

A Brief History of Southeast World History Association by Marc Jason Gilbert, North Georgia College and State University

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When Alan LeBaron, a past-SEWHA president and currently its executive secretary, first asked me to write a history of the Southeastern World History Association, I was reluctant to do so. As founder of the association I could hardly be objective and at the very least would be prone to selective memory. However, after LeBaron threatened me with his writing an alternative history that he promised would have little basis in fact, I had little choice but to offer the following, written in the first person so as to provide adequate warning of the pride and gratitude in which I hold this organization, its officers and members.

SEWHA's origins lay very close to those of its parent organization, the World History Association. The latter was the fruit an idea that grew out of a discussion among scholars in the early 1980s about the need for a new history that sought to study the interwoven threads of the human past. Some of that discussion took place among a group of historians fortunate to have been chosen as members of a delegation sent by the American Historical Association to the Republic of the Cameroon in the summer of 1982. Their mission was to examine Cameroon's aspect as "Africa in miniature" so as to identify common threads within that continent's history that might be used to better teach African history across the American educational curriculum. What the delegation found instead was that every culture on earth was, so to speak, affected by the larger patterns that have shaped world history. This conviction informed the findings of the Cameroon group, which were presented at the American Historical Association's annual meeting in December, 1982. By then, there had been discussions in other forums regarding this new field of study. It was, however, not inappropriate that immediately after the presentation of the Cameroon group's findings, an organizational meeting was held to create an organization dedicated to supporting both the teaching of and scholarship of world history. The World History Association was born.

I was one of the members of the Cameroon study team at that meeting. In 1981, I had taken a position at NGCSU in part because it offered me a chance to teach courses in world civilization, a subject I had trained myself to teach by organizing my own "world history" doctoral field of study while formally training for a degree in South and Southeast Asian history. I was lucky upon my return to Georgia from Africa to find that my interest in world history was shared both by a fellow Georgia South Asianist, the late Dr. Martin Yanuck, Chair of the History Department of Spelman College in Atlanta, and also by two members of his department, Marjorie Ganz and James Gillam. All four of us were elected to the WHA's first Executive Council and, thanks to the support of Spelman College, Atlanta hosted the first semi-annual meeting of the Executive Council of the WHA. At that time, the "Atlanta Four" offered to create the WHA's first regional affiliate. However, this honor fell by default to Heidi Roupp and Marilyn Hitchens' Rocky Mountain Regional as we found it difficult to construct the infrastructure and financial support necessary to begin their own regional. Finally, in 1986, at a meeting at a local restaurant, Yanuck stated a truism applicable to all of such enterprises. "New organizations," he said, "are not started by committees, but by one inspired individual" and, by favoring me with a hard, if also benevolent stare, indicated that I was the one to do it. In response to this charge, I created an

entity entitled “The Georgia World History Association” as a state-based organization could best draw local funding for a “Conference on World History” that could serve as basis for a regional affiliate of the WHA. Funding for this conference was provided by the International and Intercultural Studies Program of the University System of Georgia (now called the University System of Georgia Office of International Education), the National Council of U. S.-Arab Relations and the North Georgia College Foundation. According to the brochure I produced for the meeting, this conference “would provide a forum for the discussion of the proper focus and goals of world history and feature four workshops designed to provide faculty with instructional strategies and resources that can be easily integrated into their existing courses.” These twin goals—the scholarship and teaching of world history—were the twin foundation stones of the WHA and I personally wished to insure that they shaped world history activities in the Southeast. The brochure also stated that the Conference would conclude with a discussion regarding the creation of a “southeast regional affiliate of the rapidly growing national World history Association.”

The conference was held on October 12, 1989 at North Georgia College and State University. Among the scheduled contributors to the workshops at the first conference were R. Hunt Davis of the University of Florida, Thomas Ganschow of the University of Georgia at Athens, Marjorie Ganz and James Gillam of Spelman College, Lorraine Gesick of the University of Nebraska-Omaha, David McCreary of Georgia State University, Sarah Hughes of Hampton University, Kenneth Perkins of the University of South Carolina, Kevin Reilly of Somerset County College (and first President of the World History Association) and Peter Stearns, then of Carnegie Mellon University. More than twenty teachers at all levels of instruction attended panels on the United States in World History, Women and World History, the Middle East and Africa in World History and Asia and Latin America in World History. The meeting so touched a nerve in the regional academic community that many scholars and teachers, as a gesture of support, sent in registration fees though they were unable to attend. The conference closed, as planned, with a discussion of “The Future of World History in Georgia and the Southeast.” At the end of this discussion, it was unanimously agreed that the “Georgia World History Association” should seek incorporation as the WHA southeast regional affiliate, but also that it should retain the name “Georgia World History Association” to preserve its local sources of financial support. After a call for nominations from the floor, elections were held that resulted in my becoming its first President, Marjorie Ganz, its first Secretary and James Gillam its first Treasurer. I had prepared a constitution for the Georgia World History Association that was based upon that of the WHA as was required for affiliation. This was ratified at the meeting and the Georgia World History Association, an organization with founding members in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia, officially became the southeastern affiliate of the WHA. At the time, the WHA was encouraging any institution or locality to put themselves forward as regional affiliates, but sometime later, the WHA seemed to be moving toward single regional organization model. This was long anticipated by GWHHA leaders and, with its broad membership and sound financial base already established, in the 1990s GWHHA voted to change its name to the Southeastern World History Association. Among the highlights of the association are its role in twice helping to host WHA annual meetings, once sometime ago when the AHA/WHA met jointly in Atlanta and in 2003 when, thanks to the efforts of SEWHA member Steve Rapp, the WHA held its annual meeting again in that city.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of SEWHA's annual conferences has been its ability to maintain the collegiality and inclusiveness of its annual meetings. This is due in part by striving to maintain an all-plenary session structure in which every panel is attended by all participants. The annual conferences have also been graced by leading scholars and teachers of world history. William McNeill tasked faculty at the University of Georgia, Athens with informing and enlivening their specializations with world historical methodology; Andre Gunder Frank spent an entire conference meeting in Asheville, North Carolina, serving at the audience's request as an ex-officio member of every panel, much to the delight of all participants—never has a conference keynote speaker given as much tireless good humor to so beneficial effect. Thanks to past President Robert Welborn and others at Clayton State University (to the south of Atlanta), the association could always rely on a central Georgia site whenever the region beyond its initial home proved unable to support it, though this was rare event. Clayton State served as the home to what I consider my own favorite SEWHA moment: I was able to arrange a visit from virtually the entire Department of History of the University of Guam, who held a workshop on the Pacific in World History that began with the traditional blowing of the conch shell. Clayton State was also home to a conference built around guest speaker Theodore von Laue, who so enjoyed the event that he returned his speaker's fee as a donation meant to further the organization's activities: he will always be remembered by the association for this act of generosity and fellowship. Kevin Reilly, Richard Bulliet, Heidi Roupp, Mark Welter and many others have spoken at other annual meetings, rarely in return for more than travel costs and always serving as sources of similar inspiration. The association's members have been just as great an inspiration to each other: no sooner than he retired as Director of an International Studies Program, long-time member Thomas Keene volunteered to help with the association's web page. In 2003, I joyfully stepped down from the post of executive director of the association that I had held since the end of my presidency: there is no delight greater to the founder of an organization than that which comes from the knowledge that it stands on its own and can be guided by new leadership it has generated from within. In officers and local arrangements chairs like Craig Baxter, Alan LeBaron, Jonathan Grant, Alice Pate, Joel Tishken and the self-less and tireless Steve Rapp and H. Michael Tarver, SEWHA is destined to surpass its prior achievements and bring further luster to its current status as the WHA's strongest regional affiliate.