

GGC History Faculty Contribute to Ground Breaking History of Gwinnett County

Georgia Gwinnett College's historians made more than a representative contribution to the first ever treatment of the history of Gwinnett County published by an academic press.

Michael Gagnon, professor of history at GGC, co-edited *Gwinnett County, Georgia, and the Transformation of the American South, 1818-2018*, with Georgia Institute of Technology historian Matthew Hild. Gagnon was the inspiration behind the book.

Given the complexity of the sources and the diversity of possible topics, Gagnon and Hild recruited a team of academic contributors, including GGC historians David Mason, Carey Shellman, Richard Cook, and former GGC professor Erica Metcalfe. He also enlisted a GGC history major enrolled in a graduate program at Georgia State University: Katheryn Nikolich (see sidebar next page).

The story of the book's origins is fascinating in itself, and so we decided to let Gagnon tell us the story in his own words.

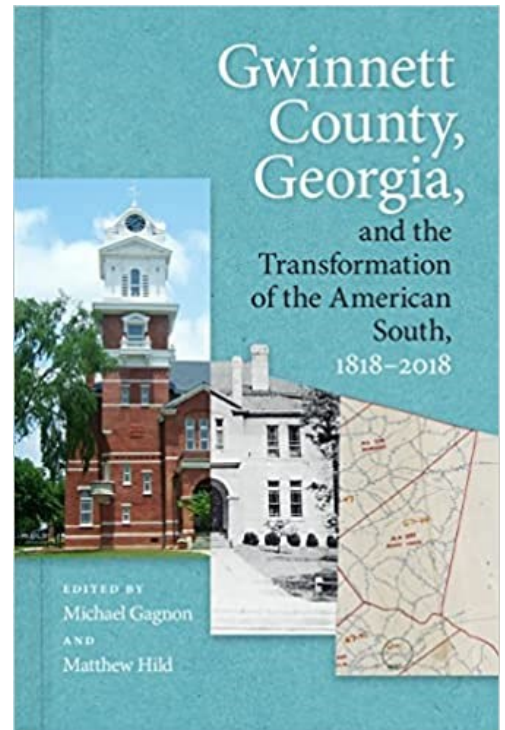
What was the inspiration in writing a history of Gwinnett County?

In 2017 the Gwinnett County Historical Society asked me to write a pamphlet in time to kick off the start of the county's bicentennial.

I spent half a year researching and writing only to discover that they wanted less than 4,000 words and I had written in excess of 10,000 words. Entire stories were cut out of the county's history to fit the length of the pamphlet. They only wanted the most positive aspects to celebrate the county's 200th birthday, so I left out many of what I considered the most relevant stories. They told me to write a book if I wanted to include them, and so I did.

What are the academic contributions of this volume?

There has never been a history of Gwinnett County written by scholars and published by an academic press, despite the fact that it is one of Georgia's most populous and most diverse counties. We first wanted to fill that gap in the record. Second, each chapter basically says, "history happened locally." Third, we wanted to



Book Cover. Published by the University of Georgia Press, this is the first formal academic study of the history of Gwinnett County.



GGC Faculty Connections, clockwise from top left: David Mason, Michael Gagnon, Carey Shellman, Erica Metcalfe, and Richard Cook.

cover the sorts of stories that typically get left out of local histories, so we addressed issues of race, class and gender encountered in Gwinnett's history in the same fashion as we would have at some other more distant place. We wrote a scholarly history for a general audience. Although we address issues important to professional historians, we do it without jargon, or we explain the jargon so it makes sense. Finally, this book is something all higher education institutions should be doing: researching the history of the locality to engage the institution with the locality and vice versa. We can't just be the ivy tower, and we should be engaging the public.

What were the advantages to using a collaborative approach?

I originally thought I would write a single monograph about the county's history, but quickly realized that I lacked the expertise to do justice to all the stories. I knew the general contours of which stories to include but without expertise in each period of US history, I would have missed a lot.

What were some disadvantages to using a collaborative approach?

We solicited over one hundred historians to find a sufficient number to tell our stories. Then one author dropped out, while another could not fulfill his commitment. We covered those two stories despite the loss of personnel. Then, different authors had different writing abilities. So we had to finesse our editing diplomacy to ask authors to change what they wrote, but acknowledge they have rights to decide how to tell the story their own way.

What were unanticipated challenges, and how were they overcome?

Obtaining a contract was frustrating. As we completed a draft and a revised manuscript, the publisher waited for final revisions following peer review before issuing a contract. The publication took another year. Overall, it took over 5 years from conception to publication.

What are some of the major takeaways?

Our book is not the last word on Gwinnett history. We had plenty of stories we wanted to include but could not find authors to research and write them in the time we had.

Were there other surprises in the publication process?

First, every story had its own twist and turn that included something we did not know before. That is what makes history so exciting! Second, publishers do little to promote their own books. If you want your book to be read, you have to promote it yourself. This is one reason we are doing a series of events in Fall 2022 [see sidebar, right].

Does GGC's Library Contain a Copy?

It does. The call number is F292.G9 .G82 2022

GGC History Graduate

Contributes Chapter



Katheryn Nikolich graduated from Georgia Gwinnett College in 2013 with a double major in history and political science.

In 2015 she earned a M.A. in history from Georgia State University. Her masters thesis investigated suburbanization in Gwinnett County.

GGC Faculty Chapters in the Book

Richard Cook, "Cherokee and Creek Agency: Gwinnett County before the Button." Michael Gagnon, "Slavery and Cotton in Antebellum Gwinnett." Michael Gagnon and Matthew Hild, "Reconstruction and Race in Gwinnett and Northeast Georgia." David Mason, "Luck and Pluck: The Life of Buck Buchanan." Carey Olmstead Shellman, "Alice Harrell Strickland (1859-1947): Civic Motherhood in Progressive-Era Gwinnett County." Erica Metcalfe, "In Search of the Promised Land: Segregation, Migration, and the African American Experience in Gwinnett County, 1910-1980."

Upcoming Events:

Gwinnett Reads Event, Duluth, County Library Branch, 6:30 p.m., September 22.

Lawrenceville Female Seminary, Drs. Gagnon and Cook, and Ms. Nikolich read chapter selections. Contact mgagnon@ggc.edu