

# **Conscious Editing of Archival Description at UNC-Chapel Hill**

by Jackie Dean

*The article is based on the author's presentation at the 2019 Society of American Archivists Research Forum.*

## **Abstract**

Archivists at UNC-Chapel Hill are engaged in "conscious editing" of archival description. We aspire to re-envision our descriptive practice so that whiteness is no longer the presumed default, language in description is inclusive and accessible, and description does not obscure collection material that documents the lives of enslaved people. This article describes early efforts to remediate legacy archival description, particularly reworking the text of the finding aid abstract for the Julian Shakespeare Carr Papers. A new descriptive practice of including racial identities for all people and families in archival description is also discussed.

Archivists at UNC-Chapel Hill are engaged in "conscious editing" of archival description. We aspire to re-envision our descriptive practice so that whiteness is no longer the presumed default, language in our description products is inclusive and accessible, and our description does not obscure collection material that documents the lives of enslaved people. This paper describes our early efforts to remediate and repair legacy archival description and to develop a new descriptive practice.

We have been influenced and inspired by the conversation happening around ethical archival description in the profession and have based our approach on the writings and presentations by Jarrett Drake, Gloria Gonzalez, Jasmine Jones, Michelle Caswell, Annie Tang, Dorothy Berry, Kelly Bolding, Rachel Winston, and Nathan Sentence.<sup>1</sup> Princeton University archivist Kelly Bolding's presentation at the Midwest Archives Conference (MAC) in 2018 titled "Reparative Processing: A Case Study in Auditing Legacy Archival Description for Racism" particularly influenced our efforts.<sup>2</sup>

Her clarity and thoroughness in this presentation gave us a road map for how to begin remediating description. Her presentation provided the encouragement to start where we are in this work. And we really needed to start.

UNC-Chapel Hill's Wilson Special Collections Library is renowned for documentation of the American South. The main manuscript collecting unit, the Southern Historical Collection, was founded in 1930. The founder, a white history professor, travelled around the South collecting letters, diaries, ledgers, and account books from white families to build the collection at UNC. The early work of the Southern Historical Collection, like that of most early state archives in the Southeast, glorified the experiences of white antebellum southerners and obscured or ignored the lives of enslaved people.

Much of the legacy finding aid description is written with a white supremacist point of view and this is manifested in patterns and trends that exist through the corpus of finding aid text. While sometimes acknowledging slavery, much of the language in the finding aids softens the role that white southerners played in the system of racial oppression. For example, the term "planter" is used extensively throughout the collection:

*Legacy description:*

Cameron family of Orange and Durham counties and Raleigh, N.C. Among antebellum North Carolina's largest **landholders and slave holders**, the Camerons also owned substantial **plantations** in Alabama and Mississippi. Prominent family members included Richard Bennehan (1743-1825), merchant; Duncan Cameron (1777-1853), lawyer, judge, banker, and legislator; and Paul C. Cameron (1808-1891), **planter, agricultural reformer**, and railroad builder. The bulk of the collection consists of correspondence, financial and legal documents, and account books. In addition, there are speeches, writings, printed material, pictures, and miscellaneous other types of personal papers. Included is extensive information about Richard Bennehan's store at Stagville, N.C., and the Stagville and Fairtosh

plantations, including crop and slave records. Family correspondence details the familial relationships and social behavior of a **wealthy planter family**, particularly the women.

The legacy description does not acknowledge the well-known white supremacy of manuscript collection creators. For example, the biographical note for the William Laurence Saunders Papers does not mention that he was chief organizer of the Ku Klux Klan in Chapel Hill, N.C.

*Legacy description:*

William Laurence Saunders (1835-1891) of North Carolina was a lawyer; colonel of the 46th North Carolina Regiment, Confederate States of America; editor of the *Colonial Records of North Carolina*; secretary-treasurer of the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina; and secretary of state of North Carolina, 1879-1891.

The archival description exhibits a presumed whiteness; it usually describes the racial identity only of non-white creators.

*Legacy description:*

Roberta H. Jackson (1920-1999), African American professor of education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was married to Blyden Jackson (1910-2000), African American professor of English and dean of the Graduate School at Southern University in Baton Rouge, La., and professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Fred Hobson is an English professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who specializes in Southern literary history.

In 2017, we began the work of identifying and seeking to disrupt these patterns and descriptive practices. We use the term “conscious editing” to describe our inclusive description efforts in reference to the *Conscious Style Guide*,<sup>3</sup> a website that collects style guides and articles cov-

ering terminology from marginalized communities. In the summer of 2019, the Wilson Special Collections Library charged a steering committee of staff from across the UNC Libraries to guide our remediation work.

When we began our conscious editing efforts, we piloted an approach that included an online form for library staff to suggest changes to archival description, a chat channel open to anyone interested in discussing these issues, and in-person case study discussions to talk through more complex description issues.

One in-person case study discussion focused on updating the description of the Julian Shakespeare Carr Papers. Carr was a white southerner active in business. A building on campus is named after him, as is Carrboro, the town immediately west of Chapel Hill. Carr was also a leader in 1890s white supremacist political campaigns in North Carolina and spent much of his later life working on Confederate memorialization. In his speech at the 1913 dedication of the Confederate monument on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus, he boasted about a violent attack he had made on an African American woman on campus. The Carr papers include a transcript of this speech.

For this case study, we specifically wanted to update the abstract section of the Carr finding aid. Finding aids for collections at UNC-Chapel Hill consistently contain an abstract that briefly describes the creator or creators of the materials and the scope and content of the materials themselves. The abstract appears in the finding aid as well as the catalog record for the collection in the library's catalog and WordCat. The legacy abstract for the Carr papers was originally created in 1988 and was updated in 2010 to highlight the existence of the dedication speech for the Confederate memorial on UNC-Chapel Hill's campus.

*Legacy description:*

Julian Shakespeare Carr (1845-1924) of Chapel Hill and Durham, N.C., was a manufacturer of tobacco products with interests in a wide range of other businesses, including banking and textiles. Carr was also active in the Methodist Church, the Democratic

Party, and several Confederate veterans' organizations, including the North Carolina branch of the United Confederate Veterans, which he served as commander. He was also a strong supporter of various institutions of higher education in the state. The collection includes letters, telegrams, printed announcements, programs, and pamphlets, business and legal documents, maps, and newspaper clippings pertaining to Carr's business and personal affairs. The letters chiefly concern banking, farming, and family matters, but also reflect Carr's interests in the Civil War and the United Confederate Veterans and in the Methodist Church. Also included are printed and manuscript addresses and Sunday School lessons given by Carr. Of special note is a series of speeches discussing the race problem in North Carolina and throughout the South. One address, 2 June 1913, given at the dedication of the monument later known as "Silent Sam" on the University of North Carolina campus. Business topics are also represented. Included are seven volumes of Carr's diary containing brief entries, 1907-1917, and letter books, 1919-1922. These volumes chiefly document Carr's personal life, particularly his travels and family associations. Also included are a wedding album, 1895, of Carr's daughter Eliza, and a family history, 1991, by Joseph Julian Carr. Photographs are chiefly of Julian S. Carr.

The legacy abstract was rewritten in 2018 based on the in-person case study discussion with UNC Libraries staff.

*2018 revision:*

The papers of white businessman and public figure Julian Shakespeare Carr (1845-1924) of Chapel Hill and Durham, N.C., document his financial interests in tobacco, textiles, and banking; affiliations with the Methodist Church, the Democratic Party in North Carolina, and organizations commemorating the Confederacy; and philanthropic support of institutions of higher education, particularly the University of North Carolina (UNC). Papers include letters, printed items, business records, legal docu-

ments, diaries, photographs, lessons for Sunday school, and addresses written and delivered by Carr. The rhetoric in many addresses reflects Carr's positions on what he and his contemporaries called "the race problem." In keeping with white supremacy movements in North Carolina at the turn of the twentieth century, Carr defended the institution of slavery, claiming it had been beneficial to the enslaved, and argued for denying full citizenship rights to African Americans. Included are Carr's 1899 speech supporting an amendment to the North Carolina constitution that disenfranchised African Americans and his address at the 1913 dedication of the Confederate monument later known as "Silent Sam" on the UNC campus.

In the revised version, the description contextualizes the phrase "the race problem" rather than assuming that researchers are familiar with that phrase.

*Legacy description:*

Of special note is a series of speeches discussing the race problem throughout North Carolina and the South.

*2018 revision:*

The rhetoric in many addresses reflects Carr's positions on what he and his contemporaries called "the race problem."

The revision also makes clear that Carr actively supported the Confederacy and that the monument known as "Silent Sam" on UNC-Chapel Hill's campus was a monument to the Confederacy.

*Legacy description:*

Carr was also active in the Methodist Church, the Democratic Party, and several Confederate veterans' organizations, including the North Carolina branch of the United Confederate Veterans, of which he served as commander.

*2018 revision:*

The papers ... document his financial interests in tobacco, textiles, and banking; affiliations with the Methodist Church, the Democratic Party in North Carolina, and organizations commemorating the Confederacy; and philanthropic support of institutions of higher education, particularly the University of North Carolina (UNC).

The 2018 revision directly addresses Carr's white supremacy.

*2018 revision:*

In keeping with white supremacy movements in North Carolina at the turn of the twentieth century, Carr defended the institution of slavery, claiming it had been beneficial to the enslaved, and argued for denying full citizenship rights to African Americans.

Finally, the 2018 revision identifies Carr's racial identity as white.

*Legacy description:*

Julian Shakespeare Carr (1845-1924) of Chapel Hill and Durham, N.C., was a manufacturer of tobacco products with interests in a wide range of other businesses, including banking and textiles.

*2018 revision:*

The papers of white businessman and public figure Julian Shakespeare Carr (1845-1924) of Chapel Hill and Durham, N.C., document his financial interests in tobacco, textiles, and banking; affiliations with the Methodist Church, the Democratic Party in North Carolina, and organizations commemorating the Confederacy; and philanthropic support of institutions of higher education, particularly the University of North Carolina (UNC).

In addition to working through case studies, we instituted a new descriptive practice that we intend to apply across all finding aids. As noted earlier, legacy finding aid description labels or marks underrepresented racial identities

for creators and subjects in Wilson Library's collections. This longstanding practice developed because researchers are keenly interested in materials created by or about identities that are underrepresented in Wilson Library Special Collections, such as African Americans or indigenous people. Legacy finding aid description does not include a label for creators or subjects who are or were white. This reflected the assumption that whiteness was our default for collection creators or subjects.

*Legacy description:*

Harry E. Groves (1921- ) is a Colorado-born African-American lawyer and professor of law, with special interests in constitutional law, particularly of newly formed nations.

The Jesse E. Oxendine Papers, 1860s-2015, consist of letters, scrapbooks, photographs, and other materials of Jesse E. Oxendine (1926-2017), a Lumbee Indian from Pembroke, N.C.

Papers of lawyer Neil G. McBride document his work with the Coal Employment Project, a non-profit focused on gender equality and discrimination issues in coal mines

The Nancy Dols Collection consists of video recordings created by ethnomusicologist and musician, Nancy Dols Neithammer

Starting in 2017, we began to experiment with labelling the racial identity of all people in archival description. We include these labels for creators in new finding aids and add them when we update existing finding aids.

*Legacy description:*

Thomas Francis Price was a farmer from Rutherford County, N.C., serving in the 56th North Carolina Volunteers. He was married to Sarah Harrill Price.

*2017 revision:*

Thomas Francis Price and Sarah Harrill Price were married white farmers from Rutherford County, N.C. Thomas Francis Price served in the 56th North Carolina Infantry.

We focused on race rather than any of the other aspects of identity such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or physical ability. This focus was not meant to diminish any of these aspects of identity; rather, it is a recognition that racial identity is especially significant for the collections and context at UNC-Chapel Hill. Our hope is that we can look to other repositories for guidance on these other aspects of identity.

*2017 revision:*

- Scattered materials documenting the Civil Rights movement in the American South, chiefly 1966-1969, collected by **Wayne Hurder, a white man of Raleigh, N.C.**, then a student at the University of North Carolina who worked as the Selma, Ala., bureau chief for a weekly newspaper in the summer of 1966 and was involved in providing support to the Civil Rights movement on campus when he returned to school.
- Farm journal, 1853-1866, kept by **George Wesley Johnson, a white merchant, postmaster, farmer, landowner, and enslaver in Davie County, N.C.**
- **White linguist Connie Clare Eble** joined the faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1971, retiring from the department in 2018.
- The Catherine Peck Collection contains oral histories and field recordings created by **white folklorist Catherine Peck.**
- Audio recordings, 1985-1986, of country music performed by **white singer and guitarist player Loy Gordon** in Graham, N.C. and at his home in Burlington, N.C.

- Scrapbook of **James Alexander Gray (1920-2003), a white college student**, documenting his time at the University of North Carolina, 1937-1941, including the visit of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Chapel Hill in 1938.
- The Eben T. Rawls Papers, 1917-2005, document the **arc of white businessman Rawls'** career from an office job with a sugar company in Preston, Cuba, in 1917-1918, to the founding of the Rawls-Dickson Candy Company in Winston-Salem, N.C., in 1926, and finally the success of his sales group, Eben Rawls Associates, Inc., in the 1960s.
- The Chris Stamey Collection consists primarily of audio recordings related to **Chris Stamey, a white musician and record producer**, who was a member of the American pop rock groups, the Sneakers and the dB's.
- The Charles Maurice Redfern Papers document a **white U.S. Navy lieutenant's** experiences while stationed in the South Pacific during World War II.

Ideally, going forward, we would privilege the creator's self-identification over any other evidence. Technical services archivists are working with curators to develop practices for soliciting identity information from donors. Here we are building on the "Life History Form" used by the Southern Oral History Program,<sup>4</sup> whose interviews and administrative files are housed in Wilson Special Collections Library, to solicit contextual information about interviewees.

Even with the example of the Southern Oral History Program, consistently including identity information in finding aids presents issues and complexity. Because of the nature of the collections at UNC-Chapel Hill, we are using "white" much more frequently than any other label. For legacy finding aids, we are often making educated guesses and end up with labels that are not very nuanced.

To promote transparency, we developed a processing note that we include in every finding where the collection creator is an individual or family:

Since August 2017, we have added racial and ethnic identities for individuals and families represented in collections. To determine identity, we rely on self-identification; other information supplied to the repository by collection creators or sources; public records, press accounts, and secondary sources; and contextual information in the collection materials. Omissions of identities in finding aids created or updated after August 2017 are an indication of insufficient information to make an educated guess or an individual's preference for ethnicity to be excluded from description. When we have misidentified, please let us know at [wilsonlibrary@unc.edu](mailto:wilsonlibrary@unc.edu).

While we have begun de-centering the white supremacist point of view and presumed whiteness in the finding aid description, we have significant work to do around confronting our failures of care around marginalized people in the archive. Reflecting on Bergis Jules 2017 keynote at the National Digital Stewardship Alliance meeting,<sup>5</sup> we are following his suggestion that archivists take an honest assessment of the collections in our home institutions to determine how they silence, erase, and distort the legacies of marginalized people. We believe the silencing, erasing, and distorting is happening in the finding aids for the 500-plus collections held in Wilson Library that contain sources of information about enslaved people.

We have an illustrative example with the finding aid for one of our most heavily used manuscript collections: The Cameron Family Papers. Before the Civil War, the Camerons enslaved approximately 1,000 people on extensive plantations in North Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi. Financial and legal documents and volumes found in the collection contain information about the people that the Camerons enslaved, including their names, ages, where they worked, and their illnesses.

Unsurprisingly, the arrangement of the collection as “family papers” and the finding aid description, which was composed in the late 1980s, is concerned primarily with the white family members. The lengthy biographical note provides an in-depth history of all the family members detailed to the extent that it mentions by name the Cameron daughter's favorite governess. The note talks about the family members as owning “land and slaves,” but contains no information about the people enslaved by the family.

The entirety of the collection is thoroughly described in the finding aid and because of this, the finding aid description does surface documentation of enslaved people.

**Fig. 1. Screenshot of a contents list which includes materials related to enslaved people**

Folder 3653	<b>Volume 115: 1830</b> Duncan Cameron. "Names of <b>slaves</b> the Property of D. Cameron in 1830." Separate lists of males and females organized by plantation with a few notations of deaths and sales. 10 pages.
Folder 3654	<b>Volume 116: 1834</b> Farm Memo. Contains various lists compiled by overseers and organized by plantation. Includes names, ages, and some occupations of male and female <b>slaves</b> ; number and variety of stock; agricultural implements plows, harrows, hoes, etc.; number of pairs of shoes made at each plantation; pork and cotton lists. Plantations mentioned include Brick House, Fairintosh, Leathers, Eno, Snow Hill, and Person County. 29 pages.
Folder 3655	<b>Volume 117: 1834-1838</b> Paul C. Cameron. Farm Memo. Contains variety of accounts including a list of equipment and supplies bought, March 1834-December 1834, and an 1835 <b>slave</b> list for Orange and Person counties. 64 pages.
Folder 3656	<b>Volume 118: January 1839-April 1839, 30 October 1839</b> Mildred Coles Cameron. Account book. Contains clothing expenses and a list of sewing and art supplies. List for October was recorded on eve of departure from Raleigh for trip South and shows clothing needed for journey. Also contains a diary entry which discusses religious "confirmation" the previous year and refers to deaths of three sisters, including Anne. 8 pages.
Folder 3657	<b>Volume 119: 1839</b> <b>Slave</b> list. Created as an account of clothing (shirts, coats, and pantaloons) distributed to <b>slaves</b> on various plantations. Separate lists of men, women, and children on each plantation. Includes Fairintosh, Snow Hill, Brick House, Eno, Bobbitts, and Person county. 6 pages.

However, the description of these materials, the lists of enslaved people, deeds, indentures and grants documenting the transfer of enslaved people, the bills of sale and appraisals, the daybooks reflecting purchases by enslaved people, are embedded in and obscured by the family papers framework and are only briefly mentioned in the finding aid's abstract.

*Legacy description:*

Cameron family of Orange and Durham counties and Raleigh, N.C. Among antebellum North Carolina's largest landholders and slave holders, the Camerons also owned substantial plantations in Alabama and Mississippi. Prominent family members included Richard Bennehan (1743-1825), merchant; Duncan Cameron (1777-1853), lawyer, judge, banker, and legislator; and Paul C. Cameron (1808-1891), planter, agricultural reformer, and railroad builder. The bulk of the collection consists of correspondence, financial and legal documents, and account books. In addition, there are speeches, writings, printed material, pictures, and miscellaneous other types of personal papers. Included is extensive information about Richard Bennehan's store at Stagville, N.C., and the Stagville and Fairtosh plantations, **including crop and slave records**. Family correspondence details the familial relationships and social behavior of a wealthy planter family, particularly the women. In addition to documentation about Duncan Cameron's legal career, there is also information about the State Bank of North Carolina and the banking industry, the education of the Cameron children at various schools, the development of the University of North Carolina, the state militia, the Episcopal Church, railroads, and state government.

We have begun the conversation at UNC-Chapel Hill about how to reposition, surface, and amplify the description of materials about enslaved people and have some initial ideas. We recognize that we will not develop an effective way forward without working together with colleagues inside and outside the profession and with the communities we hope to center in these descriptions. The approaches described here are not intended to be solutions; they are merely first steps toward what we hope will be description that is more accurate and more inclusive.

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## NOTES

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