Gayle Thornbrough, 1914–1999

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Gayle Thornbrough's work as a historian falls into several periods: for the first decade of her working life—from 1937, the year after she was graduated from Butler University as a history major, until 1947, when she succeeded Nellie Armstrong Robertson as Indiana Historical Bureau (IHB) editor—she was principally an editor of other people's manuscripts for the Indiana Historical Society (IHS). During the next twenty years (1947–1967), she was mainly an editor of historical documents. For twenty months in 1967 and 1968 she left editing and Indianapolis to work as a manuscripts specialist in the Library of Congress. She returned to Indiana in 1968 to take charge of the publications and library of the Society, which had been reorganized in large part in order to bring her back to IHS. And from 1976 to 1984, she served as the first executive secretary of the newly independent IHS, which had become the most prosperous historical society in the country and under her guidance was to become one of the most innovative as well.¹

Before 1967 Gayle's thirty-year career was enormously productive, but it was not surprising. She was a superb editor, nationally recognized for her work in documentary editing, in an institution, the Bureau, that had a tradition of superb editors; Gayle followed Robertson and Dorothy L. Riker in this line.² It is true that the resources she brought to editing were more broadly-based than those of her older colleagues. Gayle was an urbane and cultured person, knowledgeable about the arts, well traveled, and an insatiable reader. She was also notably tactful and patient in working with authors.³

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¹Lana Ruegamer is associate editor of the Indiana Magazine of History. She was editor for the Indiana Historical Society from 1975–1984. A version of this paper was delivered at a memorial service for Gayle Thornbrough at the Indiana Historical Society on December 3, 1999.


⁴Interview with Dorothy L. Riker, Indianapolis, April 25, 1984; telephone interview with Hubert Hawkins, Indianapolis, June 22, 1995.
While Gayle did her job as editor outstandingly well, it was the job she had signed on for and was expected to do. But after 1966, she changed careers, several times. After 1966, her career became surprising.

In what must have been a wrenching decision for her, and was unquestionably shocking to her colleagues, Gayle left Indianapolis and historical editing in 1967 to take a position in Washington, D.C., as a manuscripts specialist at the Library of Congress, where she classified and summarized documents, especially from the colonial period. When I interviewed them in 1984, both Riker and Shirley McCord, Gayle's colleagues at the Bureau, discussed the dismay they had felt at her leaving.4 Gayle was 52 years old in 1967; when she left the Society and the Bureau, the question of the future of those institutions was raised in an urgent way.

Eli Lilly and the board of trustees of IHS responded to her departure in dramatic ways. In May 1967 they reorganized the administration of the Society to create a leadership position for Gayle Thornbrough, and a year later, after Gayle had accepted the position, Lilly gave IHS two and a half million dollars' worth of stock to fund an expansion of the Society's programs. Here was an explicit and institution-transforming testimony (though a private one, since few knew about the Lilly gift) to Gayle's importance to the Society's future; and it marked another major turning point in Thornbrough's career.5

When she returned to Indianapolis in 1968 Gayle was no longer one of the group of old friends and coworkers who had lunched together for years; she was now quietly in charge of transforming an institution most of whose principal figures were older women who had known her since she was a girl. Distancing herself from them was no doubt difficult; Thornbrough was both unpretentious and gentle. Dorothy Riker remembered that some people thought she had bitten off more than she could chew. Riker herself was full of admiration for what Gayle accomplished: "It took a good head to get through all that."6

From 1968 to 1976 Gayle, working with the Society's board of trustees and through the library committee, found ways to bring order to the crowded and chaotic library, on the one hand, and on the other began the fulfillment of one of IHS's oldest dreams, the publication of the massive Calvin Fletcher diary, which was to be Thornbrough's crowning achievement as an editor. Enlisting Riker as her cowoker and training the new Marian College graduate Paula Lents Corpuz to work with them, Thornbrough worked from 1968 to

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4Interview with Riker; interview with Shirley McCord, Indianapolis, April 1984.
6Interview with Riker; interview with McCord.
1984 to publish the diary, the richest single source for Indiana history during the fifty-year period it covers and one of the most humanly appealing of American diaries. The editing is masterly. Gayle also undertook another large project, the publication of the documentary history of the Indiana years of George Rapp’s Harmony Society.

In 1976 Thornbrough’s career took its last turn: after her eight-year apprenticeship as director of publications and the library, she was appointed executive secretary of a once-again reorganized Indiana Historical Society. This time the Society was entirely separated from the Bureau, with which it had been closely associated since the Progressive era. Under Gayle’s leadership IHS took its place as an independent and, after 1977, very wealthy institution: with Gayle installed as its leader Eli Lilly left the Society 10 percent of his holdings in Lilly stock upon his death.

Gayle Thornbrough’s last career was truly surprising. There was no other institution like the one she headed and no other administrator, much less another woman administrator, called upon to transform the resources for state, local, and regional history in the way Gayle was. Thornbrough never made a speech, never wrote a monograph, never read a paper at a professional meeting; and yet she was one of the most productive and influential historians in the history of the state. She fostered a vast array of research projects, seeking out ideas from others, quick to respond to imaginative suggestions, willing to try something new—like funding a position in the history of medicine at Indiana University, publishing historic recordings and a monograph on Indiana ragtime, supporting a newsletter and new collecting program in black history, seeking out a talented biographer for Eli Lilly, microfilming Indiana newspapers . . . and on and on.

Gayle Thornbrough was more than the sum of these parts: it was the person that she grew to be who created this legacy for Indiana history. Modest, private, down-to-earth, endlessly interested in the past and in fostering its study and preserving its records, confident of her own good sense, she ventured beyond familiar territory in the last two decades of her life to take on the challenge of leadership when she was chosen for it. We are indebted to her for her courage in doing so.

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