ketchum, Carol Jopling, Mae Tucker, and Margaret Blaker, as well as library assistants Louvenia Russell and Ella Slaughter, who were classified as laborers but also conducted library work for the Bureau. We suggest that each of these women served as “glass shoulders,” creating an administrative and scholarly infrastructure that enabled the work of others, even as they advocated for their own value within the Bureau and the wider museum structure. In focusing on how librarians and archivists care for museum collections, we also examine how their work remains almost invisible in museum circles. Telling these stories enables us to honor the work of librarians and archivists in creating and curating museum histories, and to consider how this labor and expertise can be recognized and highlighted.

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Organizers of Museum History: Honoring the Labor of Librarians and Archivists in the Bureau of American Ethnology

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ABSTRACT

In 1879, the United States funded care for the records of government-funded geological, ethnographic and archaeological explorations in the American West, in what later became known as the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) within the Smithsonian Institution. But who was doing the organizing of library and archival sources so integral to this scientific mission? This article highlights eight women working in the Bureau of American Ethnology library and archives in the early 20th century, including head librarians and archivists Jesse Thomas, Ella Leary, Miriam Ketchum, Carol Jopling, Mae Tucker, and Margaret Blaker, as well as library assistants Louvenia Russell and Ella Slaughter, who were classified as laborers but also conducted library work for the Bureau. We suggest that each of these women served as “glass shoulders,” creating an administrative and scholarly infrastructure that enabled the work of others, even as they advocated for their own value within the Bureau and the wider museum structure. In focusing on how librarians and archivists care for museum collections, we also examine how their work remains almost invisible in museum circles. Telling these stories enables us to honor the work of librarians and archivists in creating and curating museum histories, and to consider how this labor and expertise can be recognized and highlighted.

Keywords: Museum libraries, Museum archives, Women in museums, Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), Smithsonian Institution

INTRODUCTION

In 1836, the United States Congress accepted a large bequest from Englishman James Smithson, directed to the “increase and diffusion of knowledge,” which it used to found the Smithsonian Institution in 1846. The Smithsonian, known for its museums on Washington DC’s National Mall, is a sprawling complex of dozens of museums, libraries, archives, and a zoo, plus research centers and collections storage facilities in locations across the U.S. Capital region, and outposts in New York City, Florida and Panama. In this paper, we focus on one segment of the Institution’s broader history: the development of librarian and archivist roles in the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), which operated from the 1880s to the 1960s.

In the context of imperial expansion, archaeological, ethnological, and surveying research in the American West was funded by the Organic Act of Congress in 1879, to gather and disseminate knowledge of indigenous languages and cultures (Austin et al 2005, p. 186). This act dedicated funds to the Smithsonian Institution to take in “all the archives, records and materials relating to the Indians of North America” collected by the U.S. Geological Survey in the Rocky Mountains (Organic Act 1879, p. 397); Major John Wesley Powell was then charged with developing a Bureau of Ethnology to inform the Government’s administration of “Indian affairs” (Hinsley 1981, 147-150), and to “organize anthropologic research in America” (Fowler & Fowler 1969, p. 166). As the body that would hold field records created by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), this Bureau was intended to “continue the anthropological fieldwork” of prior surveys (Woodbury & Woodbury 1999, p. 284) and to document such work through “systematic collecting and recording” (Krakker et al. 1999, p. 10). In these early years of anthropology, the Smithsonian was a national center of anthropological research and exhibition, holding collections as well as sponsoring extensive fieldwork and publications (Bernstein 1989).

Artifacts gathered by the Bureau were deposited within the U.S. National Museum (USNM), which also fell within the Smithsonian Institution, while the photographic and documentary materials that later formed the Bureau archives were retained within the Bureau. In the 1890s, the Bureau was one of the few places willing to publish work in linguistics and mythology (Hinsley and Holm 1976, p. 313), and indeed cultivated a focus on “the immaterial side of the culture,” such as languages and stories (Boas 1902, p. 829). In 1897, the *Bureau of Ethnology* was renamed the *Bureau of American Ethnology*, to describe its geographic coverage more accurately.

In addition to collecting cultural and archaeological objects for the U.S. National Museum, Bureau staff published their research in several series of monographs and journals, in what became the Bureau library, and gathered linguistic and cultural documentation such as vocabulary lists, fieldnotes and photographs in the Bureau archives, creating an interlocked structure of library, archive, and museum collections. The BAE, located in the Smithsonian Castle, employed ethnologists who primarily did fieldwork and publishing, while the anthropologists in the U. S. National Museum were responsible for cataloging and describing collections (Ruth Selig 2024, personal communication).

While most full-time ethnologists hired in the Bureau were men, women had a persistent presence as field scientists acquiring collections (Greene 2020), and as librarians and archivists. The first recognized Bureau librarian was ethnologist Frederick Webb Hodge, and the first Bureau librarian was ethnologist J.N.B. Hewitt (Judd 1967, p. 25); both juggled these roles with their other scientific responsibilities. Their successors were generally women. Hodge was moved from clerk to librarian to “ethnologist in charge” in 1910 (Woodbury & Woodbury 1999, p. 290)—a title that archivist Margaret Blaker was later nominated for but never achieved. When Bureau collections were moved into the Natural History building in the 1960s, Margaret Blaker was listed as both “librarian and archivist” (Woodbury & Woodbury 1999, p. 292).

As staffing dwindled, the Bureau underwent rapid changes in the 1960s. In 1964, Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley announced that the Bureau was to be abolished, and its staff, library, and archives would be combined with the Department of Anthropology. Both were merged into the Smithsonian Office of Anthropology (SOA) in 1965. In 1968, it was renamed the Department of Anthropology in the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH).

Library collections were divided, with manuscripts moving into the National Anthropological Archives (NAA), and published works moving into an anthropology library under the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, which in the 1980s was renamed the John Wesley Powell Anthropology Library. As of 2024, the NAA remains one of the largest anthropological archives, and the Powell Library one of few remaining anthropology libraries in the United States.

In this article, we highlight the contributions of four women who led the Bureau library under the title of librarian (Jesse Thomas, Ella Leary, Miriam Ketchum, and Carol Jopling) and of two women who led the Bureau archive under the title of archivist (Mae Tucker and Margaret Blaker). We also note the stories of Louvenia Russell and Ella Slaughter with an eye to the experiences of less-recognized library and archival staff—a project that deserves fuller exposition. In all of this, we attend to how women have navigated museum workplaces, using library and archival roles to establish expertise in institutions which were not always welcoming to women in positions of leadership and authority.

THE WORK OF WOMEN IN MUSEUM ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

While archives, libraries, and museums are seen as separate domains of expertise, museum librarians and archivists bridge these fields in their daily work. And while women are now in the majority in these professions, gendered dynamics continue to affect our work.

Women have long been visible in both libraries and archives, although they are still less represented in leadership than would be expected given their numbers in these professions as a whole. In critiques of the gendered dynamics of archival labor, archivists' work has been framed as scholarly homemaking (Kelly 2017) or mechanical work (Cook 2007, p. 170), or as reproductive labor of maintaining historic lineages in institutions and departments (Lapp 2009, p. 9) in a space where a woman “can do no real-world damage” (Lapp 2019, p. 11). Similarly, librarianship has been framed as the work of guarding cultural ideas, in a vocation where women serve “as wife and mother to their community” (Kate 2016). As friendly faces and invisible hands (cf. Emmelhainz et al. 2017), librarians at times have limited visibility for their research and scholarship, but are recognized and acknowledged as “supporting players, providing the foundation upon which the men would build their reputation, their distinction, and their profession” (Stauffer 2016, p. 315). Especially in the early years of the profession, female librarians were often hired in assistant roles (Sutherland 2015, p. 114), serving others amidst their cataloging and reference work (Garrison 1972).

As part of the broader museum workforce, museum librarians and archivists also inherit a legacy of women in the museum professions. Early women in museums often worked in honorary roles attained through familial ties and social class (Labrum 2018), and volunteered behind the scenes to collate, edit, or illustrate publications for male family members (Panciroli et al. 2021). As Greene (2020) discusses in the case of naturalists Emma Dean Powell and Ellen Powell Thompson, women's scientific and scholarly contributions are often “obscured by historical processes” and in need of rediscovery.

In the context of Smithsonian anthropology (1880s-present), women have long worked as researchers and caretakers of collections—but until the 1980s, rarely as full-time leading curators or research scientists. A few were formally employed as full-time anthropologists, ethnologists, or

curators; many more have done similar work as unpaid or piecework collaborators—as with volunteer curator Betty Meggers, or collaborating spouses Margaret Mott Wedel and Margaret Jodry (Marsh et al. 2023). These types of roles are double-edged, as on the one hand, women who hold honorary roles are often less prominent than employed spouses, while on the other, the privileges of rank, relationships, and wealth may allow them more autonomy in their work.

In the 1920s and 1930s, women made inroads across the US and Europe as paid museum workers. Many started as secretaries and assistants; women also moved quickly into roles such as preparators, catalogers, and illustrators (Taylor 1994; Wyse Jackson and Jones 2007). In the early years of natural history museums, male curators often “published on the material that they or their female colleagues collected” (Wyse Jackson and Jones 2007, p. 99), while women “fulfilled men’s directives, tidied up, and kept the records” (Taylor 1994, p. 12). As Kendall Taylor notes, women were assumed to be museum “generalists and amateurs,” and even when holding substantive positions, were not always granted the authority given to men in similar roles (1994, p. 12). In addition, women who married in the early 20th century were often nudged out of formal employment (Shepherd 2022); others, especially single or working-class women, fought the assumption that a spouse or affluent family could subsidize their low wages (Brown 1994). While working-class women have long worked outside the home, by the 1960s the paid work of middle-class American women after marriage was more tolerated (Poole 2018, p. 398)—and indeed, almost half of museum workers are now women (Baldwin and Ackerson 2017).

Yet even today, women balance their work in collections-based institutions with the temporal and financial demands of family care (Emmelhainz 2020, p. 20-21); temporary and part-time work further gives limited opportunity for upward mobility (Erdman 2019, p. 139). This is compounded by the way in which museums expect personal sacrifice from their workers, leading to frequent situations where “the burnout ratio is high, and personal lives often suffer” (Weber 1994, p. 35). All of this reinforces librarian Fobazi Ettarh’s description of *vocational awe* (2018), in which librarians and archivists are praised for their devotion to the cause—and sometimes given autonomy within their domain—yet expected not to push too hard in advocating for equitable recognition or remuneration for their work.

Yet as we will show, female museum workers have persistently worked towards a broader range of social impacts than indicated in their official position, and fought for promotion, titles, grade increases, and reclassification when appropriate. We observed a range of approaches to the workplace not only in the work of Bureau librarians and archivists, but also in Smithsonian anthropology more broadly, as women have advocated for co-authorship (Stephanie Damadio), conducted research in the hours after a full-time administrative role (Laurie Burgess), created her own customized role (Candace Greene), sued for recognition (Joanna Cohan Scherer), or sought further education to advance in her field (Lucile St. Hoyme and Jane Walsh)—each woman exploring a range of approaches that might balance her formal role, her outside responsibilities, and her ambitions and desired impacts in her field.

METHODS

This article results from the Because of Her Story (BOHS) Cohort Internship Program, part of the American Women’s History Initiative (AWHI), which amplifies women’s voices by placing interns in projects at museums across the Smithsonian. In 2023, we worked at the National

Anthropological Archives (NAA) to uncover stories of women anthropologists in the Department of Anthropology in the National Museum of Natural History. This work involved scouring older personnel and administrative records of the Bureau of American Ethnology and the National Anthropological Archives, as well as gathering biographical and career information on each woman via web searches, literature reviews, and digitized archival materials, and reviewing institutional records from the Smithsonian Institution Archives. Following Candace Greene's suggestion to "draw upon different types of source material, in addition to a finer sifting of the textual record" (2020), and Deborah Shapiro's suggestion to look for "Miss" or "Mrs" plus "Curator" when searching for women in digitized records (personal communication, 2023), we indeed found digitized government reports and the acknowledgement sections of publications to be a fruitful source of information on what women *do*, not just on their job titles. Having identified six women who led the BAE library and archive over a sixty-year period, we then did genealogical research using census records and city directories to understand their personal histories. In the sections below, we narrate their stories, followed by a discussion of women's work in museum libraries and archives.

BUREAU LIBRARIANS

Jesse E Thomas (Bureau librarian, 1900-1903)

Jesse Thomas was born in 1875 in Illinois. She studied European languages under private teachers, and later worked as secretary assisting her father Cyrus Thomas, an ethnologist at the BAE. There, she studied the Mayan language. In 1900 she was temporarily appointed as an assistant in the Bureau library under curator F.W. Hodge, listing her occupation in the census as "assistant librarian." After passing a civil service exam, she was given a permanent appointment. In 1901, Ms. Thomas stepped up to lead the library for an annual salary of \$900. As librarian, she was largely responsible for the transcription of a Maya/Spanish dictionary. Her career was cut short when she died in a skating accident in January 1903, at the age of 27; her obituary in the BAE's annual report describes her as performing "with marked ability the difficult task of administering a scientific library," including "bibliographic studies intended to lessen the labor of students of anthropology." She is eulogized for "her extreme carefulness and methodical habits [which] are well illustrated by the perfect order in which all her work was left, and her staunch character, modest demeanor, and lovable disposition."

Ella Leary (Bureau librarian, 1903-1936)

Ella Leary was born in 1869 in Washington, DC. By 1891 she was working at the U.S. Geological Survey and/or Bureau of American ethnology as a clerk, according to city directories. By 1897 she worked as a BAE clerk for an annual salary of \$900 per year. In 1903, the BAE annual report noted her "clerical work of the library"

was satisfactory; the next year, she was listed as "clerk and acting librarian," with Mrs. Ella Slaughter as an assistant; this acting role continued for several years. By 1908, she was listed as the librarian. In 1914, at the age of 42, she filed an emergency passport application while in London, in which she is described as having dark brown hair, an oval face, brown eyes, and a straight nose. Ella continued providing annual reports until 1935, when she retired "on account of ill health." She appears to have rented a home and never married; at one point she took in a lodger. She died in 1938 in Georgetown.

Miriam B Ketchum (Bureau librarian, 1936-1951)

Miriam B Ketchum was born in 1901 in Georgia, and by 1928 she moved to Washington, DC, where she worked as a cataloger. She received a BA and MA from George Washington University, with specialties in library science and anthropology, and worked on the library staff of the Naval Observatory and Weather Bureau, before being appointed in 1936 to succeed Ella Leary as Bureau librarian. By 1940, Miriam lived with her widowed mother in Bethesda, on an annual salary of \$1860. By 1952, she was no longer listed as librarian of the BAE; in 1954, she was a librarian in the Department of the Interior. We found no record of her after her service in the Department of the Interior.

Carol F Jopling (Bureau librarian, 1962-1963)

Carol Farrington was born in 1917 in Kentucky. After graduation from Vassar College in 1938, she married Peter Jopling in 1940 in Ohio. They moved to Connecticut for Peter's job, where she raised three children: Morgan, John, and Hannah. In 1960, after completing her master's in library science, she became a librarian at the University of Maryland. In 1962, she was appointed reference librarian at the BAE, after a ten-year gap in staffing; she left in 1963, the same year she received a second master's degree in anthropology. Carol went on to a wide-ranging career, with librarian and bibliographer roles across universities and government agencies. She completed her doctorate in anthropology in 1973, taught anthropology at multiple universities, and wrote five books. She ended her career—after a divorce—with three years (1981-1984) as chief librarian at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) in Panama. She died in 2000 in Bethesda.

BUREAU ARCHIVISTS

Mae W Tucker (Bureau archivist, 1925-1952)

Mae Tucker was born in 1882 in Michigan. By 1900 she worked as a servant in Syracuse, New York, and by 1910 as an advertising clerk for an automobile company. By 1920 she was working as a clerk in the War Department and living in Northwest DC. In 1924 she was temporarily appointed as stenographer and typist at the Bureau of American Ethnology. A 1926 annual report from the BAE notes her as "assisting Mr. Hewitt in reclassifying and recataloging the manuscripts in the bureau archives." Alongside her clerical work, she "assisted Dr. Swanton in compiling a Timucua dictionary" and worked classifying museum records (1927). In 1929, she compiled manuscript catalogs by author and by manuscript number. By 1930 she was again "assisting Mr. Hewitt in his work as custodian of manuscripts and phonograph records," and in 1933 she worked cataloging all the photographic negatives and prints in the archive. By 1946, Mae was listed as "operating and cataloging the manuscript and photographic archives." The next year, she fought for reclassification and recognition of her archival work, detailed below. Throughout her career, she was listed as "Miss," suggesting an unmarried status. Mae retired as archivist in 1952, after 27 years of service. We found no record of her after retirement.

Margaret C Blaker (Bureau archivist, 1958-1972)

Margaret Eleanor Contant was born in 1924 in New York, and was adopted by her aunt Mae DeSmidt before 1930. In 1945, she finished a bachelor's degree at the University of Rochester, and in 1948, she married Carl Benjamin Blaker in Washington, DC. In the 1950 census she lists herself as an archaeologist at the Smithsonian, where worked as a museum aide under Waldo Wedel in the Smithsonian's Division of Archaeology; an updated biographical stub lists her archaeological fieldwork experience in Florida and Maine. In 1953 she transferred to the Bureau as an archives assistant. In the annual report for 1954, Margaret is identified as "archivist of the Bureau," but listed as archives assistant in the directory. By 1958, she was formally named as the archivist. In 1965 she oversaw the archives' transition from Bureau archives to the National Anthropological Archives—from which she resigned in 1972. She died in Florida in 2008.

PERSISTENT ADVOCACY FOR MUSEUM LIBRARIANS AND ARCHIVISTS

While museum reports point us to the formal public representation of library and archival work, we found memoranda and administrative records to be a richer source of women's self-advocacy and their colleagues' and managers' attempts to advocate for them. Such records can be challenging to locate, as non-curatorial women may not be named as creators of record series or correspondents in a museum archive. Because of this, we looked sideways for traces of women in the records of museum programs, departments, curators, and administrators. In this, we follow the approach of Ana Baeza Ruiz' work to uncover the story of typist Miss E. M. Rendall at the National

Gallery in London; after poring through Rendall's letters protesting personnel actions, Ruiz notes that it is by registering formal challenges to policy and decision-making that women disrupt the official framing of museum spaces (2018, p. 185), leaving traces of those laborers who are otherwise invisible. This echoes Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's aphorism that well-behaved women seldom *make* history (2007)—even when they are organizing history.

Librarians and archivists at the Bureau of American Ethnology similarly left their traces in letters and memoranda relating to collections spaces, policies, and personnel. For instance, acting archivist Mae W. Tucker wrote to Bureau Chief Matthew W. Stirling in 1947, raising her concern that ten years after taking on archival leadership, she was still classed as a clerk—even though the U.S. was offering a civil service exam for well-paid archivist roles that closely matched her work. In a June 6, 1947 letter, Mae notes that she had led the Bureau archives “alone since the death of Mr. Hewitt” in 1937, ten years prior, and asked her manager:

“Do you, in all honesty, think it is fair that I should be barred for advancement...? My efficiency ratings have been consistently ‘very good.’ It would be a source of great satisfaction if I could know wherein I have failed in the performance of my work, in order that I might attempt to remedy the defects.”

Mae's escalation of concerns was supported by a May 7, 1948 letter from archaeologist Frank H. H. Roberts, who noted that Mae was at the top of her grade, had taken over archival management responsibilities, and had written multiple catalogs and devised a new organizational system for the archives. His request for her pay increase and formal reclassification into the role of “archivist” was granted in 1949, twelve years after Mae took over these responsibilities.

Similarly, Matthew W. Stirling submitted a redescription of Bureau archivist Margaret C. Blaker's duties in 1956, arguing in a January 31, 1957 letter that her work was of a professional anthropological nature, and suggesting that she be given the title of “Ethnologist in charge of Archives” or “Research Analyst.” In support, Stirling noted Blaker's anthropological education, graduate coursework, and previous experience as a museum aide in the Division of Archaeology. We found no response, yet Blaker and her superiors continued to push for recognition. Two years later, Blaker was awarded for “consistently effective performance... in a position properly allocable to a grade higher than the one she occupied” (Smithsonian Torch, August 1959, p. 2).

Managers and staff of the Bureau also advocated repeatedly for the value of a professionally staffed library and archive during staffing gaps, and particularly during a ten-year gap in staffing of the Bureau library. As the Bureau's 1960-61 Annual Report noted,

“the library is not wholly fulfilling the function that it should because of the lack of a librarian... for many years the Bureau library was one of the outstanding places in North America for anthropological research, and it well merits a return to its former status.”

Such persistent pleas make visible the continual labor that workers and managers of all genders do in calling attention to the value of library and archival work in museums, and in securing a continual renewal of staffing despite competing claims on museum resources.

GLASS SHOULDERS

In our study of Bureau and department history, it became clear that the collecting, research, and exhibitions of anthropologists in the Bureau of American Ethnology and in the U.S. National Museum could not have been done without the work of female scientists, librarians, archivists, and administrators—yet recognition often came retroactively. Hidden in the interstices of museum structures, women at times wielded substantive responsibility, yet their work was most likely to be recognized and honored in museum spaces and reports after an early death (as with Jessie Thomas and Carolyn Rose) or when advocating for replacements after gaps in staffing.

Crystalline imagery is often used to describe women’s experiences in professional roles. Women have long faced *glass ceilings*, or persistent barriers to equitable advancement. Female managers face *glass cliffs*, being most frequently permitted to assume leadership during times of crisis and change—circumstances that are more likely to result in burnout, failure, and early departure (Kramer 2005, Poole 2019, p. 410). And even in female-majority professions, men still ride *glass escalators* to the top. To counter such demoralizing dynamics, ambitious women need a “constellation” of supportive mentors (Fels 2004, p. 127), while the absence or fraying of such mentorship “rapidly deflates ambitions” (p. 124).

Yet clearly perceiving these glassy structures is challenging. As anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans notes in speaking of transparency, to see *through* something makes internal features visible, yet obscures the glass itself (2009). And indeed, such glassy metaphors for women’s labor point to both what is visible (the presence of humans in the workplace) and what is obscured (the way in which gender and other assigned identities quietly shape the workplace structures within which we all navigate).

We add to such glassy metaphors the frame of *glass shoulders*, in which women serve as enduring shoulders for others to stand on. Most social groups and workplaces have a hierarchy of roles, in which some people are more prominent than others. In cultural institutions with a long legacy of elite men and women in prominent roles, other workers may easily find they have slid into temporary, administrative, and support roles, serving as the *glass shoulders* on which others build their research, writing, and public careers. Such glass shoulders are strong, but not limitless in strength, and not always visible. Over time, workers who serve as the supports of their colleagues become seen not as producers and transmitters of knowledge in themselves, but as enabling the increase and diffusion of knowledge produced by others.

BEYOND JOB TITLES: LOUVENIA RUSSELL AND ELLA SLAUGHTER

While surfacing the stories of individual museum library and archival workers is important, we also acknowledge the limits of a biographical approach. As Anne Whitelaw notes, “a biographical approach to telling the stories of these figures ultimately valorizes those women who have

occupied recognizable leadership positions... and ignores the anonymous labor” of others (2012, p. 76). And as Kate Hill (2016) remarks, the labels attached to women’s work often obscures much of their actual labor, “either deliberately or through chance and opportunism.” Our initial survey replicated these observations, as we could trace the names of head librarians and archivists much more easily than those of the clerks, aides, laborers, and volunteers who worked alongside and for these six leading women. This was made clear as, with the assistance of reference archivist Deborah Shapiro, we uncovered the stories of Louvenia Russell and Ella Russell Slaughter, two Black women who worked as “laborers” in the Bureau library:

Louvenia Russell (Bureau library assistant, 1894-1899)

Louvenia Russell joined the Bureau as a skilled laborer by 1893, when she was paid \$50 monthly. By 1896, she was given a pay raise from \$480 to \$540 annually, but by 1899 she retired due to failing health, and was replaced by her daughter, Ella Russell. In 1900 she died after an 18-month illness. Although she was never given the title of clerk or librarian like her white colleagues, her obituary in *The Colored American* notes her work as a library assistant in the Bureau of American Ethnology. Louvenia’s grave was later moved during the construction of Tennessee dams, and her daughter’s may have been moved as well.

Ella Russell Slaughter (Bureau library assistant, 1894-1914)

Ella M. Russell was born in Tennessee in 1880. By December 1894, Ella was paid \$3.06 for her “laundry” work for the Bureau; at that time, she was enrolled at the Howard Training School for Nurses. When Louvenia stepped down from her work as a laborer in the Bureau library in 1899, Ella was appointed in her place. A 1900 obituary for Louvenia in *The Colored American* indicates that both Ella and Louvenia worked as library assistants, a consistent presence under a series of rotating librarians. By 1901, Ella was still listed as a laborer and paid \$540 annually—the lowest-paid worker in the Bureau. In 1904, Ella Russell was listed as assistant to librarian Ella Leary in the Bureau annual report; that same year, she married Henry P. Slaughter. She was never formally given the title of library assistant or clerk. Ella died in Washington, DC in 1914, at the age of 36, and was buried in her family homestead in Tennessee.

Early Bureau budgets note the allotment of funds for a “laborer” to support the library under librarian Jessie Thomas; this was likely Ella Slaughter, due to mention of her library work in her mother’s obituary and her later named work under librarian Ella Leary. If this is so, Ella Slaughter would then be a consistent fixture through the early years of the Bureau library, as the title of Librarian passed from Frederick Hodge to Jessie Thomas to Ella Leary (with a brief stint by May S. Clark, better known for her service as clerk to Director Powell). In this way, Mrs. Slaughter may have provided a throughline of institutional knowledge and practice for her rotating library

managers, even as she experienced racial barriers to full compensation and recognition for her work.

HONORING ADMINISTRATIVE WORK

There has been a pronounced movement to uncover the scientific labor of women in our museum's history (Greene 2020, Smithsonian 2023) and to document how museum librarians and archivists steward collections (Emmelhainz and Kamph 2023, p. 5). In looking to this labor, we note that women often produce extensive oral and documentary research in the course of collections care, repatriation, cataloging or processing, provenance, and administrative work in museums—in ways not necessarily recognized or cited as the formal publications of a researcher.

We further note that many library and archival workers, including Jesse Thomas, Ella Leary, Miriam Ketchum, and Mae Tucker, entered museums through clerical roles. Previously filled by men, clerical work was feminized in the early 20th century, and reframed as deskilled work “by virtue of the 'inferior' status of the women who came to perform it” (Phillips & Taylor 1996, p. 5)—mirroring an unfortunate trend observed by sociologists in other professions, in which the entry of women into a workforce tends to be correlated with lower pay and status, while the entry of men tends to elevate pay and status. Such clerical work was seen as suitable for women who would depart the workforce to take on marital support roles; those who stayed were expected to be married to their work (England & Boyer 2009).

Such dynamics around the social value of both work and workers create enduring tensions. When museum librarians and archivists develop expertise beyond what stereotypes of their title would suggest, it can be tempting to advocate for shifts in their title or role (e.g. to “curator” or “researcher”), so as to better reflect their value in a museum-centric environment. Yet we recognize that research, teaching, and curation are not the only work of value in museums. When we value women's work through a belated recognition of their research and fieldwork, we can inadvertently elide the value of their administrative and care labor, which is also worthy of respect and professional pay.

At times, the labor of museum librarians and archivists truly *is* organizational, focused on cataloging, description, and filing. At times, it is administrative, managing the flow of people, money, and collections through spaces. At times, it lays the groundwork for the insights of others, visible only through the traces of handwritten labels and indexes and catalog cards.¹ And at times, it is care work, providing emotional labor for colleagues and tending the hearth fires, or social ties, of an organization. Yet women's labor is not less for all this. As Neil Judd noted of Bureau ethnologists, “administrative duties destroy the productivity of otherwise capable scientists” (1967, p. 74)—and without capable and sensitive administration, a scientific group flounders and quickly falls apart.

¹ While records do not always detail the daily work of archivists, their traces are felt in other ways. As NAA photo archivist Paula Fleming reflected, “I didn't know Mae Tucker, but you feel her presence, doing what she can. She was trying and sometimes she was wrong, but other times, I was wrong.” (personal communication, December 14, 2023).

CONCLUSION: TELLING OUR STORIES

“Archival worlds and archival stories, these are always entirely the work of us: the people invested in labouring, encountering, confronting and rebuilding. How we tell stories about our work and our worlds matter, because they have a habit of lingering. Just ask the handmaiden.” - Jessica M. Lapp (2019, p. 22)

In this article, we have focused on the stories of eight women—librarians, archivists, and laborers—who functioned as *glass shoulders* supporting the substantial collecting, research, and publication work of the Bureau of American Ethnology. These women pushed for promotions as well as for titles such as archivist, researcher, or ethnologist that might recognize their value within the systems in which they operated. They also attempted to advocate for themselves *as* archivists and librarians, and to secure support from curators and museum leaders for their work. Such efforts represent the determination of women in museum libraries and archives—and in the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) sector more broadly—to extricate themselves from gendered experiences and workplace dynamics that we still recognize today.

We tell such stories because even non-notable women have stories worth engaging with in their full complexity. As Kathleen DeLong notes, women outside of elite and public roles rarely have their work experience documented (2013, p. 3)—nor are they documented by others through the types of oral histories, media coverage, and interviews needed to meet notability standards for Wikipedia or biographical compilations. Yet their stories are rich windows into the everyday experience of GLAM work, and into ways of being that might otherwise get passed over in our culture’s hero narratives. As 83-year-old Filomena Magavero recalled in her oral history of library work in New York:

“I was hired as a clerk. Now I questioned that of the librarian at the time... [and] he said, ‘well, there’s nothing I could do, you know this is the way it is,’ and you know I accepted... but I didn’t realize that these people (laughs) would start treating me like a clerk, and always did, and were mean-spirited about it... and so I was—I coped with it for thirteen years” (Fitzpatrick, p. 67).

However we choose to make them, our stories and our choices are complex, and worth telling. Along with the archival sleuthing we have undertaken, then, autobiographies and oral histories have tremendous potential to uncover the stories of women in collections-based and cultural heritage institutions, “illuminat[ing] the non-public lives and accomplishments of elite and non-elite women” (Orchard et al. 2019, p.72). Based on our experience, we recommend that museum departments take the time to document the names and projects of all staff, volunteers, and interns that labor with them in a given year. When writing acknowledgements, we suggest that scholars be *specific* in the work they thank their colleagues for—as, while we now know and value our colleagues, the memory of their nuanced contributions is quickly forgotten. And lastly, we urge our readers to conduct oral histories with—or at least sit and listen to—some of their less-visible colleagues, before it is too late.

Finally, we recognize that this work of advocating for women as museum workers comes at a cost. As our intern colleague Leah Ollie observed, “it’s a cyclical process, of who does the labor to show the labor of women” (personal communication, August 2023). Our process of gathering women’s stories involved the labor of two interns and multiple department staff at all levels, and included listening to elders, reparative description of archival records, the gathering of department memory, genealogical and archival research, and the compilation of scattered data. These were lengthy processes that resulted in the gathering of only a fragment of the rich women’s histories, which we know undergird the structure of our Institution—and of its many departments, libraries and archives.

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