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## **“No Competing Claims”: The Seizure, Abandonment, and Acquisition of the PATCO records**

Traci JoLeigh Drummond

The U. S. Government seized the records of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in August 1981, shortly after the Reagan Administration shut down the union for striking against the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). A defining moment for labor relations in the United States, the strike and its ramifications resonate even now.<sup>1</sup> The records, which provide insight into day-to-day operations as well as tactics used in hopes of pushing the FAA to respond favorably to the union’s demands, are an essential part of understanding that defining moment.

For the next few years, the records moved between several offices under the watchful eye of a trustee appointed by the U. S. Bankruptcy Court. As the time neared when the courts would no longer need to have access to the records, former PATCO member Terrence Shannon, who had relocated to Atlanta from Savannah, Georgia, contacted the trustee assigned to the collection and asked if the records could be turned over to him. There was no official union to return the records to (this remains the case today). In addition to the over 11,000 firings and seizure of the records by the U. S. Government, the Federal Labor Relations Authority decertified PATCO on October 22, 1981. With no acknowledged stakeholders to retrieve the records on behalf of the union, Shannon found himself in a position to claim PATCO’s historical legacy. The circumstances surrounding the guardianship of the records after their seizure up until their donation to the Southern Labor Archives (SLA) at Georgia State University (GSU), combined with a breakdown in communication between the courts and former officers, placed the records in a limbo that could have meant their abandonment or destruction.

Some approximations had the PATCO records at close to one thousand cubic feet upon their arrival at the SLA; as of 2013 it remains the Archives’ largest single collection even after processing and extensive weeding. It took close to twenty-five years to process, an operation significantly slowed due to a lack of support from its creator and many projects competing for resources in the Archives. Despite sustaining these setbacks, today the records are not only processed but also digitized and online for use by researchers. How did such an important 20<sup>th</sup> century collection become, essentially, an orphan, up for grabs to whoever claimed it? And how did its status as an orphaned collection affect efforts to make it available for research?

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the strike, see Joseph A. McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

### **PATCO and the SLA: Background of the acquisition**

The SLA received the PATCO records in 1986, five years after the union's tumultuous walkout, strike, and ultimate dissolution by President Ronald Reagan. PATCO was a very young union when it was decertified: the organization had unionized in 1968 after several years of attempting to bargain for its members' benefits, hours, and working conditions. During its short life, PATCO tried a variety of tactics to force resolution of its issues with the FAA, including sickouts, congressional lobbying, and other actions that slowed air traffic in the United States. The final act pursued before the mass firing was a strike, which happened after Reagan - who had promised PATCO during his presidential run that he would help the air traffic controllers in their quest for better benefits, hours, and working conditions - did not return support in the way that they had hoped. Herbert R. Northrup called the strike "a watershed event in governmental labor relations."<sup>2</sup> The fallout from the strike was severe: private sector employers became unafraid to fire striking workers and permanently replace them with non-union employees, organized labor's reputation suffered in the public eye, and, as PATCO lacked support from other airline industry unions, the "solidarity of the labor movement was exposed as uneven at best, and fraudulent at worst."<sup>3</sup> Despite the best efforts of PATCO's former officers and members, they could recover neither their jobs nor their reputations after they were fired.

The SLA, the oldest collecting area in Special Collections and Archives at GSU Library, brought in its first collection in 1971. With a mission to collect the records of labor unions and organizations in the South, it began to acquire the records of textile unions, woodworkers, and other unions traditionally associated with the region. As unions in the region shifted from these traditional trades to include representation in the industrial trades and the professional and service industries, the SLA began to acquire more collections with an emphasis on aviation, aerospace, and the airline industry. In addition to the PATCO records, 1986 was also the year that Carolyn Wills began to donate her Eastern Airlines' Southern Region Office materials. In the early 1990s the SLA became the official repository for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, known for their affiliations with the transportation and aviation industries. In the last twenty years, collections that reflect work in these areas have become a significant collecting strength in the archives.

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert R. Northrup, "The Rise and Demise of PATCO," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 37, no. 2 (January 1984): 167.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Shostak, "An Unhappy 25th Anniversary: The PATCO Strike in Retrospective," *New Labor Forum* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 75.

### **Terrence Shannon, ex-air traffic controller and PATCO member**

Shannon, an air traffic controller from PATCO Local 159, Savannah Tower, plays a key role in this story. He received training in the military and at eighteen, was drafted to Viet Nam and there received what he called his first real on-the-job training.<sup>4</sup> He began working for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in 1976, eventually transferring to Savannah, Georgia.<sup>5</sup>

Shannon was already a PATCO member when he arrived in Savannah and was in Savannah when the strike started in 1981. About the strike, he says, “Oh, I was pumped, I wanted to strike, I really wanted every bit of it to be, to let the public know that we weren't being treated fairly. We understood we weren't being treated fairly - we lost the PR battle - but I really did want to strike. I was 100% for it.”<sup>6</sup>

After the firings of August 5, 1981, Shannon says “I decided to come to Atlanta to raise money because I had been raising money for the locals down there...the people in Savannah. I'd helped everybody get unemployment, food stamps...we [finally] figured out we were fired forever.”<sup>7</sup> In Atlanta, he connected with the PATCO Southern Region Headquarters, which were located in College Park, Georgia, found room and board with a fellow ex-controller, and began coordinating with area unions to raise funds for fired PATCO members and their families.<sup>8</sup>

After about six months of fundraising, Shannon realized he should consider another career path. He enrolled at GSU and soon received his bachelor's degree in history; he then enrolled in GSU's College of Law. While working on his undergraduate degree, he met Les Hough, who was teaching one of Shannon's history classes. Hough was also the head of Special Collections and Archives at the University's Pullen Library (known today as the University Library) and director of the SLA. Naturally, conversations between the two men turned to talk of the now-defunct union, the whereabouts of its records, and the possibility of trying to obtain them for the SLA.<sup>9</sup>

By the time this idea took root, Shannon knew that PATCO was in bankruptcy. As a law student, he knew that a trustee would be handling the union's bankruptcy proceedings, and he made a few calls to contacts in the Washington, D.C., area to see if anyone knew the whereabouts of the records. Once he got the name of the trustee, Robert Tyler, he reached out and told him “you know I'm here at Georgia State University and we have the Southern Labor

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<sup>4</sup> Terrence Shannon, interviewed by the author, April 6, 2012, Atlanta, GA.

<sup>5</sup> Shannon interview.

<sup>6</sup> Shannon interview.

<sup>7</sup> Shannon interview.

<sup>8</sup> Shannon interview.

<sup>9</sup> Shannon interview.

Archives and I was wondering how we might be able to get the...papers [sic].’ And [the trustee] said ‘send me a letter’ and so I did. And I got a letter in return that said ‘they’re yours’...me personally, and I was like ‘Whoa, okay!’ But I had no idea what I had just been given.”<sup>10</sup>

Of this news, Hough says “I wish I could take credit for the original idea; I certainly knew...the significance of the PATCO dispute to the overall labor history of the 20th century, especially the late 20th century. So, I knew of its significance but I had no inkling up to just a few weeks before the material was acquired that it would be available.” He continues, “But Terrence just came to my office...informed me that - of course this was already five years after the firings, the job action and firings - so he informed me that he had been attempting to acquire the records of the national office of PATCO and wanted to know whether the Labor Archives, Special Collections at Georgia State, would be interested in working with him in that venture of acquiring those materials.”<sup>11</sup> They were.

Given that the U.S. Government had seized the records from the union, who identified Shannon as the legal recipient for PATCO’s records? It did not occur to Shannon at the time that there might be any other academic institutions interested in the fate of the records, or that former union officers or members had an interest in obtaining the records after their use for bankruptcy proceedings. Correspondence and court documents in the accession record for the PATCO collection indicate that Shannon was the only one who had contacted the lawyers who were using the documents to ask for their return.

### **“No competing claims”: getting the collection**

In a letter to Robert Tyler, Attorney at Law (and also the lawyer assigned as trustee to the seized PATCO records), dated May 14, 1985, Shannon requested “the possession of the PATCO paperwork entrusted [sic] to you by Judge Whelan’s PATCO Bankrupt [sic] decision” and referred to PATCO Local 159 of Savannah, Georgia, as ...”a viable PATCO organization joining efforts with the Southern Labor Archives of Georgia State University to collect and preserve the history of PATCO.”<sup>12</sup> The status of Local 159 as a functioning union local as late as 1985 cannot be confirmed but because the union had been decertified in 1981, its regional and local offices would have most likely been decertified as well. Since many PATCO-related lawsuits were still being litigated in 1985, it would take some time for the records to be turned over to Shannon.

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<sup>10</sup> Shannon interview.

<sup>11</sup> Leslie S. Hough, interviewed by the author, November 7, 2011, Atlanta, GA.

<sup>12</sup> Terrence Shannon to Robert Tyler, May 14, 1985, PATCO accession record, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University Library.

A motion to tender documents to Anthony Skirlick (a California air traffic controller),<sup>13</sup> had the documents transferred to his lawyers (Kenney, Carlson, & Warren, P.C.). A copy of this motion was mailed to Marc E. Albert, attorney for Tyler (of Williams, Meyers, and Quiggle).<sup>14</sup> He suggested “temporary possession be given to [Kenney, Carlson, & Warren, P.C.] with [Skirlick] then obtaining the records upon completion of the litigation requiring the need for the records.”<sup>15</sup> Shannon agreed, and on May 24, 1985, Albert filed a response to the motion to tender documents to Anthony Skirlick et al., with the following stipulation in place: “Upon completion of their need for the records, the records will be turned over to PATCO Local 159 for historical preservation purposes.”<sup>16</sup> Albert’s response to Shannon on Tyler’s behalf did not indicate that he had issue with Shannon’s claims about the status of Local 159, nor did he indicate that any person or organization had made claim to the PATCO records prior to Shannon.

On June 26, 1985, Shannon wrote to Glenn H. Carlson at Kenney, Carlson, & Warren, P.C., inquiring about the volume of records and asking when they might be turned over to GSU Library.<sup>17</sup> He received the following response from Carlson, typed July 8, 1985:

Please be advised that the transmittal to me of the records of PATCO, of which we will shortly take custody, is two thirds of a 40-foot trailer. We plan to temporarily store these documents in a storage facility in Virginia and will give you the exact location thereof upon their placement therein. At this time, I cannot give you the date (tentative or otherwise) when you will be able to acquire the records as the same is contingent wholly upon the termination of our litigation, for which no end is now in sight.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, a letter dated February 7, 1986, has Shannon following up with Albert (then of Tyler, Bartel, Burt and Albert), letting him know that on January 17 “the PATCO collection was relocated to Georgia State University.” He added “as per our phone conversation of January 21, PATCO Local 159 has sole

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<sup>13</sup> “Unfriendly Skies,” *Time Magazine*, July 23, 1984, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,952436,00.html>.

<sup>14</sup> United States Bankruptcy Court for the District of Columbia, *Motion to tender documents to Anthony Skirlick, et al (Case no. 81-00656)*, May 17, 1985, PATCO accession record.

<sup>15</sup> Marc E. Albert to Terrence Shannon, May 24, 1985, PATCO accession record.

<sup>16</sup> United States Bankruptcy Court for the District of Columbia, *Response to Motion to Tender Documents to Anthony Skirlick, Et Al (Case No. 81-00656)*, May 24, 1985, PATCO accession record.

<sup>17</sup> Terrence Shannon to Glenn H. Carlson, June 26, 1985, PATCO accession record.

<sup>18</sup> Glenn H. Carlson to Terrence Shannon, July 8, 1985, PATCO accession record.

disposal rights over the residue of the Collection not historically preserved in the archives.”<sup>19</sup>

Once the records were available for transfer to the SLA, Hough and Shannon made plans to travel to Washington, D.C., to get the records. On a cold January morning in 1986, the men landed in Washington, D.C., with little more than an address scribbled on a small piece of paper and an identification number for a storage container.<sup>20</sup> They rented the largest U-Haul truck they could find and headed to a storage lot on the outskirts of town. There they located, in an unlocked trailer one would normally find attached to a semi, over 1,000 (estimated) records center cartons containing the contents of the seized offices of PATCO.

Hough recalls that he and Shannon:

... found the appropriate trailer...[I]t was literally stacked floor to ceiling in this trailer. And so we basically, we had flown early that morning, picked up the truck and by mid-morning were on the site so we literally spent the rest of the day 'til dark, literally through boxes and making on-site appraisal of what was worth keeping. And there was literally everything you can imagine in this truck. There were ashtrays...what had happened was, as I understand it is, that the court had seized everything that was in the offices of PATCO at some point there after the injunctions had been put into place, assets were being seized, and for the purposes of these papers and other materials it literally meant packing it all up and...at various other times it was in law offices or perhaps in court custody, evidentiary status or whatever, but in this case it was piled floor to ceiling and we began shifting boxes. And we didn't take everything because - there was documentation that really wasn't - not worthy of preservation.<sup>21</sup>

Hough and Shannon packed records that could quickly be identified as important or promising into the U-Haul.<sup>22</sup> Even with basic appraisal applied to the mass of records, the U-Haul was full by the time they left the storage lot.

When Shannon stated that he had no idea what he'd been given, he was referring to both significance and volume. Upon first seeing the contents of the trailer, the first question was “How are we gonna do this?” He continues “...it was beyond our means, but somehow I believe they [their D.C. contacts regarding the collection] helped us move the papers into the U-Haul because it would have been physically impossible for Les and I to move some of those boxes...and it

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<sup>19</sup> Terrence Shannon to Marc E. Albert, February 7, 1986, PATCO accession record.

<sup>20</sup> Hough interview.

<sup>21</sup> Hough interview.

<sup>22</sup> Hough interview.

took quite a bit of time, but I also know that we were not the only ones doing it...cause it would have taken us days.”<sup>23</sup>

They packed from morning to evening and set out for Atlanta as night fell. Largely uneventful, the trip only became problematic when Hough and Shannon pulled into a weigh station (Hough says it was in North Carolina; Shannon says Virginia) and were discovered to be over the legal weight for the trailer. Shannon says, “So we had to sit there until we paid our fine...all they wanted was our fine...and so we paid our fine and we were going down the road and we saw this truck stop and so we pulled into the truck stop and got something to eat, it was already dark...and we got a map that told us where all the weigh stations were so we decided to go back roads. We got a room someplace I believe in South Carolina. We stayed the night, got up the next morning, drove until about two exits before the next weigh station, got out [off the interstate] and we did the back roads all the way to Atlanta. That took forever. We were both exhausted.”<sup>24</sup> Hough referred to it as “A bit of an unconventional process.”<sup>25</sup>

The records arrived at the SLA in 1986. Hough estimates that there “must have been something on the order of one thousand cubic feet, much of it in banker’s boxes, there was probably more than one thousand cubic feet of material in that trailer of which we probably took something like eighty percent, could have been eighty to ninety percent possibly.”<sup>26</sup> Whatever the actual amount, it was and remains the largest single accession of records received by the SLA.

### **PATCO Lives and the University of Texas at Arlington**

The only other repository with significant PATCO holdings is the Texas Labor Archives (TLA) at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA). It houses papers from former PATCO members and records from local and regional offices, which fill in the gaps in the national records held at the SLA. As of 2010, the TLA had the same volume of PATCO material as the SLA.

Shannon had no knowledge of any intent of former officers to donate the records to the TLA when he sought to get them for the SLA. However, once the records were in Atlanta, a former PATCO administrator, who, on hearing that the PATCO records had been given to Shannon and donated to the SLA, called Shannon to convey his displeasure with the situation. The conversation was brief - Shannon hung up on the unknown caller after only a few minutes – but he does remember that the voice on the other end of the line told him that the records were intended for a repository in Texas.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Shannon interview.

<sup>24</sup> Shannon interview.

<sup>25</sup> Hough interview.

<sup>26</sup> Hough interview.

<sup>27</sup> Shannon interview.

The SLA's accession record for PATCO does not contain any documentation that indicates Hough or Shannon knew of PATCO's former officers' wish for the records to go to the TLA. Hoping to find out more, I contacted Melissa Gonzales, labor archivist for the TLA, to see if their records could shed any light on the details of the situation. Gonzales found correspondence that included communications between former union officers and the TLA and contained evidence of heated exchanges between administrators of the TLA and the SLA. According to Gonzales' research in the TLA records, this correspondence began in mid-1987, over a year after the collection arrived in Atlanta.<sup>28</sup>

In the summary of the correspondence and notes provided by Gonzales, it is apparent that relations between the two archives were strained from the beginning, and that the archivist for the TLA along with former members (by then affiliated with PATCO Lives) were disappointed that the national office's records had been obtained by Shannon for the SLA.<sup>29</sup> The amount of time between the records coming to Atlanta and the SLA being contacted by TLA indicates that the records may have been in Atlanta for over a year before the former officers realized they'd been acquired by the SLA. Of the situation, Shannon says "I did get some feedback through some friends who have kept up with different air traffic control organizations, there was one called PATCO Lives that was around for a while, got some negative feedback. People were still a little upset that I'd done this. I personally didn't care what anybody felt after that."<sup>30</sup> PATCO Lives was an organization created in the aftermath of the shutdown to provide a conduit of communication for former members and keep them updated on litigation and news related to the strike and shutdown.

Correspondence between former PATCO officers and the TLA began in June of 1987 when former archivist Jane Boley asked Richard Kelly Chaplin to "convey UTA's interest in collecting PATCO's records from different regions and its headquarters in Washington, D.C." Shortly thereafter, Boley contacted Hough "to tell him that Mr. Chaplin and Ms. Faye Henry [presumably former PATCO officers] had visited the Texas Labor Archives at UTA, and they concluded that the national records should come to UTA."<sup>31</sup>

During that visit, Mr. Chaplin told Ms. Boley that a trailer full of "stuff" existed, but he later discovered that PATCO had "disposed of" those papers. Ms. Boley interpreted this to mean the paper had been destroyed...Later that month, Faye Henry called Ms. Boley to say the trailer was kept because of a bankruptcy case, but the trailer had been hauled off in the middle of the night. Apparently

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<sup>28</sup> Melissa Gonzales, email message to the author, April 9, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Gonzales to author.

<sup>30</sup> Shannon interview.

<sup>31</sup> Gonzales to author.

when the hearing was over, a PATCO member from Georgia took the records and donated them to the SLA. According to Kelly Chaplin and Faye Henry, this member did not have the authority to do so.<sup>32</sup>

“Certainly by ’86 there was no PATCO as such,” says Hough. “There were former officers but I must say we never sought to reach out to them – ‘Is this okay to do this’ – as far as we knew the document we had [presumably the May 1985 motion to tender the documents to Anthony Skirlick] indicated it was no longer the property of those folks, it was the property of the court. And in fact, the federal government. And so that was who we felt like we needed to deal with. It’s not that we tried to keep it a secret - I wasn’t being defensive - it was not a live organization at all and the materials had explicitly been seized from the control of the former officers along with all other assets. We didn’t feel like they were really relevant and we didn’t really have time. We thought that the materials might disappear at any time.”<sup>33</sup>

Bill Taylor, then-director of PATCO Lives, had been unaware of the transfer of records to the SLA. Gonzales’ summary reads: “This transfer consisted of 18,000 lbs. of records of supposedly little significance. Bill Taylor and others had already taken the more valuable records. Calls from Mr. Taylor to Mr. Shannon went unanswered and unreturned.” Once Shannon did contact Taylor about the remainder of the national records, Taylor informed Shannon that “there would be no more records going to Georgia State.” Taylor then informed Boley that the following issue of the PATCO Lives newsletter (*The Lifeline*) would encourage all PATCO members, locals, and regionals to send their records to the TLA.<sup>34</sup>

The announcement ran in the September 1987 issue of *The Lifeline*. In part, it said “To create a repository for PATCO records has been a goal of ours for many years now. Today, after months of investigations and consultations, we have reached agreement with representatives of the University of Texas to store the records in their labor library.”<sup>35</sup> The SLA never received another substantial group of PATCO records, although it has received a handful of small, interesting collections from former members over the years.

### **Processing the PATCO Records**

Once the SLA accessioned the records, they went unprocessed for a number of years before attempts were made to fully process them, most likely due to the size of the collection and other departmental priorities. This does not mean, however, that the collection was ignored. But before there can be a discussion

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<sup>32</sup> Gonzales to author.

<sup>33</sup> Hough, interview.

<sup>34</sup> Gonzales to author.

<sup>35</sup> Bill Taylor, “Updates,” *The Lifeline*, September 1987.

about processing the PATCO records, it is important to discuss almost fifteen years of efforts to get a handle on such a large collection, including its earliest processing plan, box-level inventories, and appraisal of certain record types and formats for deaccessioning. It is worth noting that for the SLA, acquisition of the PATCO collection in 1986 probably increased the size of the archives' holdings by twenty percent, which likely overwhelmed staff and put a strain on their space and other resources (Special Collections and Archives has grown substantially since 1986 and currently has four storage locations around the GSU campus).

The earliest known processing plan is a five-page document that cites Oliver W. Holmes (on the topic of arrangement) and Frank Boles (on sampling) and includes a list of possible series and a reference to item-level calendaring. Interestingly it includes information about an early National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant proposal, the success of which seems to have been contingent upon the SLA's acquisition of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) records with the idea that two sets of records pertaining to the work of air traffic controllers would have made the SLA a more appealing awardee for such a grant (the NATCA collection has never been acquired by the SLA). This funding would have provided for a processing archivist.<sup>36</sup>

A repository needing two similar collections (or meeting some other requirement) in order to better their chances for receiving a grant is a good reminder of the important role funding plays toward getting a large collection processed in a timely and efficient manner. Pam Hackbart-Dean writes in *How to Keep Union Records*: "In the era of declining resources and escalating processing and preservation costs, building strong relationships between repositories and union donors has become even more important... Union archives, like the records of most modern bureaucracies, are often large, complicated, and costly to process."<sup>37</sup> Two unions for which the SLA is the official repository, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and the National Federation of Federal Employees, both provided the archives with financial support to process their ample collections. Special Collections and Archives received a grant for funding to process the sizeable group of state Nurses Association records housed there as well. Like the SLA, the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University and the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University "are now receiving substantial union support for basic archival work" (for some collections and projects).<sup>38</sup> With competing projects, limited resources, and no funding for a dedicated processing archivist for the

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<sup>36</sup> "PATCO (processing Plan)," ca. 1986, PATCO accession record.

<sup>37</sup> Pamela Hackbart-Dean. "Unions and Labor Archives," in Michael Nash, ed., *How to Keep Union Records*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Hackbart-Dean. "Unions and Labor Archives," 18.

collection, it is understandable that SLA staff could not prioritize the PATCO records for many years.

A later report, titled “An evaluation of the PATCO collection for arrangement and description” (1989) provides a more detailed look at the resources needed to get the records processed. Several interesting items to note from this report include the fact that Shannon had not signed the deed of gift as late as the date of its writing (although it was signed shortly thereafter), and that “Once again in 1989 the repository was turned down for a National Endowment for the Humanities [NEH] grant and the collection may have another waiting period before being processed.”<sup>39</sup> From that point forward, more than ten years passed before the staff would have any part of the collection processed and available for research.

Portions of the collection had been appraised and deaccessioned by 1989, which the report lists as being “approximately 600 feet.” It also describes the collection as in “good shape,” that “[c]onservation and preservation of the [paper portion of the] collection will not be difficult,” and recommends basic processing practices for the paper, but encourages further investigation into the preservation of thirty-eight disk packs that contained financial information and whose preservation would allow the packs to be “kept in place of the voluminous paper records” that comprised the same information. At the time, GSU only had one computer “that the disc packs could possibl[y] be run on...[a computer that] runs the school’s entire financial network and if the PATCO discs caused the system to crash, the archives would be responsible.”<sup>40</sup> Not finding an acceptable solution to the preservation and use of the disk packs, the archives finally deaccessioned and destroyed them in March of 2000.<sup>41</sup> This action – deaccessioning the disc packs because of technical obsolescence - is one direct result of not having the resources to process the collection in a timely manner. While staff was reasonably sure that the content of the disk packs were also available in paper, it will remain unknown if valuable content was lost.

The accession record for PATCO contains several different versions of inventories, some with notes about content or weeding or lists of boxes that had already been removed. Few of these have dates, but were likely created in the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s. There are also documents that provide the series to be used when processing the collection, which ultimately changed over time. The finished collection has eighteen series, more than that proposed by any

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<sup>39</sup> “An Evaluation of the PATCO Collection for Processing and Arrangement (Georgia State University, May 31, 1989),” PATCO accession record.

<sup>40</sup> “Evaluation of the PATCO Collection,” PATCO accession record.

<sup>41</sup> Annie L. Tilden, “Disposal of 30 Disk Platters from PATCO (86-45),” March 28, 2000, PATCO accession record.

prior labor archivist. There were also early processing plans that were not closely followed once the staff began processing.

Series I through IV were processed in 2001 by Pam Hackbart-Dean (SLA archivist before becoming head of Special Collections and Archives at GSU Library), and Annie L. Tilden, former processing archivist for the SLA, fifteen years after the collection had arrived at the Archives. Using inventories, they were able to pull together groups of boxes with related material. Using traditional processing practices, they created the following series, which included sub-series: President's Files, Vice-President's Files, Regional Vice-President's Files, and Director's Files. The first four series did have some signs of minimum standards processing practices despite being arranged according to traditional practices: the materials were not refoldered nor were they arranged chronologically within each folder. Stopping after only four series, it is unclear why processing halted at this time.

When I began work at the SLA in 2007, in-process boxes of the PATCO collection indicated that previous archivist Lauren Kata had continued the work of Hackbart-Dean. The continuing phase of processing seemed to have abandoned the traditional processing used in series I through IV, and the series titles that had been assigned differed somewhat from those on early series lists. Once I decided to prioritize PATCO for processing, I reviewed the materials Kata had processed to discover that minimum standards practices had been used for this second effort at processing. This makes sense: the impact of the seminal Greene-Meissner article "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," published just a few years earlier, cannot be overstated especially when one considers the effect it has had on archives with large collections and backlogs.<sup>42</sup>

Kata created helpful minimum standards processing guidelines tailored to the PATCO records and the SLA's needs but I could not find series or inventory notes. Both the condition of the in-process boxes when reviewed in 2008 and the deviation from the earlier established series led me to feel as if I could start over with a tweaked minimum-standards processing plan and the introduction of new series that, while not perfect, would allow for quick processing by staff with limited training. Series I through IV were not reprocessed. Picking up the project in early 2008 meant that it might be finished by 2011, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the strike.

Given the size of the unprocessed portion of this collection, I maintained use of series in order to make it manageable for staff (while processing) and researchers (while using). Even with over 400 cubic feet deaccessioned (this is

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<sup>42</sup> For more information see Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–263.

only an estimate and is likely a low number) and 32 feet already processed, there was still an estimated 400 linear feet to appraise, sort, refolder, and inventory for finding aids. I changed some series titles based on the function or office from or for which materials were created.

During processing, certain items were identified for removal from the collection. The SLA maintained some of these materials, such as periodicals not created by PATCO or any of its locals (these were separated to the Labor Periodicals collection); FAA (and other) publications were separated and cataloged to the Special Collections and Archives book holdings. Other materials, such as duplicates, widely held periodicals, and incomplete membership lists were deaccessioned and/or destroyed. The size of the collection also necessitated the use of multiple finding aids because one inventory for the entire collection would be too big for one EAD file. Instead of compiling one inventory and breaking it arbitrarily into sections, eighteen finding aids were created, one for each series.

Processing of the PATCO records was completed in early 2010, twenty-four years after it arrived, with no grant assistance, using only staff, students, and temporary workers. It was a great accomplishment for the archives, which had processed an approximately 1,000 cubic foot collection with no donor or grant assistance and had reduced the size of the collection to 200 linear feet. However, this made no significant impact on the backlog: the size of the SLA collections had more than doubled since 1986 and as soon as the PATCO boxes were off the shelves, spaces were filled with incoming collections.

### **Digitization of the Collection**

In 2009 Barbara Petersohn, Digital Projects and Grant Writing Librarian at GSU Library, looked to Special Collections and Archives for a grant writing opportunity. The PATCO records, with processing in progress and near completion, were an obvious choice considering the upcoming 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the strike. Petersohn and Drummond began writing a National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grant in spring 2010 with a proposal to digitize eight of the eighteen series, those that were the most information-rich and contained the least amount of personal, restricted, or copyrighted information (the collection was mainly processed using minimum-standards processing, after all). These included the President's Files, Vice-President's Files, Regional Vice-President's Files, Director's Files, the Strike Files, Central Office Files, Regions and Locals, and Publications.

In December 2010, the NHPRC awarded GSU Library a matching grant in the amount of \$90,000. Drummond oversaw preparation of the collection for digitization and staff was hired to perform scanning and other tasks; Petersohn oversaw day-to-day operations and planned the workflow. Digitization began in

June 2011 and wrapped up in August 2012, the thirty-first anniversary of the strike.

The digitized series are available as part of GSU Library's Digital Collections (the platform used is CONTENTdm). Virtual documents display as they would in person, within folders, and maintain aspects of the physical user experience. Improving on the access provided to the collection by processing, text in the digitized records has been converted using optical character recognition and the documents are searchable for specific names or terms in addition to browsing. Users can also download files (as .pdf documents) to make retrieval of information easier once it is discovered.

### **Outreach on the 30<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary of the Strike**

The 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the strike was commemorated in August 2011 at a meeting in Hollywood, Florida. PATCO members past and present – both fired air traffic controllers and those organized in 1996 and onward by a new union that took up the PATCO name - attended the convention both to reminisce and discuss issues important to the current union, which is affiliated with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Arthur Shostak (a sociologist known for his work on PATCO, retired from Drexel University) suggested to Ron Taylor, PATCO president, that he have the archivists from the SLA and the TLA present at the convention and discuss the collections at each repository.

Claire Galloway Jenkins, formerly of the TLA, spoke to the attendees about their PATCO collections and Drummond spoke about the collection at the SLA and the in-progress NHPRC grant. Attendees were interested in the archivists' work. Some air traffic controllers had questions about their personal collections or the holdings in the archives. Others wanted to share stories, photos, or artifacts with the archivists. Attendees left the meeting understanding how the legacy of the strike is being preserved, debated, and examined in the academic realm.

### **Conclusion**

While it is unlikely that a labor union collection of this magnitude will ever again be placed at such risk, had the PATCO records been forgotten on that vacant lot the loss to the historical record would have been considerable. The records - arguably one of the most important collections on 20<sup>th</sup> century labor history – were rescued and housed, albeit at an archives unprepared for the commitment of caring for such a large collection without financial assistance. However, despite the collection's size and briefly contested ownership, despite lack of funding for a dedicated processing archivist and changes in archival practice and technology, and despite the project's on-again, off-again status, the records are now available to researchers, both online and in-person.