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What We Would Have Done Differently Now That It is Too Late

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We might as well begin on a note of candor by admitting the worst error we ever made, for of all the things that we would have done differently this surely heads the list. On the errata page of volume 8 appears the note: "Volume 4, p. 309, n. 1. The man wrongly identified as Robert Brown Elliott [a black man] was actually William Elliott, a white man. The letter to BTW, Apr. 25, 1898, was from Rev. G. M. Elliott of Beaufort, S.C." Not only had we confused a black man with a white man and another black man, but in a display of erudition we gratuitously had mentioned a letter that Elliott — the wrong Elliott — wrote to Booker T. Washington fourteen years after our own annotation indicated his death date. And they say that dead men tell no tales. At least there were no errata in our erratum. Such a compounding of errors could only have been achieved by a committee. For most of our annotations, we are able to trace back responsibility by checking the raw data notes, but in this case these had mysteriously disappeared. It all reminds us of the famous Nast cartoon about the Tweed ring. It shows a circle of bloated politicians. The caption reads, "Who Stole the People's Money?" Each man is pointing his finger at the man on his left. That is our worst error *yet*, but we still have to do the cumulative index with its infinite possibilities.

Without trying to explain away an error that gross, we can only say that it is the kind of error that occurred only once, and occurred in spite of our editorial method rather than because of it. Most of the other outright errors were less egregious: misspelled names; failure to annotate at

*Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock edit the Booker T. Washington papers at the University of Maryland. This paper is adapted from a talk jointly written but delivered by Louis R. Harlan at a meeting of Washington, D.C., area editors on 20 May 1980. Their project, begun in 1967, will complete its thirteenth and final volume in 1981.

it appeared in the original, though we doubt that history was changed by the omission of that particular punctuation. We would still continue to correct obvious typographical errors in typewritten or printed documents. Maybe a type does reveal something deeply hidden, but is it deeply hidden in the author or the stenographer? Only a psychohistorian can analyze all the typos of a lifetime and reach conclusions as to their psychological significance, and for that he would surely want to see the originals, to see if the typist was agitated enough to punch out all the o's.

Beware of the portable photocopiers. They'll sneak up on you. When we began thirteen years ago, there were *no* photocopiers in the Manuscript Room of the Library of Congress, and the only recourses were to pay the exorbitant rates then charged by the photoduplication service, or else bring your own portable copier. Knowing what we do now, we would never use the 3M process at all, much less the portable version. We got a lot of bad copies, particularly where the original was faded. Furthermore, our copies are soon going to be worthless as an archive of Booker T. Washington documents because, although the photocopies have not yet faded, they go faster, as the song says, when you get to September, and we are at September.

Another lesson of experience: accept the limitations as well as enjoy the greater roominess of documentary publication. We had the illusion that through Booker T. Washington's papers we could write his life and times, not only his own experience but the history — or at least the black history — of his era. That proved to be beyond the limitations of the documents we were working with. While he had a broad experience, there were many aspects of the era that his correspondence never illuminated. In the end we had to accept that, in editing a person's papers, we were in effect writing an amplified biography rather than a comprehensive history. Maybe other editing projects are exceptions to this rule, but we found it impossible, without neglecting our biographical subject and without writing lengthy notes on historical events peripheral to our subject, to write a balanced history of the times.

Let us turn to a few things we think we have done right, for there may be lessons of experience in them, too. We still think we have been right to do a selective letterpress edition and not microfilm. If others want to microfilm all or part of the main collection of a million items in the Library of Congress, all power to them. We just don't think a comprehensive microfilm publication is appropriate work for historians. There is no room in it for scholarly judgment, historical imagination, or literary skill. Other virtues are required, but they aren't the special province of the historian.

We think we were wise, in spite of loss of some funding, to engage in only a minimal amount of fund-raising and administration, thus leaving the two senior editors free to concentrate on the actual editing work of the project. Too often, project directors are forced to be entrepreneurs and administrators at the expense of their own scholarly contribution to their projects. The University of Maryland campus administration handles our financial accounts, and this usually results in an annual discrepancy of a thousand dollars or so between budgeted accounts and actual expenditures. If we did all the financial accounting, we could probably even it all out, but at the cost of many man-hours we now devote to our real work of editing. Similarly, in the early, desperate years of the project nearly half of one editor's time was spent vainly trying to get long-range funding. About the time we said, to hell with it, we have better things to do with our time, the money began to flow in, without connection to our fund-raising efforts. For more than ten years, NEH and NHPRC have generously supported the project, and not because of any hype on our part but simply because the volumes rolling off the press were evidence that we were doing the job, and because in those years they themselves were more adequately funded than earlier.

Another decision we made at the beginning that we think has stood up well is avoiding the temptation to load the annotations with bibliographical data. Our rule on this question may not apply to editions whose sources are more often rare books, but for late 19th and 20th century editions we recommend our rule of not citing standard reference books, collective biographies, *New York Times* obituaries, or other sources as would naturally occur to anybody wanting to follow up an annotation with additional research. On the other hand, we do cite sources for any direct quotations, any significant documentary sources, and any unique contributions of fact or interpretation by other scholars.

We have also rejected the notion that we are archivists. We consider our volumes products of research primarily, that is, documentary history and biography, even though they may also serve as leads to research by others. Our photocopies are our working copies, rather than a repository for other researchers to rummage in, at our possible inconvenience in doing our job and at the risk of misfiling. We can understand that the same rules might not be applicable to a project that does not work primarily from a large central collection and whose files therefore do become the chief repository on the subject they are dealing with. So we have compromised. Instead of opening our photocopy files, we have kept at the Library of Congress for nearly fifteen years a card file of all the documents we have photocopied from the Booker T. Washington Papers, with container and folder numbers, and have guided hundreds of researchers to material in this huge and somewhat disarranged collection.

On the question of using word processors and computer technology, to put it bluntly, if we had it to do over we would not use them, except for the cumulative index. We

first mention — we now have a system for that; and attributing to the A. M. E. Church what should properly be credited to the A. M. E. Zion Church — there is a man in Atlanta who reads our volumes apparently for no other purpose than to catch any slighting of his church.

Every project of course presents different problems calling for somewhat different solutions; and there are some things that cannot be settled in advance and stated explicitly in the introductory explanation of editorial method that has become a standard feature of first volumes of edited series. The catch 22 is that many things an editor learns by doing are the sorts of things he cannot change once he has been locked in, from volume one, to a preconceived editorial method. So we will treat some things we were able to correct in later volumes and some things we could not.

At the outset, if we had our druthers, we would ask in our first annual budget for funding for a project reference library. Of course we have about one hundred books in the office, our own books, most monographs in the field, and another one hundred fifty at the project's desk in the Library of Congress. But we could have done so many more annotations right in the office, without nearly as much labor cost, if we had only had a better reference library. We have worn out the 1918–1919 *Who's Who in America,* until the binding has deteriorated and it is three pieces, but if we could have had *Who Was Who in America* volumes, we could have found those death-dates that adorn our volumes without all the time-consuming tasks of preparing systematic instruction cards for annotation research and so on. Some two hundred books at an average of $20 a book, or an initial outlay of $4000 at the beginning of a project will actually pay for itself in labor savings over several years of work. Of course, that was impossible at the time we began our project on a shoestring.

Another thing that we would do differently is to develop a more regular system for vetting of the volumes before publication, that is, for a close critical reading by either an established scholar in the field or a veteran editor or both. We had assumed at the beginning that the members of our board of editors would all do this and send us their criticisms. We had chosen our board of editors, we must say in a spirit of candor, with mixed emotions. We wanted to impress the funding agencies, the reviewers, and the readers with the fact that these leaders in the profession and field endorsed the project and the editors. That we assumed that they would be willing to do some hard work on our volumes was, in retrospect, rather naive. Only a couple of our editorial advisers have given us detailed criticism on a regular basis. So we would recommend to beginning editors that they include a few workers on their board of editors. Also, they should leave off a few of the luminaries in their field so that they can be eligible to review the series in the journals. Disregarding for the moment the board of editors, it seems to us that neither the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, or the National Endowment for the Humanities, or possibly ADE could take the lead in setting up a vetting system for the historical editions and make it a standard practice for all projects. Our project has been lucky enough to have an excellent copy-editor, and the same one for all volumes. Even though she has been promoted to managing editor of the press, our copy-editor has continued her work on our volumes in order to keep the continuity and high standards of the early volumes. But we cannot rely on the press to review the scholarly judgments involved in selection and annotation. So, we would urge some vetting system, though without the seal of approval used in scholarly editions of American authors sponsored by the Modern Language Association.

One of the things we *were* able to change along the way was to write leaner annotations. In the process of the first three or four volumes we gradually learned that in annotation form should follow function. For the major figures in our documents, who appeared over and over as major actors in the drama of Booker T. Washington's life, we even *increased* the detail. If this person was a well-known historical personage, we would only briefly outline his life and concentrate on his relationship with Booker T. Washington. Since we considered ours a project in Afro-American history primarily, we tended to give fuller annotation to black figures, all other things being equal. But the key to our changes in annotation as we gained experience was functionalism. We gave less annotation and sometimes none at all to the once-at-bat, the peripheral characters mentioned in correspondence, people in lists, often fully enough identified in the document itself. For example, in the annotation of Elliott mentioned above, the errors we printed in our eagerness to impress the world with how much we knew about the character would have been largely eliminated in a later volume by the fact that his real identity was alluded to in the document, which mentioned him only incidentally and therefore did not require any annotation of him at all!

Did we modernize too much? Modernization is a bad word for what is often a good thing, or at least a necessary thing. All rendering of autograph or typed originals in print is modernization. We would keep some of our practices of transcription such as lowering superscripts, running the first line of the text of a letter into the line of the salutation, shifting date lines at the end of a letter to the top of the letter, and removing the title "Principal" following Booker T. Washington's signature. On the other hand, we think we went too far without good reason in some of our gratutious changes. We would now decide to include double punctuation every one of the thousands of times it occurred, such as the colon-dash or comma-dash, instead of rendering them as simply colon, comma, or dash. We would include a period at the end of a dateline if

have not been convinced of substantial cost savings, improved quality, or more rapid production of volumes. So we'll keep operating out of shoeboxes while some of our editorial colleagues become captains of the industry; their offices will resemble those of insurance companies while ours looks like a mom-and-pop store. Also, we just heard a disquieting rumor, that floppy disks have a limited shelf life. All those thousands of bits of information may deteriorate over time, like all else that is mortal. What a potential disaster! We are, however, working on a cumulative index that will use computer sorting to combine the twelve separate indexes of the volumes into one. This, we believe, will save time and possibly our sanity. It will not, however, save us from the human brain labor of reorganizing our subheads to fit a much lengthier index. Given a finite amount of available money for initial outlays, we would opt for an adequate reference library for the project office rather than our own pet computer. We are not Luddites, and we are open to future persuason. Maybe in, say, 1984 we'll be not only believers in but advocates of instamatic editing. In the meantime, we're from Missouri.

Maybe, facetiously speaking, one of the things we would avoid if we were doing this project over is ever ending it. Deceleration presents a number of special problems not encountered earlier: a dwindling staff, less need for the Library of Congress desk as annotation work declines, and a sharp rise at the end in the least pleasant tasks — proofreading and indexing. We have no good solution for declining staff needs — some have to go from full time to half time, and some have to be let go. We have decided to give up the sacred Library of Congress desk and operate out of a study shelf for the remainder of the project. The lag between completion of a volume and its publication presented no problems while we had other volumes to work on, but with the series finished and funding ended we will still be faced with the task of reading galleys and completing the cumulative index. The project at that point could go months with nothing to do and then be flooded with work for several months, depending on the schedule of the press.

This has been a catalog of particulars, but isn't that what editing is all about? We suppose the most general question we could answer, however, is, would we do it over again? We sure would. We've enjoyed every bit of it. In fact, we like it so well we are now in the process of volunteering for another long hitch.

The reader will notice that we have not said anything about Booker T. Washington. It is not that our loyalty to him isn't strong. In fact, we call our project "the real Washington Papers." Our Washington was obviously a greater man. George Washington could chop down a cherry tree but could not tell a lie. Our man could do both. Seriously, although we have learned much by trial and error about editorial techniques, the chief learning experiences have been the substantive ones. We have learned more than we knew about black history, the period, the man, and human nature itself.