

DOWNTIME

Ways to recharge your batteries



Shaking hands with history

Genealogical research at the Georgia Archives links families to the past

by Christopher Lancette

On a crisp February morning, the sun-drenched interior of the Georgia Archives in Morrow is bustling with activity. People young and old, black and white, are pouring through Census records, scrolling through rolls of microfilm, studying original documents dating back to the founding of the United States... and making discoveries that bring tears to their eyes.

All are on a mission: They are at one of the South's premier research institutions seeking to meet relatives from long ago.

David Corley, a painting contractor from Newman, is standing amid the rows of bookshelves lining one side of the main research room. He is looking to uncover more details for an already dazzling family tree that dates back to the French and Indian War. His relatives were also heavily involved in the next one – the American Revolution.

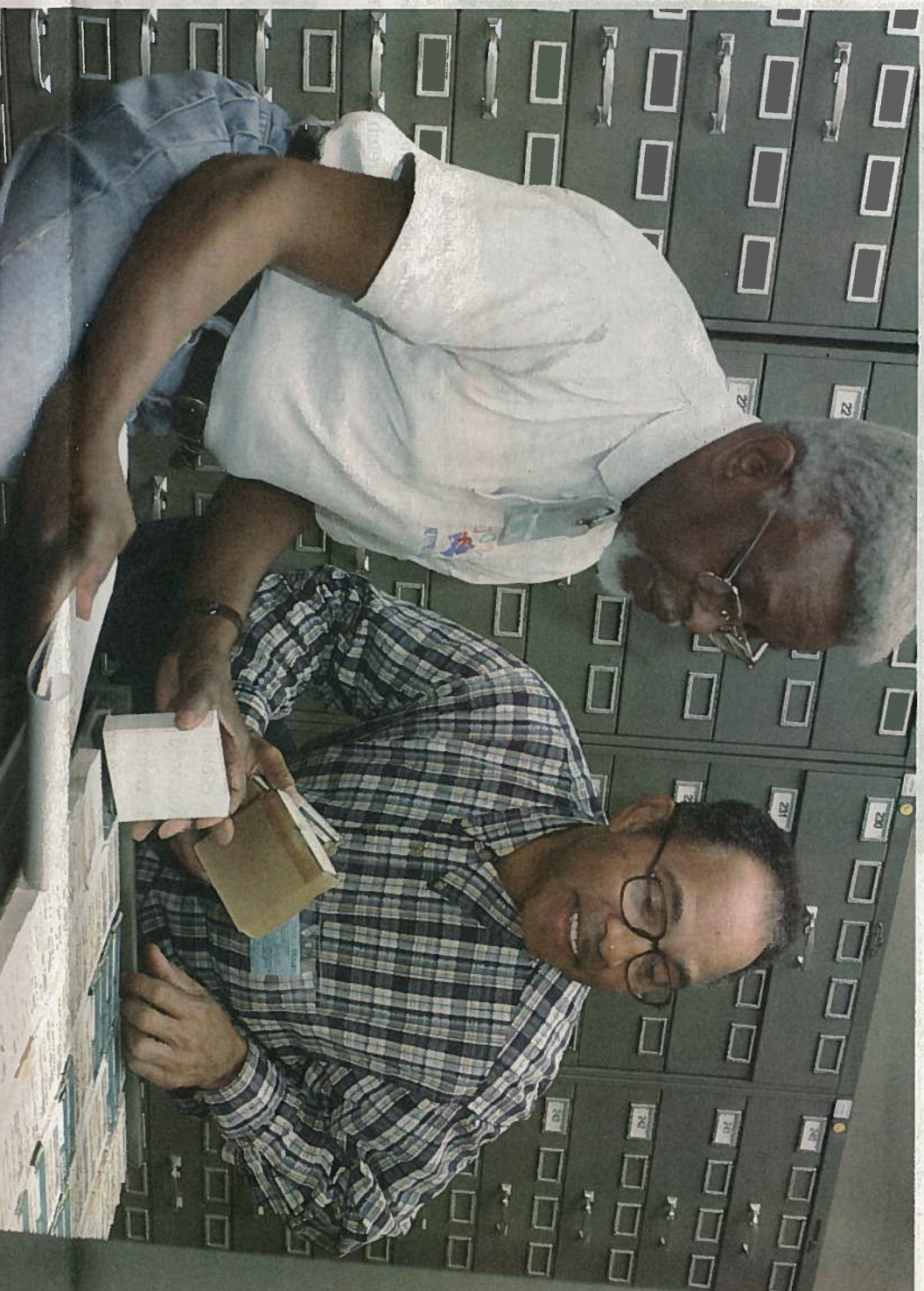
"My five times great grandfather Abner Corley was a Revolutionary War soldier," he says with pride. "I've found out how tall he was, what color eyes and hair he had and what kind of horse he rode. It's in a book here."

On the opposite side of the room, sisters Yvette Pitts and Tonya Minter are continuing an experience that staggers the imagination to consider. Camped out among an arcade of microfilm reading machines, the duo from Ellenwood go back and forth between their reels and a particular file in a nearby cabinet. Having already traced their slave ancestors back to a Georgia plantation owned by a family named Pitts in Gray, Ga., their journey took an amazing turn.

"We were here yesterday when a white lady came over and said she heard us talking about the Pitts family," the enthusiastic Minter began. "We had each looked at the same file. She said, 'I'm a Pitts' and that she was trying to find out if she was related to the same family that owned our family. She lives in Florida but we ran into her here. We exchanged phone numbers."

History healing itself as new friendships form, the siblings may well have new stories to share at their upcoming family reunion. They plan to give each family member the gift of a booklet they're writing on what they've learned so far. Their next stop, though, is to a spot of ground they identified through the Georgia Archives and the Internet – the site of the plantation their ancestors lived on.

A few feet away, Decatur resident Harold Robinson is part of the way through his first-ever visit. He dreams of acquiring the wealth of information that Pitts and Minter have found.



Harold Robinson (left) traced his family tree back 106 years on his first visit to the Georgia Archives – thanks to friend Joseph Lowe (right), who showed him the ropes.



Susan Sloan (left) and husband John Sloan (right) turned a hobby into a profession by becoming professional genealogists.



Tonya Minter found ancestors, and an unusual new friend, among the files.

"This is something I've been interested in for years," he says. "I talked to my uncle before he passed away and I became passionate about it. Right now, I've made it back to the 1900 Census in Cobb County. I want to know more about what my great-grandparents' lives were like after slavery. I know they owned land. I want to see how far I can go with this. I have two sons and I'd like to share this with them."

Spouses John and Susan Sloan frequently witness how powerful this kind of knowledge is.

Sitting at a reading table with notebooks by their sides, the Fayetteville couple

turned their genealogical skills into a profession by starting Sloan Superior Tutors. The company conducts research for people who don't have the time to pursue it themselves.

"One lady had us research her father's side," Mrs. Sloan remembers. "That was actually the easiest project we had ever seen. We traced his family back to the Revolution. She gave the information to her dad for Christmas. He read a little bit and cried. Then he'd read again and cry a little bit more. He never even knew who his grandparents were."

Senior archivist Joanne Smalley smiles

every time she and her Georgia Archives colleagues are able to lend someone a hand.

"New researchers are always fun to deal with," she says. "The first time they find an original record is always so exciting. It's fulfilling for them to learn who their ancestors are and where they came from. And it's definitely addicting. People come in here once and then they keep coming back for years."

>>> The Georgia Archives is open to the public Tuesday-Saturday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Visit www.georgiaarchives.org or call (678) 364-3700.