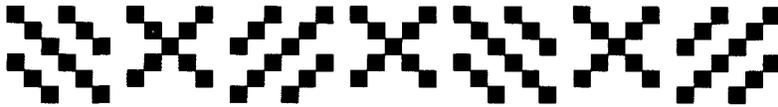


Gayle Thornbrough and the Indiana Historical Society

*Lana Ruegamer**

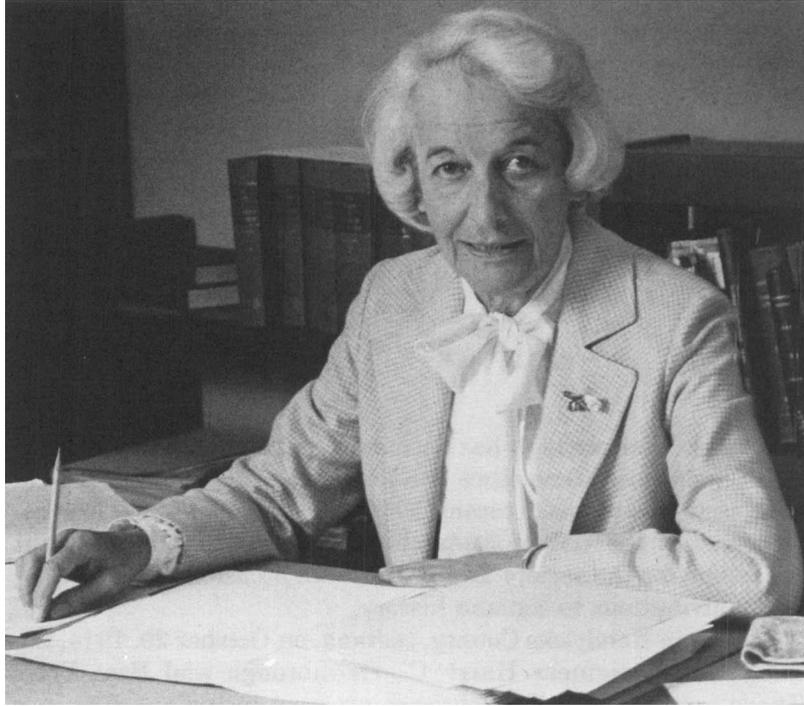


Gayle Thornbrough has been an important figure on the Indiana historical scene since she joined the staff of the Indiana Historical Society as a recent college graduate in 1937. Her retirement at the end of September, 1984, marks an important milestone for the society and provides an occasion for reviewing her contributions to Indiana history.

Born in Hendricks County, Indiana, on October 29, 1914, the daughter of engineer Harry C. Thornbrough and Bess Tyler Thornbrough, Gayle Thornbrough grew up in Indianapolis in a history-minded household. Like her older sister Emma Lou, Gayle Thornbrough was an outstanding student at both Shortridge High School (class of 1932) and Butler University (B.A., 1936). In 1937 Thornbrough came to work as an editor for the Indiana Historical Society, the society's first full-time employee. Except for a leave of absence in the academic year 1941-1942 to complete a master's degree in history at the University of Michigan and twenty months in 1967-1968 at the Library of Congress as a specialist in early United States history in the Manuscripts Division, Thornbrough's entire career has been spent working in Indiana history in the Indiana Historical Society.

Thornbrough has brought to her work in state and local history impressive personal and intellectual qualifications. There is nothing provincial or narrow about Gayle Thornbrough. Though she sometimes observes, with a note of surprise in her voice, that she has lived "all my life in Indianapolis" (overlooking a year in Ann Arbor and nearly two years in Washington, D.C.), her interests are splendidly cosmopolitan. A lifelong devotee of the thea-

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GAYLE THORNBROUGH

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

ter and belles lettres, she is also a serious traveler, at home in many parts of the world. She has been an exemplary citizen, publicly supporting civil rights and civil liberties during times when it was unpopular to do so in Indianapolis. Her wide-ranging curiosity about the world combined with a broad acquaintance with classical and modern literature has equipped Thornbrough to “do” state history on a high level. These qualities have been reflected throughout her career.

This remarkable career, spanning forty-seven years, falls into two basic periods: her years primarily as an editor, 1937-1966, and her years primarily as an administrator, since 1968, with special emphasis on the period since she assumed the undivided leadership of the society in 1976.

Gayle Thornbrough’s contributions to Indiana history through her work as an editor are enormous. They include both her work as the society’s editor (1937-1966) and her work for the Indiana Historical Bureau (1947-1966), the state-supported historical

agency which operated very closely with the society until 1976. Beginning with her early assignments as editor of the society's pioneering *Prehistory Research Series*—the earliest scholarly publications on Indiana archaeology—and continuing through the last volume of the *Diary of Calvin Fletcher*, published in 1983, Thornbrough has brought to her work an outstanding level of integrity, competence, industry, imagination, and good sense. The sheer quantity of her output is impressive: in addition to the twenty-odd titles in which her name appears as editor, compiler, coeditor, or author, there are more than fifty more works that she prepared for publication without explicit acknowledgment.

This "silent" preparation included scrupulous verification of the author's research, checking footnote accuracy and direct quotations as well as evaluating inferences drawn from the sources cited. Thornbrough's copyediting assignments often included either extensive revision of texts or helpful suggestions and criticisms for authors leading to extensive revision. In some instances in the past twenty or so years her "silent" editing has consisted of the sort of guidance of research and writing usually associated with directors of doctoral dissertations; this was her role, for example, in the preparation of the society's sesquicentennial history, a lengthy scholarly study published in 1980. She was the copy editor for the only book ever published by a historical society to win a Pulitzer prize: the lavishly annotated, two-volume *Old Northwest*, written by R. C. Buley and published by the society in 1950.

Thornbrough's contribution to the monumental *Angel Site*, published by the society in 1967, was crucial. Glenn A. Black, the society's longtime archaeologist, died suddenly in 1964, with the manuscript of his life's work partly unfinished. To Thornbrough fell the extremely complex task of commissioning chapters to fill in the areas Black had not yet written about and then editing the entire work so as to achieve continuity of style. Because the entire set of original illustrations and the dummy to which the set was keyed were stolen while in the printer's possession, Thornbrough was called upon to perform the heroic task of replacing the 420 photographs and figuring out where they belonged in the book. Despite these formidable obstacles, Black's two-volume *Angel Site* was published in 1967 under Thornbrough's oversight and was greeted with unambiguous acclaim.

Important as these "silent" contributions to Indiana history and prehistory have been, Thornbrough's national reputation was achieved by her accomplishments as an editor of historical documents. The compilation, transcription, and annotation of his-

torical documents are very different sorts of undertakings from that of copyediting. In the former case the editor has complete control over the shape and content of the work, guided only by her or his judgment of what is historically significant and correct. (Whereas in copyediting the editor is always subordinate to the author, in editing documents the editor is subordinate only to the truth, like all historians.) Gayle Thornbrough has demonstrated an unusual gift for identifying, assembling, and explaining significant documents in the history of the United States, especially for the early period and for the Old Northwest. It is almost impossible to work in Indiana history before the Civil War and not to base a significant part of one's research on the documents edited by Gayle Thornbrough for the Indiana Historical Bureau (frequently in collaboration with her older colleague, the fine historian Dorothy Riker). Included in the landmark research tools that Thornbrough prepared either alone or with Riker are *Journals of the General Assembly of Indiana Territory, 1805-1815* (1950); *Indiana Election Returns, 1816-1851* (1960); and three volumes of the indispensable messages and papers of the governors of Indiana series, including volumes on James Brown Ray, 1825-1831 (1954), Noah Noble, 1831-1837 (1958), and Samuel Bigger, 1840-1843 (1964).

Thornbrough's most distinctive achievements in editing, however, are her treatments of projects that reflected the individual personalities and unique settings of historical figures in trying times: the paramount examples are her volumes on the Josiah Harmar-John Francis Hamtramck correspondence, 1787-1791, the record of the United States military garrison's frustrated attempt to establish order in Vincennes in a critical period (*Outpost on the Wabash*, 1957); the engrossing records of the Indian agents at Fort Wayne in the turbulent era of the War of 1812 (*Letter Book of the Indian Agency at Fort Wayne . . .*, 1961, described enthusiastically by reviewer Richard Knopf of Kent State in *Ohio History* as "but one more star in the scholarly tiara of its editor . . ."); and the correspondence (described by one reviewer as "vivid, fascinating, unromantic . . .") between lifelong friends Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin and Register of the Vincennes Land Office John Badollet, both gifted Swiss immigrants (*Correspondence of John Badollet and Albert Gallatin, 1804-1836*, 1963).

Thornbrough's greatest achievement in this kind of documentary editing has come in the period after she assumed heavy administrative responsibilities and is eloquent testimony both to her command of this area of historical research and her devotion to history: to wit, the magnificent nine-volume *Diary of Calvin*

Fletcher. The Fletcher diary is probably unique in American letters for several reasons: first, because it was written by a private and self-taught person who nevertheless had a great deal to say worth hearing about public men and events and, second, because it was composed in the Midwest by an Indianapolis city father. While it is relatively rare for even “public” persons—longtime holders of public office—to maintain thoughtful diaries for significant periods of time (one thinks of John Quincy Adams and Harold Ickes among the few who did so), it is virtually unheard of for a private citizen with no strong personal claim to a substantial place in history to produce such a document. Fletcher, a New Englander and “self-made” pioneer businessman, is such an anomaly. His twelve quarto-sized manuscript volumes cover fifty years. In them the diarist grows from frontier lawyer to wealthy and conscientious citizen, widely known and respected. Calvin Fletcher knew everybody and had an opinion about everything in antebellum and Civil War Indianapolis, and his diary is consequently the richest single source on Indianapolis and Indiana in this time period.

Although the Fletcher diary has been long recognized by historians as an extremely rich document, its very length and richness of detail posed obstacles to its publication. The document awaited the leadership and editorial talents of Gayle Thornbrough to achieve its publication. When she returned to the society as director of publications and the library in 1968, her first major publishing project was to secure the rights to and to begin editorial research on the diary. From the publication of the first volume in 1972 the diary’s significance and the superb level of annotation and meticulous research were recognized as the hallmarks of Thornbrough’s editorial style. The publication of the diary is itself an important event in American historiography, and Thornbrough led the project from beginning to end.

Thornbrough has also been an important teacher of editors. While her colleague Dorothy Riker recalls that nobody taught Thornbrough to edit (Riker credits the veteran Nellie Armstrong Robertson with her own training)—“she just sat down and started right in and always seemed to know what she was doing”—her younger colleagues testify to her generous help in teaching them the ropes. From Shirley Snyder McCord of the Indiana Historical Bureau to Paula Lents Corpuz of the society, Thornbrough has been a gentle and an effective mentor to several generations of aspiring editors.

While Gayle Thornbrough has never abandoned historical editing altogether, her primary responsibilities since 1968 have been administrative. That year she was made director of both the

publications program and the library—which together comprised the heart of the society's work—and in 1976 she was made executive secretary and took over the leadership of all the society's programs. Her accomplishments in both of these positions have been dramatic—perhaps especially so since Thornbrough is a modest, even somewhat retiring person, who has always regarded herself primarily as a historian rather than as an administrator.

Under Thornbrough's leadership the Indiana Historical Society Library has grown from a small understaffed institution with a largely uncataloged collection of books and manuscripts to a well-staffed research library with its collections largely accessible to researchers. The library has also formulated vigorous new collecting policies, reaching out to peoples previously underrepresented in collections of Indiana history, like blacks and other ethnic groups, and looking to some less traditional kinds of historical documents, like photographs. Thornbrough also planned the modern facility in which the library is now housed, a building made possible by the gift of Eli Lilly, for many years a society officer and member of the board of trustees.

Gayle Thornbrough became executive secretary of the society in 1976, a few months before the death of Eli Lilly and the public disclosure of the fact that he had left the society a substantial fortune, 10 percent of his holdings in Lilly stock. The gift reflected Lilly's confidence in the institution of which Gayle Thornbrough had been such an important part for nearly forty years; since 1977 she has had the major leadership role in the transformation of a small historical society with a distinguished publication program into the vanguard of the American historical society movement. Since 1977 Thornbrough has led the society judiciously but swiftly into an impressive number of innovative projects, working at every turn to expand the materials available for a full understanding of Indiana and American history. Even a short list begins to suggest the range of the Thornbrough-led society: supporting a new faculty position in the history of medicine at Indiana University, Bloomington; producing a bibliography of Indiana newspapers; undertaking a new guide to Indiana on the lines of the old WPA guide; publishing an award-winning record album and booklet on Indiana ragtime; awarding dissertation fellowships to support research in Indiana history; and adding staff support to successful but underfunded state programs like the Genealogy Division of the Indiana State Library and the outstanding Indiana Junior Historical Society.

Gayle Thornbrough has led the society through a challenging period of expansion and reevaluation in the wake of the Lilly gift. She has demonstrated a steady sense of the society's scholarly

purpose along with a flexible response to new opportunities. Her imprint on the new Indiana Historical Society has worked to insure that the old values of excellence and integrity will prevail despite the excitement of dramatic new opportunities.

Gayle Thornbrough has been identified with the Indiana Historical Society so closely and for so long that it is very difficult to imagine the institution without her. Her personal elegance and quiet dignity set a tone of bracing gentility that made all her associates and friends stand up a little straighter for the world, proud to be associated with her. Throughout her career Miss Thornbrough has embodied the ideal of the lady—and the gentleman, for that matter—gentle, diffident, honorable, and altogether capable. While the ideal has sometimes been set aside by succeeding generations and other times transmogrified in an effort to fashion a “postmodern” version, Thornbrough’s personal example has reminded all who know her of the sterling virtues of the older ideal.

It was altogether fitting that Indiana University awarded Gayle Thornbrough an honorary doctor of laws degree in 1983 in recognition of her distinguished career as a historian and an administrator. But, by all who care about Indiana history, she will be honored for many generations to come.