

Mattie Underwood Russell

Mattie Underwood Russell, a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists and former curator of manuscripts in the Perkins Library at Duke University, died on 4 May 1988, shortly before her seventy-third birthday. Raised on a farm in Pontotoc County, Mississippi, Russell received her undergraduate and master's degrees from the University of Mississippi where she studied with James W. Silver. After teaching in the Mississippi public schools for six years, she moved to North Carolina in 1943 to join the faculty of Mars Hill College. In 1946, she entered graduate school at Duke to seek a doctoral degree in history. She began her long career with the library at Duke that year as well and in 1953 became curator of manuscripts, a position she held until her retirement in 1985.

While researching her dissertation on William Holland Thomas, a white chief of the Cherokee tribe, she visited Washington, D.C. on several occasions, where she benefited from services provided for professional women by Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party. She was an early supporter of equal rights and opportunities and remained throughout her career an advocate for the advancement of women and minorities in the archival and historical professions.

Professional education was an especial concern, and in 1969 Russell began teaching archival administration as an associate professor in the School of Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. When she relinquished this position in 1978, her course was still one of the few offered in the Southeast. She encouraged her staff to keep abreast of current professional literature and to participate actively in archival and historical organizations. She made every effort to introduce graduate students in history as well as library science to the joys and challenges of collecting, preserving, and using the documentary evidence of their national heritage. She was also far from timid in informing public of-

ficials, institutional administrators, and organizational representatives of their responsibility to establish and support archival programs of their own. She defined new programs not as competition for her own repository, but as expanding evidence of the vitality and influence of the archival profession.

Hers was a mission to which she directed such energy and interest that little remained for activities outside her chosen sphere. She held numerous assignments on committees at Duke and in the Durham community and was an active member of the American Library Association and the Southern Historical Association and was elected to membership in the Historical Society of North Carolina. She was a long-time member of the Society of American Archivists and the South Atlantic Archives and Records Conference and was chosen an SAA Fellow in 1977. She represented the Southern Historical Association on the National Archives Advisory Council from 1977 to 1983.

Though a congenial woman of great warmth and compassion, she was also a highly principled person who elicited respect as well as affection. Not many of those nearest and dearest to her knew her other than as "Miss Russell." University presidents, politicians, ambassadors, and donors, as well as neighbors, colleagues, and friends deferred to her socially as they did professionally, and she remained a figure of genteel convention while at the same time fighting vigorously for the archival and historical professions.

The Mattie Underwood Russell Fund for the Collection and Preservation of Manuscripts has been established at Duke to perpetuate the efforts and memory of an indefatigable mentor, loyal friend, and respected colleague. Contributions to the fund may be sent to the Duke University Library, Durham, NC 27706.

Paul I. Chestnut
Library of Congress



Mattie Underwood Russell, 1915–1988
Photograph courtesy of Duke University Archives.