

Winter 2005

Voices from the Caroliniana - Winter 2005

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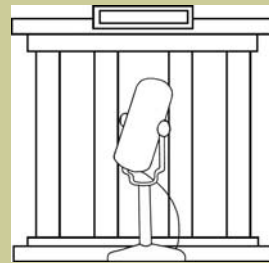
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Issue One

Winter, 2005

Voices From the Caroliniana



The Newsletter of the Oral History Program at the South Caroliniana Library

Greetings

Welcome to the first newsletter of the Oral History Program at the South Caroliniana Library! We are pleased to have an opportunity to present our collections and explain our work in a little more detail. We plan to keep you informed twice a year and are always happy to hear from you.

Like our collections and the building that houses them, oral history at the Caroliniana has a long and distinguished past. Noted South Carolina writer William Gilmore Simms, whose papers represent one of the Library's major collections, gathered oral testimony for a number of his works, including the recently reissued account of the burning of Columbia by Sherman's troops in February, 1865. Though oral history begins at the dawn of historical

writing, when Thucydides collected accounts of the Peloponnesian War, modern oral history begins in 1948 with historian Allan Nevins at Columbia University using the recently invented tape recorder to capture interviews with prominent businessmen and politicians.

At the Caroliniana, our recordings begin in the 1930s and span more than a thousand hours of interviews in a variety of formats, from microcassettes to reels. We are currently building a database to catalog them and a digital workstation to ensure their preservation (see p.6 for details). In keeping with the Library's mission to document the lives of all South Carolinians, our oral histories encompass a wide array of narra-



Located on the historic Horseshoe of the University of South Carolina, the Oral History Program at the South Caroliniana Library gathers interviews of South Carolinians from all walks of life.

tors, with more being added all the time. If you have a project you'd like us to consider or help with, or a collection you wish to donate, please get in touch! We'd love to hear from you.

Highlights In This Issue:

- SC Jazz and Blues Musicians Project—our first publication!
- Carolina First: An Oral History of a South Carolina Success Story
- The Amelia Wallace Vernon Collection of African American Oral History
- Conserving Our Past: the SC Bankers Association Grant
- Digital Oral History: South Caroliniana in the 21st Century

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Oral History Publications Series

With the generous support of the Caroline McKissick Dial Publication Fund, the Oral History Program is delighted to announce the first volume in a series of publications. Drawn from the extensive oral history collections at the South Caroliniana Library, this series will

highlight the rich oral heritage of the state. With the first volume to be published by the University of South Carolina Press (see "SC Jazz and Blues Musicians," p.2), the series will promote awareness of and appreciation for often-overlooked aspects of South Carolina's

people, culture, and history. "We are excited to be able to present our holdings to a wider audience," explained Dr. Allen Stokes, Director of the South Caroliniana Library, "and we have high ambitions to make this series a landmark in oral history publications."

Carolina First: An Oral History of a South Carolina Success Story



The eye-catching façade of the Columbia headquarters of Carolina First.

With the advent of interstate banking in the 1980s, many of South Carolina's bankers knew that a wave of mergers and take-overs would follow, changing the financial landscape of the state forever. As more and more of South Carolina's major banks were bought by out-of-state firms, USC graduate and Columbia native Mack Whittle saw an opportunity.

As a senior vice president with NCNB South Carolina, Whittle believed that a South Carolina bank could provide better service to South Carolinians. And after a meeting with fifteen prominent Greenville businessmen, he was sure, walking out with unsolicited offers of \$5 million in start-up capital.

Greenville's business community kept their promise: when Carolina First was formed, it raised more capital—nearly \$15 million—than any other bank in the state's history. It was only one of many firsts for the aptly-named enterprise. In an industry where the rule is one to three years before profitability, Carolina First turned a profit in its second full quarter of operations. Now, as it nears its twentieth anniversary, Carolina First is working with the South Caroliniana Library to compile an oral history of its precedent-setting experiences over the last two decades.

In keeping with the Library's mission, the Carolina First Oral History Project will interview key

people at every level, from founder to teller. Building on the Library's extensive SCBA Oral History Collection (see "Conserving Our Past: The SC Bankers Association Grant," p.3), the project will also interview the state's most prominent bankers about their work with and observations of this remarkable success story.

"The Library is fortunate to have, in Mr. Whittle, a banker who understands the importance of oral history and its potential," said Paul Willis, Dean of University Libraries. Just as South Carolina is fortunate to have, in Carolina First, a bank that understands the importance of this state and its potential.

African Americans at Mars Bluff: The Amelia Wallace Vernon Oral History Collection



Amelia Wallace Vernon on the steps on one of the hewn-timber cabins at Mars Bluff, built in the 1830s by the ancestors of several of the narrators she interviewed.

Though a nurse by training, Amelia Wallace Vernon found herself drawn to writing when a project to save two antebellum cabins turned into something much more. Born and raised in Florence, SC, Vernon began with little more than a South Carolinian's reverence for the past, part of the heritage that came with being a Wallace.

When the president of Francis Marion College, now University, wanted the cabins torn down, Vernon launched a crusade to save them, and in the process discovered stories that she knew had to be recorded. "I was having an awful time persuading him [the president] to save the houses, and so I went to see Archie Waiters to see what he knew," Vernon explained.

An old family friend who had worked for her father for many years, Waiters turned out to be the ideal narrator. "Oh, what that man knew! He could just tell me the whole history of Mars Bluff," Wallace recalled in a recent interview. "I couldn't believe it, because I had known him my whole life but he'd always been very quiet, never spoke out. So I thought, I've got to come back. I didn't mean to ever write a book, I was just going to save his recordings of some of the things he knew. But he was great."

Vernon wrote a critically acclaimed book based partly on her interviews, simply called *African Americans at Mars Bluff, South Carolina*, published by Louisiana State University

Press in 1993. Now she is working with the Oral History Program to complete and conserve her immense archive of interviews, turning them into oral histories for the benefit of other scholars and researchers.

With over 100 hours of recordings spanning over 30 years of interviews, the Vernon Collection represents a major repository of African-American oral history, and one of the most important at the Caroliniana. "We are delighted and honored to be working with Mrs. Vernon," said Henry Fulmer, Curator of Manuscripts at the Caroliniana, who oversees the rest of the Wallace Collection. "Her interviews make an invaluable addition to our understanding of South Carolina."

SC Jazz and Blues Musicians

When USC English professor Benjamin Franklin V moved to Columbia in 1976, he was delighted to be moving to a region that had produced so many fine jazz and blues musicians.

“Although literature was my profession, it shared a passion with jazz,” he explained.

But he was surprised to find that there was no reference work on his adopted state’s contributions to these uniquely American music forms. “I wanted to document thoroughly the South Carolina jazz and blues musicians,” he wrote in his landmark essay, “The Problem of Local Jazz History: the Example of South Carolina,” published in *Jazz in Mind: Essays on the History and Meanings of Jazz*. So he did. Begin-

ning his research with Cheraw native Dizzy Gillespie, he soon found dozens of musicians who merited attention. Documentary evidence was scarce, though. The answer was oral history.

With the help of a grant from the South Carolina Committee for the Humanities, Franklin went to work interviewing musicians up and down the East Coast, all of whom had roots in South Carolina. Many of them, though not well known, made what Franklin calls “significant contributions to the music.”

The result is a dazzling collection of powerful and revealing oral histories from luminaries such as Dizzy Gillespie and Orangeburg native Johnny Williams to Aiken-born singer Etta

Jones. Now, with the help of the Oral History Program at the Caroliniana, Dr. Franklin is completing several new interviews to bring the collection up to the present.

Once completed, the collection will be published by USC Press as the first volume from the Library’s oral history collections (see “Oral History Publications Series,” p.1). New interviews with famed Columbia saxophonist Skipp Pearson and young phenomenon Chris Potter will complete this multi-decade snapshot of the Palmetto State’s rich musical heritage.

“It’s been a labor of love,” Franklin noted recently, “but the love has outweighed the labor.”



Famed trumpeter Jabbo Smith, one of the South Carolina jazz musicians featured in Dr. Benjamin Franklin’s oral history collection at the South Caroliniana Library.

Conserving Our Past: The SC Bankers Association Grant

In 1812, when the General Assembly chartered the Bank of the State of South Carolina, they had no idea they were establishing an institution that one historian would call “the most successful bank ever conducted by an American state.” The precedents it set have persisted until today, USC historian Dr. Jack Sproat noted in *Making Change: South Carolina Banking in the Twentieth Century*.

When Dr. Sproat was commissioned by the South Carolina Bankers Association in 1987 to help write that history, he interviewed more than 40 of the state’s most prominent bankers. Those interviews comprise a treasure trove of the state’s commercial and financial history, as well as provide an overview of the immense changes

that have defined South Carolina history in the last century.

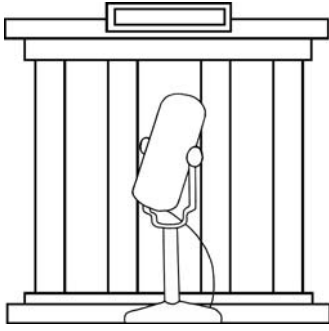
Far from a dry recounting of business anecdotes, these interviews capture some of the state’s most powerful captains of industry, recording their observations on issues such as integration and banking deregulation to the role that bankers should play in their communities.

Always insightful, often humorous, these tapes showcase the power and value of oral history. When Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian at the Caroliniana Library, contacted Lloyd Hendricks of the SC Bankers Association in April, 2005, and told him about the collection, he remembered working with Dr. Sproat. The problem was

the age of the tapes: “Cassette tape is thin and doesn’t age well,” Meriwether explained. “When I listened to three of the tapes, I was amazed at the candor and vitality of those voices—and I was horrified at the degradation of the sound.” Digitizing and transcribing them became a top priority.

With the active support of Mr. Hendricks, the SC Bankers Association agreed to provide a generous grant to help defray the costs involved. “We are fortunate to have the kind of visionary support that the Bankers Association has provided,” Meriwether commented. “Once again, the banking industry of South Carolina has demonstrated its commitment to the enrichment of our state, not just commercially but culturally.”

“When I listened to three of the tapes, I was amazed at the candor and vitality of those voices ...”



Voices From the Caroliniana

The Oral History Program
South Caroliniana Library
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208

Phone: 803.777.3133
Fax: 803.777.5747
E-mail: MeriwetN@gwm.sc.edu



Digital Oral History: South Caroliniana in the 21st Century

Ask an oral historian what the greatest problem facing archives today, and the chances are good that the reply will be, “audio preservation.” Since the beginning of modern oral history in the late 1940s, the question of how best to care for the sound recordings that are the basis for oral history has bedeviled the field.

No medium for sound is permanent. Since the advent of Edison cylinders, archivists have struggled with the best way to conserve the often fragile, perishable formats of their recordings. With oral history interviews, the problems are even greater: often recorded with low-fidelity machines on consumer-grade media, amateur

recordings pose some of the greatest challenges in sound preservation and restoration.

“For every high-quality reel we have there are a hundred old cassettes,” Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian at the Caroliniana, noted. Even more challenging are the microcassettes, perhaps the most perishable format invented. Regardless, every tape receives the most scrupulous attention: “Our goal is to transfer the tape at the highest possible fidelity, and then go to work to restore the signal,” Meriwether explained.

With construction underway of a state-of-the-art digital audio workstation, the South Caro-

liniana Library will soon be able to handle many of these tasks in-house. When completed, it will enable the Oral History Program to embark on the long process of digitizing the tapes. “It’s exacting and often exasperating work,” Meriwether commented. “But it’s also satisfying—it’s what we love to do.”



Tapes donated to the Library come in all formats. These recent arrivals include several sizes of reels, cassettes, and microcassettes. All of them will have to be transferred to digital media.