



Beyond the Books *by dmschwar*

By Carolyn Coons

Tucked away in the far corners of Wilson Library, rare documents rest on wooden shelves, holding in them history, experiences and knowledge just waiting to be found.

The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library—which includes five collections and the North Carolina Digital Heritage Center—houses everything from pieces of national history to UNC-Chapel Hill archives, available to the public in the building and sometimes online.

“I recommend letting your curiosity get the best of you,” says Morgan Jones, a library science graduate student who works at the library. “That’s what lets you see something you may have never seen before.” The materials contained within Wilson might be lesser known to the community, but to the students who work there, they hold a value far beyond the average library book.

Making Discoveries

Last spring, a patron researching in the Southern Historical Collection discovered a hidden piece of history—a letter written by then Virginia Governor and future president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson.

“Those are rare,” says Emerson Cardoso, a sophomore who works in Wilson’s Research and Instructional Services department. “There was no record of it being in the folder and then (the patron) just found it.”

The Southern Historical Collection (SHC) and the Southern Folklife Collection (SFC) are housed together. According to the library’s website, the SHC houses an array of materials pertaining to Southern life, and the SFC contains audio and visual items, in addition to documents, related to folk life and music.

The Jefferson letter, found in the SHC, is just one of the many “gems,” as Cardoso fondly refers to them, that can be found in Wilson.

“(The SHC) is actually one of the country’s largest and most important repositories for manuscripts and archives related to the American South,” says Judy Panitch, director of library communications at UNC-CH.

Amy Gallagher, a junior working in the North Carolina Collection and Rare Book Collection reading room, says the Stuart Collection is one of the most fascinating she has come across. As an anthropology major, Gallagher is intrigued by the collection, which includes the research of anthropologist George E. Stuart on Mayan and other Mesoamerican civilizations.

The Rare Book Collection includes a great expanse of literature, and the North Carolina Collection (NCC) holds materials distinct to North Carolina, according to the library's website.

Certain students and staff members call Wilson's contents gems and treasures due to their rarity and the intrinsic value they hold.

"I've always viewed Wilson as a library," Cardoso says, "but also a museum."

Jones says you could find an item that may intrigue you or relate to you personally.

"You never know what you're going to find," Jones says. "You don't know if you are going to find your great great grandmother's signature in a book, or Robert E. Lee's map."

Jones worked at Wilson as an undergraduate and now works in University Archives and Records Management Services, a collection in the library. Jones says she has always had a passion for history but became enthralled with the library after working with the collections personally.

"I liked that hands-on activity that I got to experience by working in a manuscripts library," Jones says. "I liked seeing things that were unique, and that's what pulled me in. What led me to stay (at Wilson) was realizing that it was an important job and that I wanted to make these things accessible to people. I wanted to let people know these things are here."

Jones recalls a specific set of letters written to the local newspaper about a UNC-CH professor in the 1850s. The letters concerned the professor's comments in regards to the Fremont Electoral Ticket—a bid for presidential candidate John C. Fremont, who supported the abolition of slavery in all states. The professor had said he supported the ticket but also that he would stand behind the South if succession became a possibility. As a result of these letters and the University's strictly nonpartisan political policy, the University fired the professor.

"On the outside," Jones says, "you think they're going to be very bland materials, but you start seeing really personal documents in University archives that you didn't know were there."

Working at Wilson

Jones plans on becoming an archivist once she finishes her degree, and she hopes to work in a library such as Wilson processing and appraising different materials. Gallagher may be on the same path now.

"The librarian path is definitely something that I can consider in the future," Gallagher says. "I love it. I've been there for two years now and it's a fantastic job."

Wilson currently has 59 undergraduate students—a mix of work-study and not—and 31 graduate student assistants working at the library.

"They make a lot of the work done in the collection possible," says Steve Weiss, curator of the SFC, of undergraduate and graduate students.

The tasks the student assistants are given vary from paging and shelving books to cataloging to watching over patrons as they do their research. Due to the fragility of many items in the collection, patrons can only look at the materials in the collections' secure rooms and are supervised by one of the assistants.

"I think my favorite thing," Cardoso says, "is interacting with the patrons."

Cardoso says students and alumni from the area and from Ivy League institutions come to Wilson to use the collections.

“I get to talk with (the patrons) about their research,” Gallagher adds. “When I get to talk to them individually about what they’re doing at the library, it is really interesting.”

Jones began her time as an undergraduate working at Wilson by doing basic library work and interacting with patrons. By the time she became a senior, she began to take on more responsibility including copy orders, preparing works for digitization and responding to reference requests.

“I have a lot of experience in research and instructional services, teaching people about how to use the material,” Jones says.

In addition to organizational and informational skills, Cardoso has learned to be proactive in solving any issues that arise while working with library material.

“When there is so much stuff in this building,” Cardoso says, “things can seem to get lost easily.”

Collections can be misplaced and pages from manuscripts go missing, Cardoso says, and part of the job is searching for these items.

“As a librarian, you learn to deal with problems quickly.”

Beyond Books

Wilson’s staff members and student workers have an inside glimpse into many of the University’s most interesting and unique collections, and now the same opportunity is becoming increasingly available to people all over the world.

“We’ve collected great materials, but we’ve done something with it and given it accessibility,” Weiss says of the SFC. Students have created online inventories for public use as well as scanned photographs and posters for online access.

The North Carolina Collection in Wilson Library also accommodates the North Carolina Digital Heritage Center—a program that makes historic material available online in collaboration with similarly focused establishments in the state, according to the center’s website.

“There is a growing demand for state and local history materials from historians, students and genealogists,” says program coordinator Nick Graham, “and we are excited to be able to help make more and more of North Carolina’s cultural heritage easily accessible online.”

“I’ve seen lots of cool stuff during my time as a Wilson employee,” says Traci Parnell, a graduate student in the speech-language pathology program. Parnell began working at Wilson during her sophomore year at UNC-CH and has worked in many different departments over the years. She now works in the Digital Production Center.

“We always have some really fascinating photos coming through,” she says.

Parnell is currently working on a project for the NCC digitizing historical photographs from counties across the state.

“It’s really cool to see how things looked decades, and in some cases, even a hundred years ago,” Parnell says of the collection.

Students who work at the center are given similar instruction to those working in the collections on how to handle rare materials, but they also have “lots of hands-on training with the specialized digitization equipment,” Graham says.

“When we hire, we are most interested in finding students who are excited about the work that we’re doing,” Graham says. “We work closely to ensure that our student assistants understand the importance of the materials that they are working on and the service philosophy that is at the heart of our program.”

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