

Spring 2006

## *Voices from the Caroliniana* - Spring 2006

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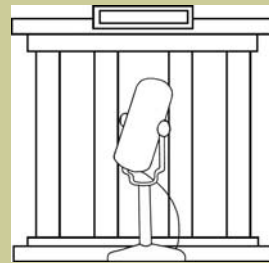
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# Voices From the Caroliniana



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

## Greetings

Springtime at the Caroliniana is always a busy time for us, and the same is even more true for the Oral History Program. We continue to forge ahead with the projects we outlined in our first newsletter, while continuing to develop new initiatives. Several of these new efforts are detailed in this newsletter, which also provides us with a chance to thank our contributors for their support of the Library's oral history collections.

Those collections continue to evolve as we unearth new materials and discover their interconnections. A prime example of oral history's capacity to enrich our other holdings is a recently discovered cache of interviews with Mary Simms Oliphant, granddaughter of famed South Carolina writer William Gilmore Simms. One of two new oral history projects relating to Simms, whose materials comprise the Library's most significant and extensive collection,

the Oliphant tapes complement the second major initiative, a series of interviews conducted by Simms descendent Felicia Furman.

We have also been fortunate to receive the support of the South Carolina Chapter of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, who have helped fund our efforts to conserve an important collection of interviews they created.

Those forensic efforts are a central focus of the Program, and our efforts are attracting national attention: our presentation on that topic at a recent major conference generated keen interest, and we are pleased that with the Oral History Program as well as our other divisions, the Caroliniana remains at the forefront of cutting-edge scholarly methodology. None of this is possible without the sup-



Springtime frames the Caroliniana with flowering trees, making the front lawn a favorite spot for outdoor studying, sunbathing, and Frisbee.

port of our patrons and donors, and we thank you all for your vision, generosity and enthusiasm. As always, please let us know if you have a collection that you think might interest us, or if we can help you in your own oral history efforts.

### Highlights In This Issue:

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- Memory and History: The Guilds/Oliphant Interview Tapes
- Shared History: The Felicia Furman Interview Archive
- A Tradition of Service to History: The SC Chapter of the Colonial Dames
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## Oral History Goes Digital: The Westmoreland Tapes

With the completion of our state-of-the-art digital audio workstation (see "Digital Oral History" on p.4 of our last newsletter), the Oral History Program can now undertake the restoration of even the most difficult analog formats. Our first test came when Dr. Lewis Sorley, noted William C. Westmoreland biographer, asked to audition more than 20 hours of recordings. "We had almost every

variety of reel as well as cassettes," Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian at the Caroliniana, explained, "and all of them had been stored in file folders in the General's attic for decades." With the help of Bryan Jenkins of University Instructional Services, an old reel-to-reel player was located, and Meriwether went to work. When Sorley arrived at the Library, he was delighted, and compli-

mented the staff on their efforts, some of which had required work throughout the Christmas holidays. "Having the ability to digitize and restore our recorded artifacts is another one of the exciting benefits of hosting an active Oral History Program," Dr. Allen Stokes, Director of the Caroliniana commented, "and we're delighted that we can now offer those services to our patrons."

## Memory and History: The Guilds/Oliphant Interview Tapes



South Carolinian William Gilmore Simms was the pre-eminent man of letters in the South before the Civil War.

In 1958, John C. Guilds, Jr. was working on a Ph.D. dissertation about William Gilmore Simms, the most famous antebellum literary figure in the South and one of the foremost novelists of his day. “Tackling someone of Simms’s stature was challenge enough,” Dr. Guilds recalled recently, “but doing so for a dissertation was almost unthinkable.”

Fortunately he had an ally in Simms’s granddaughter, Mary C. Simms Oliphant, herself an accomplished writer and historian who had spent many years researching her famous ancestor. When Guilds realized what a resource Oliphant was, he began to tape record their conversations, a practice he continued into the late 1970’s, when he was well into the research

that would inform his monumental biography, *Simms, A Literary Life* (University of Arkansas Press, 1992).

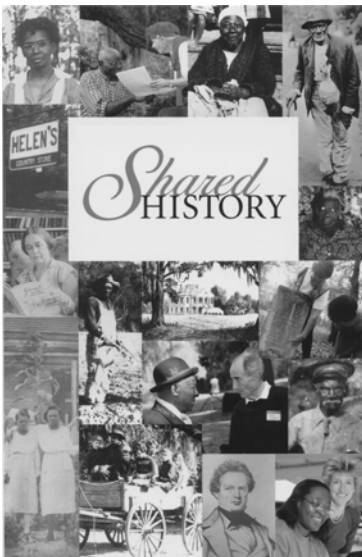
After the book was published, Dr. Guilds donated the surviving recordings to the Caroliniana, where work has begun to restore the badly degraded tapes. Even though that effort is in its earliest stages, initial results have surpassed expectations, according to Nicholas Meriwether, who heads the Oral History Program. “I was amazed at how much of a signal we were able to reclaim from the first tapes we digitized,” he commented, “so we have high hopes for the entire collection.”

In fact, Meriwether gave a paper on the tapes at the recent conference honoring the bicentennial of Simms’s birth,

“Cultural Hearth: William Gilmore Simms and His State,” hosted by the Library, April 6-8. For the Oral History Program, it was a signal honor to be able to address the conference, and highly appropriate, given Simms’s own studied use of oral sources in his own fiction and historical writing.

“These tapes not only contain riches for scholars interested in Simms, they provide a unique view of the seismic changes that South Carolina underwent after his death,” Meriwether explained. With the permission of Mrs. Oliphant’s daughter, Mrs. Mary Simms Furman, the tapes will be transcribed and made available to scholars at the Library as part of the Caroliniana’s extensive Simms collections.

## Shared History: The Felicia Furman Interview Archive



*Shared History* made its debut in South Carolina in February with screenings in Columbia and Greenville, to wide acclaim.

Scholars working in South Carolina history are often surprised at the connections that appear between seemingly disparate topics, and nowhere does that seem more apparent than those working in oral history. When Felicia Furman, great-great-granddaughter of William Gilmore Simms, read Amelia Wallace Vernon’s *African Americans at Mars Bluff, South Carolina*, (see our last newsletter, p.2), she realized that she, too, could make a contribution to South Carolina history—to document the labyrinthine relations between white and black descendents of the families who lived and worked at Woodlands, the Simms family plantation in Midway, SC.

In keeping with the example of her industrious ancestor, she

devoted more than a decade of her life to interviewing descendents of those families that traced their ancestry back to Woodlands. Those interviews form the basis for her remarkable documentary film, *Shared History*, which recently had its national debut on PBS.

Now Furman is working with the Oral History Program at the Caroliniana to convert the 112 interviews in the collection into oral histories, making available the immense riches that the 90-minute film could only touch upon. For scholars interested in South Carolina and African American history, the collection will afford unique opportunities to further explore the complicated and extensive relationships that entwine South Carolinians even today.

“Our Simms materials represent the crown jewel of the Caroliniana’s collections,” noted Henry Fulmer, Curator of Manuscripts, “and the Shared History Archive adds a rich dimension to the story that our other holdings can only hint at.” For the Library, the archive not only enhances our Simms collections, it also complements our African American holdings, especially those that informed the book that first inspired Furman, the Amelia Wallace Vernon Collection.

“The Simms family has made immense contributions to our state and our Library for generations,” noted Paul Willis, Dean of University Libraries. With *Shared History*, that illustrious heritage has been carried into the next generation as well.

## A Tradition of Service to History: the South Carolina Chapter of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America

In 1891, a group of women gathered in Philadelphia to form an organization dedicated to promoting the appreciation and preservation of our nation's history. Today that organization, the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, has grown to an association of 44 individual societies with over 15,000 members.

South Carolinians enthusiastically welcomed the mission of the Dames, and in 1893 organized the South Carolina Society in Charleston. Today the state is served by six local committees, as the regional bodies are known, representing Columbia, Georgetown, Greenville, the Lowcountry, the Pee Dee, and Spartanburg. From the beginning, the South Carolina Chapter embraced the injunction of the Dames charter to "collect

and preserve manuscripts, traditions, relics and mementos of bygone days," and in 1930 they formed Historical Activities Committees to develop projects that would fulfill that mandate.

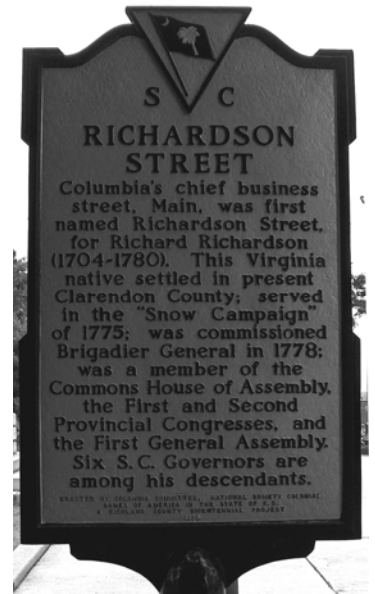
From the outset, the Historical Activities Committees were interested in recording the recollections of South Carolinians who had participated in the events that defined their times, and in the 1980's, four of the state Committees embarked on an ambitious interview program. Spanning nearly 40 hours of interviews with 34 narrators, those tapes are now being digitized, conserved and transcribed, with the generous support of several members and Committees of the South Carolina Chapter.

"We are delighted to be working with the Oral History Program to

process and conserve these tapes," said Louisa Campbell of the Columbia Committee.

"These voices are compelling examples of the promise of oral history," added Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian at the Caroliniana. Created by dedicated amateurs, they capture stories that would otherwise have been lost, and that professionals could not have obtained.

With nearly a fourth of the necessary funds secured, work has begun on the most fragile tapes, with plans to process the remainder as funds come available. When complete, the collection will form another testament to the historical vision of the South Carolina women of the Colonial Dames, who have done so much to preserve our history, and in so many ways.



This historical marker on the State House grounds was erected by the Dames in 1976. The tapes they donated to the Library mark another monument to their work in preserving South Carolina history.

## A Past Reclaimed: The Catawba Indian Oral History Archive

In 1976, when Dr. Thomas J. Blumer took time off from his work at the Library of Congress to travel to South Carolina to meet Catawba master potter Nola Harris Campbell, he had no idea that he was beginning a friendship that would span a quarter of a century. "One of my early goals in the study of the Catawba was to meet this already legendary woman," he wrote in a moving eulogy on her death in 2001.

Campbell took Blumer under her wing, teaching him about much more than pottery: his interviews with her and others cover a broad swath of Catawba history and culture, from traditional songs to the changes confronting the tribe. In time, his interviews would span more than 120 tapes, now being

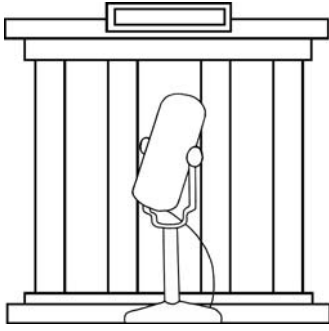
converted into oral histories with the help of the Oral History Program at the Caroliniana Library for the USC-Lancaster Native American Studies Archive. A part of the Blumer Collection at USC-Lancaster, the tapes represent one of the most important Native American oral history collections in the South.

"We're especially gratified to be working with USC-Lancaster on a project of this significance," said Dr. Allen Stokes, Director of the Caroliniana. And it is especially appropriate that the Oral History Program be the forum for this institutional cooperation, noted Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian at the Library: "Oral history is by nature collaborative and often interdisciplinary, as the Catawba archive so amply demon-

strates." Although the challenges in processing this archive are greater than with most collections, that only enhances the scholarly value of the end result, noted Dr. Stephen Criswell, Director of USC-Lancaster's Native American Studies Department: "Conserving these tapes represents an opportunity to reach out across decades of cultural exploitation and help redress some of the immense injustices that have robbed the Catawbas of so much of their heritage." Oral history is a perfect vehicle for that, as Meriwether explained: "Ensuring that these voices can be heard in the future is a way to preserve the tremendous vitality and richness that define the Catawba people."

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*"Conserving these tapes represents an opportunity to reach out across the decades..."*



## *Voices From the Caroliniana*

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## Recent Gifts and Current Needs

Donors are the lifeblood of any library's special collections, and the Oral History Program at the Caroliniana is no exception: many of the most highly prized interviews in our collection have been given to us. However, many patrons are not aware of the variety of ways that they can contribute to our work. Oral history relies on technology to a greater degree than almost any other part of the library, from the often obsolete equipment we need to play recordings to the constantly evolving high-end technology that we use to preserve the sound.

In the last few months, we have been fortunate enough to receive an audiophile CD player, a set of studio headphones, an early reel-to-reel player, as well as splicing blocks, a demagnet-

izer, and a wealth of equipment cleaning supplies. These gifts are advantageous for our donors, since older technology is often of no use to businesses and individuals whose needs have outgrown it.

Currently we are still looking for a variety of reel-to-reel players, as well as headphones, amplifiers, speakers, and turntables. All gifts are tax-deductible. If you have orphaned or unused equipment that you might like to donate, please stop by the Library or get in touch with Nicholas Meriwether at the Oral History Program at the Library (MeriwetN@gwm.sc.edu, or 777-3133) to see if we can use it. As Meriwether wrote in a recent article, "The single greatest problem in forensic oral history is the challenge of deal-

ing with obsolete technology: no medium for recorded sound is permanent, and finding and maintaining the equipment to enable us to play back obsolete formats becomes geometrically more complex with every passing year." With the help of our donors, we can continue to meet that challenge.



One of our workstations incorporates several donated components.