

Draft Transcript of the National Archives Assembly Legacy Project interview with  
**Virginia Purdy**

December 15, 2006  
2:00 p.m.

Interviewer: [MICHAEL MCREYNOLDS]

Subject: Virginia Purdy [VIRGINIA PURDY]

Interviewer: Let's talk about your education.

Virginia Purdy: OK

Interviewer: You were educated in South Carolina; you got an MA and a PHD from George Washington. What was the subject of your PHD?

Virginia Purdy: Dissertation?

Interviewer: Were you a history major?

Virginia Purdy: History? Yes. George Washington had at that time 5 fields with a doctorate and 3 of them were in history and there were a couple of others in economics and social history. So it's mainly history.

Interviewer: You worked at the Library of Congress.

Virginia Purdy: Yes

Interviewer: What was that position?

Virginia Purdy: I was a reference librarian in the local history and genealogy section.

Interviewer: Did that prepare you for a career at the National Archives?

Virginia Purdy: Well there were a lot of genealogists wandering around the National Archives. But in that job I really got a respect for genealogists. They are very good researchers and don't deserve the scorn they get in most research places where they work.

Interviewer: What was your position at the National Portrait Gallery?

Virginia Purdy: I was Assistant Historian.

Interviewer: Did you publish anything there while you were there?

Virginia Purdy: I was in charge of popular publications and for the first exhibition we had a very good catalogue. I edited that and enjoyed doing it.

Interviewer: Were you recruited by Frank Burke to come to the National Archives?

Virginia Purdy: Yes. I met him through . . . we were putting together at the National Portrait Gallery a catalogue of American Portraits. And we were trying to work toward putting that on computer. And so my boss there, Dan Reed, brought in Frank Burke to help us with the computer work. And we worked together on that catalogue and then Frank invited me to come over here and work for him.

Interviewer: What was your first position at the National Archives?

Virginia Purdy: Director of popular publications and exhibitions in the Education Programs department.

Interviewer: What was your first reaction to being at the National Archives?

Virginia Purdy: Oh, I don't remember, it was a bit overwhelming because I'd been working in a very small place but people were nice and I enjoyed it.

Interviewer: Did you go through any training program when you first came to the National Archives?

Virginia Purdy: No.

Interviewer: Was any training offered to you when you first came, just to get used to the building?

Virginia Purdy: No (laughs)

Interviewer: Did Frank provide training?

Virginia Purdy: Not formally.

Interviewer: Not formally.

Virginia Purdy: Yeah.

Interviewer: But kind of on a day to day basis?

Virginia Purdy: Yeah.

Interviewer: How many people were in Educational Programs in those days?

Virginia Purdy: I think about 8.

Interviewer: Eight.

Virginia Purdy: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you have anybody working for you?

Virginia Purdy: Oh, yes. I had a staff.

Interviewer: You had a staff?

Virginia Purdy: Yes.

Interviewer: How many people?

Virginia Purdy: Three and four. And then interns, summer interns I had a lot of. And some of them came to work for the Archives later.

Interviewer: What was it like to put up an exhibit in those days for the National Archives?

Virginia Purdy: Well I just had the editing and history part of it. Frank himself had the installation of exhibits. So I didn't have much to do with that.

Interviewer: You became the specialist in Women's history with Mabel Dietrich. How long after you started did that take place?

Virginia Purdy: I think that it was the year of 1976 that I was women's history specialist. Just the one year.

Interviewer: Just one year?

Virginia Purdy: Yes.

Interviewer: And you assisted Mabel Dietrich in putting together the conference on Women's History?

Virginia Purdy: Yeah, oh yeah.

Interviewer: And what kind of work did that involve?

Virginia Purdy: Contacting people who were prominent in Women's history. And that was very interesting because I met a lot of historians and I enjoyed that very much.

Interviewer: That conference series was very successful in the 1970s for the National Archives.

Virginia Purdy: Yes, it was.

Interviewer: Particularly the Women's History Conference. It stood out among the others we put on.

Virginia Purdy: Yes, it was sort of a new field.

Interviewer: What was your relationship with Mabel Dietrich?

Virginia Purdy: Scared to death of her to start out. And then we became bosom friends and kept that friendship until she died.

Interviewer: What kind of supervisor was she like?

Virginia Purdy: A very loose supervisor, no real close attention.

Interviewer: The two of you worked to put the conference together. Did she direct you specifically or did she allow you to have the run of the conference?

Virginia Purdy: She left me on my own but was always available if I needed help.

Interviewer: Did you talk on a daily basis, hourly basis?

Virginia Purdy: Oh yes. I had an office on the other side of the entrance of to her suite. So I was in constant touch with her.

Interviewer: Was it difficult to get people to come to conferences at the National Archives in those days?

Virginia Purdy: I don't think so.

Interviewer: The audiences for the women's conferences were capacity?

Virginia Purdy: I think so.

Interviewer: Did you get a lot of feed back from the conference?

Virginia Purdy: I'm not sure what you mean?

Interviewer: Did people who came to the conference comment to you about the National Archives being involved in this initiative?

Virginia Purdy: It worried me that a lot of people didn't seem to know what the purposes of the conferences were. I gave a paper outlining the kinds of sources available for women's history in the National Archives and later on I found out that one lady said, "I

don't know what you were driving at" so I evidently didn't do a very good job of saying this, well she said you covered so many things. Well what I did was try to show how each part of the National Archives had records relating to women's history for researchers.

Interviewer: Did we get more researchers in after . . . ?

Virginia Purdy: That I don't know. (laughs)

Time out for photographs (9:02)

Interviewer: You had the women's history conference which provided entrée to records relating to women in the National Archives.

Virginia Purdy: Right

Interviewer: What was it like working as a woman in the National Archives in the 1970s?

Virginia Purdy: I think that there was no differentiation between men and women in the sort of work they did and the kind of relations they had. I'm trying to remember one time when something went wrong and I was mad about it and I said to Bert Rhoads, "Well if a man had had this problem you would have solved it differently." He flew up, I'd never seen him mad before, and he said "Archives is absolutely not opposed to women working". So it was a real good feeling.

Interviewer: Did you feel any pressure to do better than the men?

Virginia Purdy: No.

Interviewer: You didn't.

Virginia Purdy: Laughs

Interviewer: Let's move on the start of the Assembly. You and I were in the initial committee that put the Assembly together.

Virginia Purdy: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was your personal reason for getting involved in this committee?

Virginia Purdy: Well, we were still part of General Services Administration, and there was an administrator who came in to GSA who thought that he kept records of papers like paper towels and toilet paper and we kept paper records and they were all the same thing. And he was proposing to send the records out to different parts of the country. He was going to send the civil war records to Richmond, I guess. And it would have just

completely torn up the Archives if he had done that. And there were several of us who were just so concerned about it that we got together at each other's houses and talked about what we could do. And then finally a committee of us went to see the GSA administrator. And I was so nervous about that that my hands were shaking. I've never seen my hands shaking before or since (laughs).

Interviewer: That administrator was Admiral Freeman.

Virginia Purdy: Oh, yeah. Okay.

Interviewer: What did you think of our conversation with him?

Virginia Purdy: Well, he was very pleasant. And I think we made our point because, of course, he didn't tear up the Archives as we expected him to. He seemed like a very nice man who just didn't understand this part of his work. And we could understand that because we didn't think we ought to be part of GSA.

Interviewer: The issue of National Archives independence. Was that a major part of the committee's work?

Virginia Purdy: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Did Admiral Freeman understand that?

Virginia Purdy: I don't think so. Who was the next Archivist in the 1970s?

Interviewer: Jim O'Neill was acting Archivist when we were putting the Assembly together.

Virginia Purdy: Yeah.

Interviewer: And then Bob Warner . . .

Virginia Purdy: Bob Warner was the one who said he took the job just to get us independent. And he went on up to Ames, Iowa, to his homestead after he had accomplished that.

Interviewer: The Committee that put the Assembly together was generally a group of young archivists.

Virginia Purdy: Right.

Interviewer: And when the Assembly actually got put together the question was who was going to become the first president. And unanimously we selected you.

Virginia Purdy: [Laughs]

Interviewer: Did you see that coming?

Virginia Purdy: No! [laughs] I did not see it coming and I said, "I can't do it. I've never been president of anything in my life and I don't want to start now."

Interviewer: And how did we convince you to take up the job?

Virginia Purdy: I think it was Ken Harris who said to me, Virginia, if you don't take the job it'll all fall apart because you are the only person around that nobody dislikes (laughs).

Interviewer: Were you the President who started the tradition of the Assembly President talking with the Archivists once a quarter?

Virginia Purdy: No.

Interviewer: You didn't do that?

Virginia Purdy: No.

Interviewer: I didn't either three years later but that was because things were real hot on the independence issue.

Virginia Purdy: Oh.

Interviewer: And Warner told me, he didn't want to see me.

Virginia Purdy: Laughs.

Interviewer: I thought you had done that but I must be mistaken.

Virginia Purdy: No.

Interviewer: What was that year of the Presidency like for you?

Virginia Purdy: Well, I got so I liked the job. I remember holding a meeting in the Auditorium and the people who responded and came up and made remarks and all were just such great people. And I remember telling the Archivist's assistant, whose name I can't remember, that that gathering in the Auditorium represented the crème de la crème of our staff. And it was not just archivists it was lower ranking people as well and I just thought it was wonderful.

Interviewer: You and I had a conversation at the time about the question of recruiting clerical and archives technician positions into the Assembly. You just mentioned that. How important was that to you?

Virginia Purdy: Well, I'm a democrat through and through, with a small "d", and I didn't like the idea of having a bunch of people lording it over anybody. I felt that the junior staff was just as concerned with the records as we were. And also I remember that Lillian Grandy was an archivist technician that worked for me in Educational programs on exhibits. She knew the records that she worked with, the diplomatic records, better than any archivist did. And I think my conversation with Lillian was what convinced me we had to have archives technicians in the organization.

Interviewer: Did you follow the activities of the Assembly after you left the Presidency?

Virginia Purdy: I don't think so, I don't remember doing it.

Interviewer: How long were you the women's history specialist?

Virginia Purdy: One miserable year. Laughs.

Interviewer: Laughs. Then what did you do?

Virginia Purdy: Then I was put in charge of archival publications which included describing records, editing guides, inventories and that sort of thing. That was much more my style.

Interviewer: And what did you do? You edited guides and that sort of thing. Were you in head of the publications branch?

Virginia Purdy: Yeah, I had several people working who were working on inventories and people who were working on guides. And I supervised their work.

Interviewer: And this was before computers?

Virginia Purdy: I'm trying to think. No! Because I had a terminal on my desk and several other people did too. That's something that I remember that's kind of funny. I was asked, because I had had some contact with computers when I worked for the Smithsonian, to talk to the archivists about converting to automation and I said to them it was going to be wonderful, that we were going to have bar codes, to identify things by and all of this and one man, I don't know whether I should give his name or not, got up and left in the middle of all this and said, "She's talking a lot of rot, it'll never happen", and of course in six months we did have terminals on our desks.

Interviewer: The editing process must have been much easier from typewriters to computers.

Virginia Purdy: I edited the manuscripts, they were printouts, but it didn't make much difference to me.



Interviewer: I see. What was your favorite guide that you edited?

Virginia Purdy: [Laughs] I guess the women's history guide. But I didn't finish editing it because I left before the guide was finished.

Interviewer: What kind of changes in your work did you see over time?

Virginia Purdy: Oh dear! That's a hard question. I'm not sure I saw any changes. I'm afraid I didn't, it varied with the Archivist. Bert Rhoads was Archivist when I came on. Because I worked in educational programs with a small staff, right under the Archivist, I got to know him real well and liked him and had great respect for him. Then after that, I had it in my mind a minute ago but my mind's gone . . .

Interviewer: Robert Warner?

Virginia Purdy: Robert Warner, yes. He was also a dedicated man. And a very capable guy.

Interviewer: Did you have any direct contact with him during the independence movement?

Virginia Purdy: Yes, a good deal.

Interviewer: What was that?

Virginia Purdy: Well, he came to some of our meetings and was very much with us on that. And he was very glad that we were doing what we were doing.

Interviewer: Do you remember the celebration of independence?

Virginia Purdy: No. [Laughs]

Interviewer: Remember they had the whole staff out on the steps on Independence and they took a picture of us?

Virginia Purdy: Oh! Yes! Yes, and I was the last person in the top corner, on the left of that picture.

Interviewer: Did you see any changes in the administrative work of the National Archives over the time that you were here?

Virginia Purdy: I don't think so.

Interviewer: You were fortunate that your supervisor seemed to allow you to work on your own.

Virginia Purdy: Oh absolutely. [Laughs]

Interviewer: You were fortunate.

Virginia Purdy: Yes. And I think that I allowed the people who worked for me to work on their own. I talked with them about what needed to be done and asked how it was going and then edited the results.

Interviewer: Jim O'Neill was known as someone who supported young women and women in the Archives, did you ever have any contact with him?

Virginia Purdy: Oh yeah, I knew Jim. I remember when I got in trouble, when I was editor of the *American Archivist*, I got in trouble with the GSA and he came in and told me he that was sorry I had gotten in trouble, but because I was working for the Society of American Archivists which had come into problems with Jim's boss, he couldn't help me at all. So, he apologized and I could understand that.

Interviewer: What was it like to be the editor of the *American Archivist*?

Virginia Purdy: Well, I did a lot of editing.

Interviewer: How many years did you work on that?

Virginia Purdy: Three years.

Interviewer: Had you been a member of the Society?

Virginia Purdy: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Were you an active member?

Virginia Purdy: Yes, very active. I was on the council and was a fellow and of course went to all the meetings. I was very much interested in that.

Interviewer: You must have thought that that helped your own work at the National Archives?

Virginia Purdy: No, No! [laughs]

Interviewer: You just wanted to be part of a national organization.

Virginia Purdy: Yes and the editor of the *American Archivist* had always been a staff member of the National Archives. So I was given a lot of freedom in that.

Interviewer: What did you do in your last years at the National Archives?

Virginia Purdy: That was when I was supervising the creation of inventories and guides. Five years.

Interviewer: For five years. Was there any significant turning point in your career?

Virginia Purdy: No. [laughs] I just took what came.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy your last years?

Virginia Purdy: Yes! In fact the only reason I retired was that I had seen some other elderly archivists hanging on to their jobs and that kept younger men and women from moving up, because the older people had the top jobs. So I decided it was time for me to go and I went. [laughs]

Interviewer: Who was the Archivist when you retired?

Virginia Purdy: Don Wilson. He had just come in and he sent me a lovely letter. And I'm not sure he would have known me if I had met him in the hall because he was that early in his job when I left.

Interviewer: Who was the Assistant Archivist when you retired?

Virginia Purdy: No idea.

Interviewer: Was it Mr. Moore?

Virginia Purdy: Could've been.

Interviewer: Would you offer to young people the idea working in the National Archives as a great way to pursue your career?

Virginia Purdy: Yes! Yes!

Interviewer: Did you ever have a chance to move somewhere else out of the National Archives while you were here?

Virginia Purdy: No.

Interviewer: And you didn't seek it?

Virginia Purdy: No!

Interviewer: What was your most memorable or defining experience? It could be Admiral Freeman. [laughs]

Virginia Purdy: One of the most memorable things that I used to enjoy as head of part of educational programs was here I was keeping the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence under my care and the number of people who almost fainted with respect at seeing these documents. Various news people would come in, people I would see on TV in the news, would come in and have their picture taken with those documents. And I got to the point of just feeling like they were nice documents [laughs] But they were really revered. By the general populace I think.

Gift of Historical Materials of **Virginia Purdy** to  
The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

1. In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, **Virginia Purdy** (hereinafter referred to as the Donor), hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America, for eventual deposit in the National Archives of the United States (hereinafter referred to as the National Archives), the following historical materials (hereinafter referred to as the Materials):

Recording (media) of an oral history interview with **Virginia Purdy** conducted on December 15, 2006, by R. Michael McReynolds on behalf of the National Archives Assembly Legacy Project.

Transcript of an oral history interview of **Virginia Purdy**, conducted on December 15, 2006 by R. Michael McReynolds on behalf of the National Archives Assembly Legacy Project.

Letter from National Archives Assembly Legacy Project Lead Susan Abbott to **Virginia Purdy**, date June 1, 2006, inviting **Virginia Purdy** to participate in an oral history interview for the Assembly's Legacy Project.

2. Because the Materials were generated in connection with the National Archives Assembly Legacy Project-an oral history project designed to capture the institutional memory of retiring NARA staff-the Donor stipulates that the Materials be accessioned into the National Archives and allocated to the donated historical materials collection of the National Archives Assembly. This collection is designated as NAA and is entitled, Records of the National Archives Assembly.

3. The Donor warrants that, immediately prior to the execution of the deed of gift, s/he possessed title to, and all rights and interests in, the Materials free and clear of all liens, claims, charges, and encumbrances.

4. The Donor hereby gives and assigns to the United States of America all copyright which s/he has in the Materials.

5. Title to the Materials shall pass to the United States of America upon their delivery to the Archivist of the United States or the Archivist's delegate (hereinafter referred to as the Archivist).

6. Following delivery, the Materials shall be maintained by NARA at a location to be determined by the Archivist in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and provided that at any time after delivery, the Donor shall be permitted freely to examine any of the Materials during the regular working hours of the depository in which they are preserved.

7. It is the Donor's wish that the Materials in their entirety be made available for research as soon as possible following their deposit in the National Archives.

8. The Archivist may, subject only to restrictions placed upon him by law or regulation, provide for the preservation, arrangement, repair and rehabilitation, duplication and reproduction, description, exhibition, display, and servicing of the Materials as may be needed or appropriate.

9. The Archivist may enter into agreements for the temporary deposit of the Materials in any depository administered by NARA.

10. In the event that the Donor may from time to time hereafter give, donate, and convey to the United States of America additional historical materials, title to such additional historical materials shall pass to the United States of America upon their delivery to the Archivist, and all of the foregoing provisions of this instrument of gift shall be applicable to such additional historical materials. An appendix shall be prepared and attached hereto that references this deed of gift and that describes the additional historical materials being donated and delivered. Each such appendix shall be properly executed by being signed and dated by the Donor and the Archivist.

Virginia C Purdy  
(Signed: Virginia Purdy)

Date: 12/15/06

Pursuant to the authority of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, the foregoing gift of historical materials is determined to be in the public interest and is accepted on behalf of the United States of America, subject to the terms and conditions set forth herein.

Signed: Allen Weinstein  
Archivist of the United States

Date: 7/3/07