

“The Luck of the Archives:
An Examination of the Unusual Journey of the Colonel Hopkins Collection”

by

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Submitted to the Department of History of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for departmental honors

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Date Defended:

April 27, 2022

Introduction

The year is 1915, England is in the midst of the First World War. The King of England makes his way to Birmingham to assess factories and aid for the war effort. A woman greets him at the factories, and she describes her work with a local canteen as leader of the Women's Volunteer Reserves. The woman was Colonel B. Hopkins and we only know about her story by chance.

History and the production of historical narratives is a game of luck. In the *BBC Future* article "Who will be remembered in 1,000 years?" the author discusses the ways in which people can try and be "remembered."¹ The article includes what has worked for people from the past through examples. One section featured is that a person simply has to "Be Lucky." The Egyptian Pharaoh, Tutankhamun, also referred to as King Tut, did not do anything outstandingly remarkable during his time as pharaoh before he passed away at the age of eighteen. What makes Tutankhamun a significant historical figure to Egyptian history is that his hidden tomb was discovered with his mummy and mass amounts of riches inside. With every article and documentary made about King Tut his fame in historical narratives of ancient Egypt grew.² If historical narratives are constructed based on contingency then society's perception and knowledge about the past is shaped by these circumstances. According to historian Peter N. Sterns, the study of history should be about gaining "access to the laboratory of human experience." Sterns claims that the study of history helps us understand people and societies and provides identity from the past for the living.³ But, the individuals whose stories end up in

¹ Zaria Grovett, "Who Will Be Remembered in 1,000 Years?" Accessed March 30, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20171220-how-to-be-remembered-in-1000-years>.

² Grovett, "Who Will Be Remembered in 1,000 Years?"

³ "Why Study History?" American Historical Association, accessed October 28, 2021, [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-(1998)).

history books and in the historical narratives that society learns about, like King Tut, were dealt a lucky hand.

While chance and luck play a part, there are definable influences that affect an individual's odds for ending up in history books and narratives. These influences include gender, location and archival practice. Gender refers to the power dynamics in society as it dictates what was acceptable in terms of public and private lives for men and women. These standards then influence how men and women were documented in the past because historically more information is known and written about men rather than women. Location refers to two concepts. The first is what type of community an individual functions within while they are alive. Is the historical figure locally based in a small town or are they in a big city which has a greater influence on the global stage? This location factor then influences the second concept. Based on the location, whether on a local or global stage, it affects an individual's physical remembrance through information and sources preserved about them after death. Therefore, the odds of a person making it into historical narratives are based on how big a footprint they left behind and where that footprint was left. Lastly, part of the answer for who ends up in historical narratives is influenced by the historians and archivists themselves. Archival practice is the method which historians use to research and write historical narratives. Historians use primary sources which are preserved in libraries and archives to guide their writing. Depending on what sources through donation or acquisition were deemed important by archivists to preserve shapes our perception and understanding of what was significant in the past.

During my research in Birmingham, England on the involvement of British women in World War I (WWI), I came across an archival collection for Colonel R. C. Hopkins. The journal entries inside the collection give an account of Col. Hopkins's role in establishing and working

in the Women's Volunteer Reserve (WVR) Birmingham Battalion in England during the war. Col. Hopkins drew notable recognition for her work from the King of England, Serbian royalty, and the Serbian Legislature. Additionally, Col. Hopkins was awarded a Bronze Medal of Merit from the Serbian Red Cross for her leadership and the WVR's actions in aiding Serbia during the war.⁴ Col. Hopkins is also mentioned briefly in two books written on the history of Birmingham, England during the Great War, but neither provides much detail on who Col. Hopkins was before the war and her involvement with the WVR.⁵ Likewise, when conducting a Google search on Col. R. C. Hopkins the only relevant website link to appear is the link for the Birmingham archives. There is no Wikipedia site or other informational sites on who Col. R. C. Hopkins is or what she did.

Using the case study of Col. Hopkins and my own experience of archival research, this thesis illustrates how gender, location, social class, and archival practice have shaped the production of history. Despite having interacted with significant historical figures, like the King of England, Col. Hopkins's work during World War I has been excluded from mainstream historical narratives, or more accurately, has been exclusively contained in one location. I argue that women's war work and other patriotic contributions during the First World War were affected by gender and location when it came to the documentation and preservation of their involvement and significance in historical studies. Therefore, gender and location influence archival practice, which determines the odds of who makes it into historical narratives and who does not.

⁴ "Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins," 1915-1917. MS3194. Library of Birmingham: Wolfson Centre of Archival Research.

⁵ Reginald Brazier, and Earnest Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War 1914-1919* (Cornish Brothers Limited, 1921): 326; Siân Roberts, *Great War Britain: Birmingham Remembering 1914-18*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2014): 46.

The Women's Volunteer Reserves and Colonel Hopkins

During the First World War women were significantly impacted by the social changes to accepted gender roles.⁶ Prior to the start of the war, no one in Britain would have assumed women would organize and take on a physical role in military endeavors. As Jennifer Gould pointed out in her dissertation on Britain's *Women's Corps*, "if the Army had ever considered women collectively, it saw them in one of three ways: as nurses, as potential carriers of venereal disease...or as wives of soldiers."⁷ However, desperate times called for desperate measures. Women were suddenly being welcomed and urged to join spheres of national life from which they were previously excluded.⁸ In the *Birmingham Daily Mail* dated July 26, 1915, there is a drawn advertisement titled "The Woman's Place—And the Man's!" [Figure 1]. This ad depicts a male shop clerk asking the woman what she would like to see, but the woman responds, "I want to see YOU in Khaki, and I will take your place behind the counter."⁹ Hence, women were being encouraged to go out and seek work if it meant freeing men to go fight in the war. This newspaper ad shows that society was now more accepting to women's expanding role in the common work force to aid the war effort, but society would remain critical of the militarization of women.

⁶ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 319.

⁷ Jennifer Margaret Gould, "Women's Corps: The Establishment of Women's Military Services in Britain," (1988): 19-20.

⁸ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 319.

⁹ "The Woman's Place—And The Man's!" *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 26, 1915.



Figure 1: "The Woman's Place—And The Man's!" *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 26, 1915.

In 1914, Colonel Evelina Haverfield and the Women's Social and Political Union founded the Women's Emergency Corps (WEC),¹⁰ which evolved into the Women's Volunteer Reserve (WVR) by 1915.¹¹ The creation of the WVR, Colonel Haverfield said, was to organize and protect women should there be an invasion of Britain. This meant that if the warfront would expand onto British soil, women would have an organization they could rely on to work with and for them when it came to protection of women and those who were more vulnerable in society. However, in order to justify the military organization of women, Krisztina Roberts explains the WVR's powerful use and description of the warfront, which established men's duties as being on the front lines in Europe and women's as a protectorate for the helpless on the home front, made

¹⁰ Gould, "Women's Corps," 34.

¹¹ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 324.

way for the Women's Volunteer Reserves.¹² Col. Haverfield separated the WVR from the front in Europe, defining that as a place only for men. But should Britain be invaded, similar to Belgium and France, women could be an active player in dealing with emergencies. The WVR extended their mission to include "their constituency as the 'helpless members of the community,'" and upon invasion the WVR would be responsible for evacuating them from areas of fighting and to care for them. This description invokes the traditional role of women as caregivers and therefore would make society less critical of the military organization of women.¹³ The maternal element within the Women's Volunteer Reserves defined by Col. Haverfield would lay the argument for the expansion of the WVR and establishment of the Birmingham Battalion.

In collaboration with Mrs. Haverfield, Colonel R. C. Hopkins proposed the organization of the WVR Birmingham Battalion. Birmingham is the second largest city in England so naturally it made sense that the women of Birmingham follow in the footsteps of Haverfield and those in London and establish their own branch. This idea went on to be addressed at Queens College in 1915 where a meeting took place in front of a representative body of women, including Miss Matheson, Warden of the Birmingham Women's Settlement, and Mrs. Smithett, from the WVR London Headquarters.¹⁴ In this meeting the committee decided to form a Branch of the WVR in Birmingham.¹⁵ With the decision made, Miss Matheson, accompanied by Colonel Haverfield, headed back to Birmingham to take charge of a recruitment meeting in the Midland

¹² Krisztina Robert, "Constructions of 'Home,' 'Front,' and Women's Military Employment in First-World-War Britain: A Spatial Interpretation," *History and Theory* 52, no. 3 (2013): 333-334.

¹³ Krisztina, "Constructions of 'Home,' 'Front,'" 333-334.

¹⁴ As mentioned, Miss Matheson was Warden of the Birmingham Women's Settlement. The Settlement was established for educated middle-class women to help support women of lower-class and poverty in Birmingham; Siân Roberts, "The Morals of Munitions Workers 1914-1918," *West Midlands History*, n.d., 1-4; John Glasby, "Poverty and Opportunity: 100 Years of the Birmingham Settlement," January 1, 2013.

¹⁵ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 324.

Institute. On January 22, 1915, over a thousand recruits gave their names to join the WVR Birmingham Battalion.¹⁶ Neighboring towns followed suit in creating their own Branches of the WVR, which would be grouped together under the Birmingham Headquarters forming an expansive network of the WVR Midlands.¹⁷ The following April, as the Birmingham Battalion organized itself, Mrs. Hopkins was appointed Colonel of the Battalion.¹⁸

Col. Hopkins carried on Col. Haverfield's definition of the purpose of the WVR. Her 1915 diary entry states:

The idea of the Women's Volunteer Reserve in general, was to provide a trained and disciplined body of women, whose services could be offered to the State when need arose. It was thought, that in case of invasion, the Corps would be most useful, looking after old people, children and invalids, helping to remove them, if necessary, to a place of safety, taking messages, cooking for refugees, and setting free, whenever possible, men needed for the fighting line.¹⁹

From the start, Captain Rathbone recorded in Col. Hopkins collection, the community welcomed the battalion was welcomed with great enthusiasm. Both the Civil and Military Authorities in Birmingham accepted the WVR's services, and requests for help "began to pour in at the WVR Headquarters, almost before the Corps had begun their training, or had got in their uniforms."²⁰ Since most men at this time had to abandon everyday jobs to join the war effort, accepting the help of women and organizations like the WVR would fill in the gaps left in the men's absence.

The Women's Volunteer Reserves formed Companies out of the women who signed up to commence "drills and route marches."²¹ These drills included Swedish Drill where volunteers learned coordinated movements to specific commands, along with French and signaling classes.

¹⁶ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 324.

¹⁷ "Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins," 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid*, 1.

Later, the WVR added courses such as camp cookery, first aid, and home nursing to be able to fulfill the requests of service by the community.²² Camp cookery was especially important to the branch of the WVR that worked in canteens. Early in the war, as the need for munitions employees in factories increased so did the need for food to feed them. Col. Hopkins was given the authority to begin seeking how to organize canteens within the munitions factories. She put out a notice in the *Birmingham Daily Post*, explaining that the “WVR were prepared to do what they could to organize canteens for munition workers.”²³ The response Hopkins received back was large and almost impossible for the Corps to fulfill on their own. The WVR received help from other women’s organizations to establish several canteens in different factories. The Birmingham Battalion exclusively was in charge of the canteen at the Birmingham Metal and Munitions Company Works.²⁴ Women of the WVR took shifts to serve dinner and tea to the munition workers.²⁵ Col. Hopkins superintended the creation of this canteen and was also responsible for its staffing and financial interworkings until the canteens were placed in the possession of the Works in 1917.²⁶ Hopkins’s position in running the canteen was a bit exceptional because typically men would own and be administrators of the canteens, which explains why the canteens were later given to the companies to run. Otherwise, women’s work within the canteens was not unusual as it still fit within the gender norms of women providing and cooking for the male workers.²⁷

Between its creation and 1917, the canteen grew from a small hut to a large hall that could seat upwards of 3,000 men and women. Likewise, to keep up with the growth, as many as

²² “Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins,” 1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 3.

²⁵ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 325.

²⁶ “Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins,” 3; Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great*, 325.

²⁷ Krisztina, “Constructions of ‘Home,’ ‘Front,’ ” 338.

four hundred WVR members went to the canteen for day and night shifts.²⁸ On July 24, 1915, King George V visited Birmingham. During his trip he paid a visit to large munition factories, including the Birmingham Metal and Munitions Co. Works. While inspecting the factory, Col. Hopkins was presented to the King to discuss the workings of the canteens. The King congratulated Col. Hopkins on her organization and efficiency with which she ran them, making the canteens a notable milestone in Col. Hopkins career with the Women's Volunteer Reserves.²⁹

The Women's Volunteer Reserve was committed to serving the community of Birmingham. As the war continued into 1916 and more and more men were being called up to fight, it was evident that there was a labor shortage on the land in England.³⁰ The organization of female labor was needed. The Birmingham War Agricultural Committee and the Women's War Agricultural Committee formed to attempt to and solve this problem.³¹ Colonel Hopkins served on the Lady Mayoress of Birmingham's Land Council and was at some of the first meetings of the War Agricultural Committee. At an early meeting a farmer from Erdington inquired about seeking labor to manure seventeen acres of his land. Col. Hopkins's diary remarks that if women could be found to help fertilize his land, "he would become a believer in women farm labour."³² Colonel Hopkins accepted his challenge and employed WVR volunteers to fulfill the farmer's request. Over the Easter holidays, Col. Hopkins took forty women volunteers down for four days to spread the manure to the farmer's satisfaction across all seventeen acres.³³ The result not only boosted confidence in the capabilities of the Women's Volunteer Reserves but also in the capability of women in general as land laborers. Colonel Hopkins and the WVR, through their

²⁸ "Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins," 3.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 5.

³¹ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 322.

³² "Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins," 5.

³³ Ibid.

actions, increased the amount of village women part-time workers accepted by society and employed by the Women's Agricultural Committee.³⁴ Through the expansion of village women workers, the WVR could tackle additional challenges brought on by the war.

Another remarkable achievement for Col. Hopkins came from the work she did in raising funds with the WVR Birmingham Battalion for the Serbian Red Cross. In 1915, one of the first large scale events put together by the WVR Birmingham Battalion was a fundraiser to help support the Serbian allies. The Birmingham Battalion and Col. Hopkins hosted an American Tea social on April 22, 1915, in Birmingham's Town Hall, with the approval of the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress of Birmingham. As stated in Col. Hopkins's diaries, the event "was an unqualified success; over two and half tons of medical stores, and £130 in money being sent to Serbian Headquarters."³⁵ Therefore, the Birmingham Battalion was successful in their first large scale independent actions as a functioning branch of the Women's Volunteer Reserves. In particular, Colonel Hopkins was awarded for her role in organizing the fundraiser. The colonel received a letter of gratitude from Princess Alexis of Serbia as well as Serbian decorations.³⁶ On June 9, 1915, the Serbian Red Cross Society bestowed upon Col. Hopkins the Serbian Red Cross Bronze Medal of Merit.³⁷ This was a medal given to those who aided the Serbian Red Cross through philanthropy or personal virtue to provide for the sick and wounded during war and peace. Col. Hopkins qualified for the medal by raising money through the WVR for the Serbian Red Cross. The Women's Volunteer Reserves Birmingham Battalion's fundraiser was the start of ongoing relations with the Serbian allies. In 1916, the Serbian legislation visited Birmingham. On their arrival to the city the Birmingham Battalion formed a "Guard of Honor" to welcome

³⁴ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 322-323.

³⁵ "Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins," 2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, (Photographs).

them and distinguished guests traveling with them. During their visit Lord Mayor hosted a dinner which Col. Hopkins attended, and a Red Cross worker shared her experience of working in Serbia.³⁸ Thanks to Col. Hopkins and the work done by fellow volunteers of the Birmingham Battalion the WVR and the city of Birmingham kept a beneficial working and political relationship with the Serbian government.

Colonel Hopkins Collection Analysis

In spite of the above achievements, there is little evidence of Col. Hopkins in historical narratives and the archive that houses her collection. At the Wolfson Centre for Archival Research, located in the Library of Birmingham, the collection “MS 3194 – Papers of Miss Osborne,” consist of a set of documents about Col. Hopkins. The collection was donated to the Birmingham Reference Library in 1919 by Miss Osborne. While the library does not hold much information on who Miss Osborne is, how she acquired the documents, or why she donated the documents, there were more clues within the collection itself and from other sources. In Reginald Brazier and Earnest Sandford’s book *Birmingham and the Great War*, they reported that Miss Osborne became the colonel of the WVR in 1919. Miss Osborne did not directly succeed Col. Hopkins, but because she is the one who donated the documents about Col. Hopkins, it is likely that she found the papers in the WVR Midland Headquarters in Birmingham.³⁹ Based on the contents of the papers, Miss Osborne believed Col. Hopkins’s work and memory should be preserved. However, the library does not appear to have viewed the collection as that significant. The donation of Col. Hopkins collection was not noted in either the administration’s donation

³⁸ “Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins,” 8.

³⁹ Reginald Brazier, and Earnest Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War 1914-1919* (Cornish Brothers Limited, 1921): 326.

book records, nor in the minutes of the Management Sub-Committee records from 1919.⁴⁰ Both of these sources should have provided me, as a researcher, with the origin of Col. Hopkins's collection at the library, but it was seemingly left out.

Additionally, Col. Hopkins's documents have been passed through multiple channels in a series of library changes and updates. While the documents were donated to the Birmingham Reference Library, they moved to the Central Library in 1973, and then to the new Library of Birmingham after 2013.⁴¹ The documents within the collection are titled, "Women's Volunteer Reserve (Midlands Battalion): typescript diary and photographs of Colonel Miss Hopkins," from 1915 through 1917.⁴² In my research I found a slight discrepancy with the title and the actual content which I feel is noteworthy. The catalogue title refers to Col. Hopkins as "Colonel Miss Hopkins," but within the first paragraph of the collection Col. Hopkins is referred to as "Mrs. R. C. Hopkins."⁴³ This mistake could have been made in the shuffle of cataloging items through different libraries and archives, but it is important to establish this mistake because it impacts the perception of who she was. As a married woman, Mrs. R. C. Hopkins is considerably harder to track down. It is given that Col. Hopkins would have adopted her husband's surname. Therefore, Col. Hopkins cannot be found through birth records or christening registries because both her first and maiden name are unknown. Furthermore, no details are known of when she was married and would have formally changed her name, making marital records hard to discover as well. This information, or more accurately the lack of information is shaped by gender practices and expectation. Colonel Hopkins was expected to take her husband's surname because it aligned

⁴⁰ Birmingham City Archives, "Birmingham Public Libraries: Large Donation Book," December 1915-August 1922, A&H Admin/1/1/1/3. Library of Birmingham: Wolfson Centre of Archival Research; "Management Sub-Committee," 1879-1960, BCC/1/AT/3. Library of Birmingham: Wolfson Centre of Archival Research.

⁴¹ Library of Birmingham. "About Us." *The Iron Room*, accessed October 18, 2021, <https://theironroom.wordpress.com/about-us/>.

⁴² "Diary and Photographs of Col. Mrs. Hopkins," 1915-1917.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 1.

with societal practice. Therefore, such gendered expectations and roles shape what researchers can and cannot find on historical actors.

There are three sections within the Hopkins collection. The first contains photographs in the collection. These photographs consist of one large black and white photo of Col. Hopkins by herself in uniform [Figure 2], two smaller photos of the Serbian Red Cross Bronze Medal of Merit she was awarded, and two additional photos of the certificate she received with the medal from the Serbian Red Cross.⁴⁴ Historian Susan R. Grayzel has examined the change in women's outward physical appearance through uniforms during the war to address public perception of a woman's patriotism.⁴⁵ Grayzel quotes an evening news source which stated "Uniforms have sifted out the women in England. The woman who wears the uniform is entirely different from the woman who does not – yet."⁴⁶ This means that the woman who wore the uniform was visibly more patriotic than those who did not wear a uniform.⁴⁷ It is worth noting the news quote was from 1918, but Col. Hopkins' photograph was taken between 1915 and 1917 when she was a part of the WVR. Therefore, based on Grayzel's observation and this quotation, the choice to include an image of Col. Hopkins in uniform was tactical to the presentation of her work because it fit the script of a patriotic woman during the First World War. The inclusion of her medal and certificate are significant simply so viewers of the collection can see the visible recognition of her work by notable people.

⁴⁴ "Diary and Photographs of Col. Mrs. Hopkins," 1.

⁴⁵ Susan Grayzel, "The Outward and Visible Sign of Her Patriotism: Women, Uniforms, and National Service During the First World War," *Twentieth Century British History* 8 (1997): 145–64.

⁴⁶ Peg Scott, "The Age of Uniforms," *Evening News*, (January 24, 1918) as cited in Susan Grayzel, "The Outward and Visible Sign of Her Patriotism," 145.

⁴⁷ Grayzel, "The Outward and Visible Sign of Her Patriotism," 145-146.



Figure 2: “Colonel Hopkins,” from “Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins,” 1915-1917. MS3194. Library of Birmingham: Wolfson Centre of Archival Research.

The second section of the collection has two parts within it: the typescript diary of Col. Hopkins and the descriptions of the Midlands Battalion of the WVR.⁴⁸ However, this diary is not like typical diaries. Instead of being written from Col. Hopkins’s perspective, the entries are written in third person. The diary summarizes the important work which Col. Hopkins did for the WVR from 1915 to 1917. At the end of the entries in handwriting it states, “Kate M. Rathbone (Captain and Hon. Sec. W.V. R. Midlands) by order of B. Hopkins C.o. W.V.R. Midlands,” [Figure 3]. This as a researcher, led me to believe that Captain Kate Rathbone wrote the entries

⁴⁸ “Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins,” 1-28.

under the instruction of Col. B. Hopkins.⁴⁹ It is unclear whether Captain Rathbone had access to Col. Hopkins personal diary and used it to type these third-person entries as there is no evidence of an original first-person diary. However, through my research I believe that “B. Hopkins” is Col. Hopkins, who is also referred to as “R. C. Hopkins” in the diary entries [Figure 4] which can explain how Rathbone had the information to type these entries.⁵⁰

The Corps to-day is a standing monument to the great work done in those early days by her, and by those who worked so willingly under her.

Kate M. Rathbone.
(Captain and Hon. Sec. W.V.R. Midlands.)

By order of —
B. Hopkins
Co. W.V.R. Midlands

- 28 -

Figure 3: From “Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins,” 1915-1917. MS3194: 28.

WOMEN'S VOLUNTEER RESERVE.

Hon. Treasurer: Mrs. K. Rathbone, Hon. Secretary: Mrs. Porter. **MIDLANDS BATTALION.** Colonel Hopkins set up the reserve, was prevented by her illness from doing so.

Commanding Officer - January 1915 - September 1917.
Colonel Hopkins.

1915. The Women's Volunteer Reserve, under the Hon. Mrs. Haverfield, Colonel-in-Chief, was formed in August, 1914. Early in 1915, the idea of raising a Battalion in Birmingham occurred to Mrs. R. C. Hopkins, who approached the Lady Mayress, Lady Rowater, on the subject, and discussed the possibilities with her. Subsequently, a meeting, convened by Mrs. Hopkins and Mrs. E. Porter, was held at Queen's College, and the scheme was laid before a representative body of women. Miss Rathson, (Warden of the Birmingham Women's Settlement) took the Chair, and Mrs. Smithett, from London Headquarters, addressed the meeting.

Figure 4: From “Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins,” 1915-1917. MS3194: 1.

⁴⁹ “Diary and Photographs of Col. Mrs. Hopkins,” 28.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 1.

The connection between “R. C. Hopkins,” and “B. Hopkins,” comes from known information about the organization and sources. A newspaper article titled “Refreshments for Munitions Workers,” about the Women’s Volunteer Reserves was authored by “B. Hopkins C.O., W.V.R.,” [Figure 5 & 6].⁵¹ The article was published in 1915, which is the same year that Col. Hopkins took command of the WVR. Furthermore, the article is written about the WVR’s creation and establishment of canteens for munitions factory workers. Mention of this work is also found in the entries of Col. Hopkins collection because it states that she specifically helped create and run these canteens.⁵² Therefore, as the lead organizer of the canteens, Col. Hopkins would have had the most insight and information about the canteens to write and submit an article to the newspaper.⁵³ This direct connection between the newspaper article and the collection solidified for me that they were the same person.

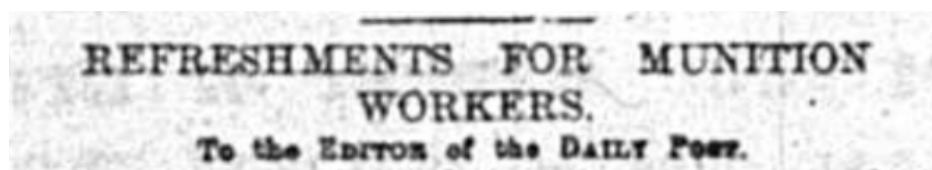


Figure 5: B. Hopkins, “Refreshments for Munitions Workers,” *Birmingham Post*, July 8, 1915.

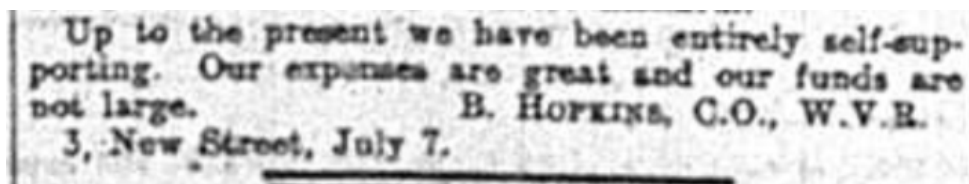


Figure 6: Closing of article, Hopkins, “Refreshments for Munitions Workers.”

⁵¹ B. Hopkins, “Refreshments for Munitions Workers,” *Birmingham Post*, July 8, 1915.

⁵² Hopkins, “Refreshments for Munitions Workers.”

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Immediately following the diary entries is the individual description of each branch of the Midlands Battalion which is overseen by the Birmingham Headquarters.⁵⁴ This thesis does not review this section as in as much depth as the contents from the diary entries, but the expansive list of branches which were established from the Birmingham branch does reflect how wide reaching and expansive the Women's Volunteer Reserves became. Captain Rathbone explicitly states at the end of this section, "It may be truly said that the W.V.R. Midlands owes its existence to Colonel Hopkins."⁵⁵ She goes on to conclude, "The Corps to-day is a standing monument to the spade work done in those early days by her, and by those who worked so willingly under her."⁵⁶

The concluding section of this collection are letters of appreciation and thanks written to Col. Hopkins from various people she and the WVR helped or worked with, including the Lord Mayor.⁵⁷ The letters within the collection were chosen either to showcase recognition from high class members of society, or ones which depicted the work which Col. Hopkins did in the WVR. It is because the only letters included in the collection showcase a running theme of glowing admiration for Col. Hopkins, that I believe these specific ones were most likely selected among numerous other letters which were not preserved.

The collection as a whole focuses on presenting the role Hopkins took on as colonel in the Birmingham Battalion WVR. It is likely that Captain Rathbone (by order of B. Hopkins) selected the most notable moments of Hopkins's career to include in the summarization of Col. Hopkins's time working for the WVR.⁵⁸ For example, Cap. Rathbone wrote about Col. Hopkins

⁵⁴ "Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins," 14-28.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 29-38.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 28.

being presented to King George V upon his visit to Birmingham. She then mentions how the king reviewed the canteens run by Col. Hopkins staffed with members of the WVR for munition factories.⁵⁹ Therefore, Captain Rathbone has played a significant role in how Col. Hopkins is remembered. Rathbone was the one to type the documents and select which moments and events were worthy of including in the collection. These quotes, the selected letters, the contents of the entries, and the photographs of the medal she received, show the bias in writing and putting together these documents by order of Col. Hopkins herself. Then Col. Miss Osborne, a following successor, deemed Col. Hopkins's collection significant enough that it should be held in the hands of the public library to preserve and share. What is significant about Col. Hopkins, Rathbone, and Osborne's choices is that all information chosen to be in the entries is about the WVR. While this collection is catalogued as a diary, it excludes any personal information which would typically be included within a diary. The focus on her work is important because it shows that as a woman, she played a vital role in contributing to the victory of World War I for Great Britain, and she deserves just as much recognition as the male workers in the munitions factories. The selection process of the collections content is biased toward work and the war in hopes that Col. Hopkins's story would be preserved and shared because of her work, and in spite of her gender. Biases like these contribute to what historical narratives are produced, what the narratives say, and what they hide from researchers and historians.

Shaping of Archives

Historians have staked their claim of professionalism and legitimacy on the use of archival evidence, but this thesis argues that historians should navigate archives and examine

⁵⁹ "Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins," 3.

archival evidence with a more critical eye.⁶⁰ On a physical level, the process of acquiring primary sources in libraries and archives can skew our perception of history even more, because not everything can be saved nor is everything deemed important enough to save. The farther a researcher goes back in history the more complicated finding information about a particular topic can be. At the libraries in Birmingham, England, between 1865 and 2013 documents have been moved through three different locations before ending up at the Library of Birmingham where they remain today. These transitions can affect catalogues and the organization of documents leading them to be shuffled around and lost in the process. Disasters and weather also threaten the preservation of documents. Birmingham's first civic library caught fire in 1879, destroying all but 1,000 of its estimated 50,000 volumes.⁶¹ An archivist at the Library of Birmingham mentioned how earlier libraries, especially in the early twentieth century, did not always have temperature-controlled rooms that the documents were kept in, which could lead to the degradation of sources.⁶²

There are also some instances where it seems as though collections just appear into archives due to lack of information kept or preserved during the acquisition process. For example, during my research I reviewed the diary of Gwen Wells, held at the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham.⁶³ While in the archive, I talked with two archivists about the acquisition of her diary.⁶⁴ This particular diary was bought through a book vendor, but the vendor had no additional information on how they acquired the diary. Through further

⁶⁰ Antoinette M. Burton, "Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories." Essay in *Archive Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 3.

⁶¹ Birmingham Public Libraries, *Notes on the History of the Birmingham Public Libraries: 1861-1961*, Birmingham Public Libraries, 1962.

⁶² "Personal Communication," Wolfson Centre for Archival Research, (Library of Birmingham: Birmingham, England), October 5, 2021.

⁶³ "Diary of Gwen Wells," 1918, MS117, vol. 1. University of Birmingham: Cadbury Research Library.

⁶⁴ "Personal Communication," Cadbury Research Library, (University of Birmingham: Birmingham, England), November 24, 2022.

research a historian was able to track down the living family of Gwen Wells. In talking with the family, it was revealed that this diary from 1918 was part of a much larger collection of diaries Wells had written over many years. The family was surprised to hear that Cadbury Research Library had acquired this diary, and admitted they were unsure how it escaped family procession.⁶⁵ In the case of Gwen Wells, the archivists were lucky enough to find her living relatives to learn more about her and even access copies of photographs to show who she was.⁶⁶ But not all documents that land in the procession of archives and libraries share the same fate, like the collection of Col. Hopkins.

Some of these factors would influence the preservation of Col. Hopkins's collection. First, the Hopkins collection was donated in 1919, which means the collection would have been transferred twice between three different libraries to where it is found today in the Library of Birmingham. The library does have on file that the collection was donated by Miss Osborne but has no further information about the donation which could be a result of the transitions. Secondly, besides minor smudging that can make the type script documents within the collection hard to read, there appears to be no other signs of degradation to the collection. Lastly, as previously mentioned, Col. Hopkins first name as well as maiden name are unknown and not mentioned within the collection. Therefore, unlike Gwen Wells, Col. Hopkins lineage is difficult to trace. Lack of additional information could play a factor in why Col. Hopkins is found in few historical narratives, but there are also invisible factors which influence archival practice and the production of history.

Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued the “silencing” of histories affects the production of history in several steps including, “the moment of fact assembly (the making of

⁶⁵ “Personal Communication,” November 24, 2022.

⁶⁶ “Diary of Gwen Wells.”

archives).⁶⁷ What this means is that through different steps of writing sources, collecting them, and using them to produce historical narratives there is space to lose or prioritize certain narratives. Trouillot explains that inequalities in power contribute to these “silences,” but forgoes mentioning specific ones like the power struggle of gender and location which this thesis seeks to address.⁶⁸

Colonel Hopkins had several defining moments during her career as colonel of the WVR Birmingham Battalion. However, Col. Hopkins contribution has yet to make an appearance in historical narratives. In Trouillot’s argument of silencing history he points to the impact that the creation of sources in a moment of time have on the production of historical narratives. Trouillot explains that when sources are written in time, the writer is determining what is remembered and what is left out.⁶⁹ For example, when it comes to reliable sources of what happened in the past historians typically turn to newspapers. Newspapers give historians an insight as to what was being reported on and taking place across time periods and countries. The importance of newspapers is also reflected in how they are kept and stored in libraries and archives. The Library of Birmingham has over a hundred different newspapers ranging across centuries. In the research center there were four large file cabinets in the center of the room. In the middle aisle between two cabinets were drawers filled with microfilm of some of the most popular newspapers of Birmingham like *The Birmingham Post* and *The Birmingham Daily Mail*. These cabinets are a visible and physical representation of human experience from the past. However, this human experience is an example of filtering at work because the editors of newspapers choose which events were newsworthy and which were not.

⁶⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015): 26.

⁶⁸ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 23.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 26.

The events reported on in these publications were heavily skewed to focus on men rather than women. As mentioned in Col. Hopkins's diaries, upon King George V.'s visit to Birmingham, she was presented to him at a munitions factory for her work in running a canteen which fed munitions workers. In *The Birmingham Daily Mail* there were five different articles and features written about the King's visit from July 22, 1915 to July 24, 1915.⁷⁰ None of them included the King's interaction with Col. Hopkins or the mention of the WVR's work. Instead, the articles mention the Munitions Committee and the prominent men who led that committee, as well as the "workpeople presented" for their service in the factories who were exclusively male.⁷¹ The only inclusion of women in relation to the King's visit in the paper was the feature of their "rousing send-off" they provided as he departed the city.⁷² The article mentions that the women were working at King's Norton Metal Works, which acknowledges their employment.⁷³ However, it does not address whether these women were given the same recognition by the King as male workers were on his visit. This is influenced by the fact that the expectation of women is to be caretakers. Thus, it was expected of women to care for and support men as presented in the article about their send-off for the king. Therefore, fulfilling their gender norms makes them presentable to the public in a positive light because women are playing their expected role.

Another significant moment in Col. Hopkins's career was her aid to Serbia and relationship with the Serbian legislation. The visit of the Serbian legislation party was documented on June 30, 1916. As with the visit of the King, once again neither Col. Hopkins nor

⁷⁰ "King in Birmingham: Another Tour of Inspection," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 23, 1915; "King in Birmingham: Morning Spent in Coventry," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 22, 1915; "King George V. in Birmingham," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 23, 1915; "King's Visit to Birmingham," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 24, 1915; "King's Visit," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 24, 1915.

⁷¹ "King in Birmingham: Morning Spent in Coventry," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*; "King in Birmingham: Another Tour of Inspection," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*.

⁷² "A Workgirls' Welcome," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, July 23, 1915.

⁷³ "A Workgirls' Welcome," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*.

the WVR were mentioned in the article. The focus of the report was on the Lord Mayor who hosted the Serbian party and a few other noteworthy men who attended the gathering.⁷⁴ As a researcher, I only knew she was in attendance at this event because it was covered in the diary entries. In both cases gender was a bias in the moment of creating these sources which silenced the work done by Col. Hopkins and the women of the WVR. The newspapers did not regard these women's work as noteworthy for readers, which leads to gender impacting the review of such sources by historians in the present-day and the historical narratives that historians write based on these sources.

One of the only newspaper articles which I came across about the Women's Volunteer Reserve was an entry written and submitted by B. Hopkins, herself. The article, "Refreshments for Munitions Workers," addresses the work done by the WVR to establish and run canteens at local munitions factories. B. Hopkins felt it was necessary to inform the public that, "the W.V.R. are meeting a real emergency by stepping into the breach."⁷⁵ After explaining what the organization has done for local factories and how important their role has been in assisting munition factories by feeding workers, B. Hopkins asks for the public's assistance in providing a motor car to the WVR. But she also strategically mentions that except for this one request the WVR has been almost entirely self-sufficient. The difference between this article and the previous ones are that the WVR are only receiving public recognition in the local paper because a member of the organization wrote the article. The WVR's contribution to feeding factory workers may not have been publicized without her submission to the *Birmingham Post*.⁷⁶ It is evident male reporters almost exclusively report on subjects which would be accepted by

⁷⁴ "Serbians in Birmingham," *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, June 30, 1916.

⁷⁵ Hopkins, "Refreshments for Munitions Workers."

⁷⁶ Ibid.

society's norms during the war. Therefore, the chances of the WVR to be featured in the newspaper were higher when Col. Hopkins was the one to report it.⁷⁷

As a historian I have to consider what was put into the collection as well as what was left out. In Col. Hopkins's collection there is no mention of her personal life. This is why it is hard to trace who Col. Hopkins was before becoming a colonel of the Women's Volunteer Reserves. This is also why as a researcher, I had to come to my own conclusion based on evidence who "R. C. Hopkins" and "B. Hopkins" were and what the relation between them was. The entries rather focus on her work with the WVR only from 1915 to 1917. This information means that those who put together Col. Hopkins collection tactically chose to filter out any remnants of personal life and solely documented Hopkins public life within the WVR.

Research seems to indicate that as a woman Col. Hopkins private life was not inherently of interest or worth preserving at the time of recording her narrative. Durba Ghosh examines this concept in her research about "National Narratives and the Politics of Miscegenation."⁷⁸ Ghosh was conducting research on native women to India who had interracial relationships with European men, circa 1760 to 1840, in archives located in Britain and India. Ghosh found that many of these native women's names were tactically left out of written documents, like wills and church records. This choice was partially made because early colonial record keepers wanted to "mask the level of interracial sex that British men were engaged in during the eighteenth century."⁷⁹ Additionally, the private and feminine lives of native women were of no significance to historical record keepers. The same can be said for Col. Hopkins because the feminine side of her life which included her role as a wife, and possibly a mother, was not remarkable enough to

⁷⁷ Hopkins, "Refreshments for Munitions Workers."

⁷⁸ Antoinette M. Burton, and Durba Ghosh, "National Narratives and the Politics of Miscegenation," Essay in *Archives Stories Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, (Durham: Duke university Press, 2005): 27-44.

⁷⁹ Burton, "National Narratives," 34.

be included in the collection and therefore is not preserved. Instead, it was Col. Hopkins public life working for the community alongside masculine figures, such as the Lord Mayor and King George V, that was of significance to herself and the record keepers of her collection as they were the ones to write it. The silencing of the creation of sources creates a domino effect which influences the retrieval of sources by historians for the manufacturing of written history.⁸⁰

Location as a subject for a source and as a physical location of sources can influence historians' access to documents too. Col. Hopkins is mentioned in two history books produced after her time in the Women's Volunteer Reserves. The first was written in 1921 about Birmingham during the Great War. In chapter sixteen, "Women's War Work," there is a two-and-a-half-page long section about the WVR in Birmingham. Col. Hopkins is briefly referenced as the first commandant of the Birmingham forces in the last paragraph of that section.⁸¹ The other source is likewise specifically about remembering the city of Birmingham during WWI. In the section about the WVR, Col. Hopkins is mentioned in the introduction, but the remainder of the piece quickly moves on to address the organization as a whole rather than her specific role within it. However, this book dedicated a page to the photograph of Col. Hopkins in her uniform, which was copied from her archival collection.⁸² A whole page dedicated to her photograph signifies that she was of importance in the Birmingham community. In the eyes of the author, including Col. Hopkins picture was most likely important because she was the first colonel of the WVR in Birmingham. This author probably faced the same challenges I did as a researcher when trying to find more information on Col. Hopkins. However, regardless of acquired information

⁸⁰ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

⁸¹ Brazier, and Sandford, *Birmingham and the Great War*, 324-326.

⁸² Roberts, *Great War Britain*, 46-47.

the author wanted to include her nonetheless, as they felt Col. Hopkins was important to the story the author was trying to tell.

While Col. Hopkins can be found in these two sources, both are focused on the city of Birmingham. If the focus is broadened to England or WWI in its entirety Col. Hopkins's story gets lost to those in more prominent historical locations. As the capital of England and the political center of the United Kingdom, London holds more significance and influence over the creation of the historical narratives of England. Evelina Haverfield's historical legacy is one example of how historical location effects the narratives of history. Haverfield was the founder of the Women's Volunteer Reserves which makes her the most significant woman in the organization, and rightfully more significant than Col. Hopkins, but her location in London aided her in networking and receiving help from the Women's Social and Political Union to create the WVR.⁸³ On top of that, her remembrance can be attributed to the influence the Women's Social and Political Union had on the collection and preservation of documents in the 1970s for "the discipline of women's history," because she worked alongside and within the union.⁸⁴ Being a part of this union in a political center like London contributed to Haverfield's significance and position in history.

The impact of historical location does not always have to mean the historical figures live in as big of a city as London. Significant historical locations can be determined by their proximity to action, in this case it would be the frontlines of the Great War. Mabel St. Clair Stobart is another notable woman whose location and proximity to the war influenced her writings and consequently her footprint in history. Stobart was awarded the Serbian Red Cross

⁸³ Gould, "Women's Corps," 34.

⁸⁴ Laura Mayhall, "Creating the 'Suffragette Spirit': British Feminism and the Historical Imagination," Essay in *Archive Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 232-233.

Medal of Merit like Col. Hopkins, but information about Mabel Stobart is better documented and remembered leading her to be directly linked to the Wikipedia site about the Medal of Merit making her work and life more accessible.⁸⁵ Stobart worked in Serbia and the Balkans during the time of the war and wrote books about her experiences including *War and Women: From Experience in the Balkans and Elsewhere* and *The Flaming Sword in Serbia and Elsewhere*.⁸⁶ While Col. Hopkins received the same award, it was Mabel Stobart's location in the fields of the war and her written experiences of those battlefields which placed her at a higher historical significance than Col. Hopkins who was much farther from the frontlines.

An analysis of location also includes that of the physical archives. Today, a source's location can be influenced by its accessibility via the internet. Both the physical location and online access influence those who produce historical narratives today. As society has entered new ages of technology, more historical sources have become digitized and made available on the World Wide Web.⁸⁷ Renée Sentilles stated that "the Web can serve as an archive in a loose sense of the word: a place where scholars can go to search through collections of information."⁸⁸ However, Col. Hopkins is not a woman who can be easily found on the World Wide Web. When conducting an internet search on Hopkins the one relevant link to appear is a link to the catalogue description of her collection featured on the National Archives website. But a researcher has to follow several more links before ending up at the Library of Birmingham catalogue of the Wolfson Centre of Archival Research where the collection is physically held. Even then the collection is not available digitally. A researcher would need to travel to the city of

⁸⁵ "Red Cross Medal of Merit (Serbia)." In *Wikipedia*, March 18, 2021.

⁸⁶ Mabel Stobart, *War and Women: From Experience in the Balkans and Elsewhere*. (London: G. Bell, 1913); Mabel Stobart *The Flaming Sword in Serbia and Elsewhere*. (London, New York.: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916).

⁸⁷ Antoinette M. Burton, and Renée Sentilles, "Toiling the Archives of Cyberspace," Essay in *Archive Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 136-137.

⁸⁸ Burton, "Toiling the Archives of Cyberspace," 136-137.

Birmingham to visit the library and view her collection. In contrast, both Evelina Haverfield and Mabel St. Clair Stobart have had profiles created for them on Wikipedia.⁸⁹ Another example is Louise Paget, also known as Lady Paget. Louise Paget was directly mentioned in the entries of Col. Hopkins collection. Lady Paget was in attendance and spoke at the meeting with Col. Hopkins, the WVR, and the Serbian Legislation.⁹⁰ Information about who Louise Paget was is also more accessible via the internet.⁹¹ Accessibility and location matter because it can constrict a historical actor's reach and inclusion into historical narratives, which means this thesis's analysis of her collection would not have existed had I not gone to Birmingham.

Trouillot's argument on the silences of history need to add a new step which incorporates the transfer of facts, or sources, from an archive to an online-digitized database. Some might argue that the transfer could offer more voices of history to a wider audience, however, historians still have to consider the human factor of who is choosing to digitize what documents and where those are being placed on the internet. Digitizing documents will be affected by the same filters as physical archives. However, that also means transferring documents will require the sources to be sifted through once again, which can cause more narratives to slip through the cracks. Accessibility on the internet has and will continue to impact, shift, and enhance research methods for writing historical narratives. However, this means that historians will have to become even more cautious of the human factors which can impact the information on the World Wide Web.

⁸⁹ "Evelina Haverfield." In *Wikipedia*, January 5, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Evelina_Haverfield&oldid=1063860857; "Mabel St Clair Stobart." In *Wikipedia*, August 28, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mabel_St_Clair_Stobart&oldid=1041082306.

⁹⁰ "Diary and Photographs of Col. Miss Hopkins," 8.

⁹¹ "Louise Paget." In *Wikipedia*, March 20, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Louise_Paget&oldid=1013107131.

Conclusion

What is to be learnt from Col. Hopkins collection? The collection has faced underlying influences which have both landed her in an archive but also prevented her from becoming a larger part in historical narratives. The contents of the collection demonstrated that Hopkins was a significant member of the Birmingham community through photographs, events, and letters of appreciation. However, in the process of focusing on Hopkins and her position at the WVR, Col. Hopkins's record keepers filtered out any mention of her personal life. This lack of information makes Hopkins a historical figure much harder to trace back and forward in time.

As a researcher, Col. Hopkins is my own personal King Tut. Seemingly unknown to historical narratives, this thesis sought to bring her collection and story to light. Showcasing Col. Hopkins offers a critical perspective on the production of history and what influences which sources historians use and do not use when writing historical narratives. In current history programs, professors and teachers have instructed their students to let accessibility guide their research. This meant that if a student could not find enough reliable sources on a topic, they should consider moving on or changing their topic of research entirely. However, this thought process then perpetuates the cycle of rewriting the same historical narratives with minute differences. Archival research is introduced as method of historical research further into educational programs for undergraduate historians. Archives and the collections which they house can be used to begin inquiries down different paths to create new historical narratives which historians have yet to answer. Even then historians and researchers are often limited to the archives in their physical location. Within these history programs a larger effort needs to be made to educate current and future historians of the visible and invisible factors influencing archival research. It is this thesis's hope that historians are not dismayed by what information

they can and cannot find. Rather it will be through their motivation for the truth that historians will uncover historical narratives which are lost in the shuffle by chance.

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