
The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is one of the premier archival repositories for primary documents about the American South. Its founder, J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, a professor of history at the university, is remembered for his rambles across the South from the 1920s through 1940s, in search of historical documents. Too often, Hamilton’s work is thought of as a solitary effort. In reality, the creation of the collection could not have been accomplished without support. This paper considers Hamilton and the Southern Historical Collection from the perspectives of his own family history and education; the supportive environment found at UNC; and the interactions Hamilton had with donors, the press, historians, and archivists. All of these elements fostered the growth of the Southern Historical Collection and, when seen together, they provide a more complex view of the both the founder and the collection.

Headings:

Archives -- History
Regional archives
Universities & colleges -- Archives

by

Matisa H. Wiggs

A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

July 2012

Approved by

Matt Turi
Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................2
Chapter One: “Fired with Enthusiasm:” J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton’s Life in History......8
Chapter Two: The UNC Community’s Role in the Southern Historical Collection’s Growth ........................................................................................................................................19
Chapter Three: “No Matter how Negligible it May Appear:” the Processes and Challenges of Collecting........................................................................................................................................30
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................46
Bibliography ......................................................................................................................................48
Introduction

The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) is one of the premier archival repositories for primary documents about the American South. From its earliest official days in the 1920s, the collection was built on a unique vision: to create an archival collection reflecting the entire American South, rather than just one state. These founding years of the Southern Historical Collection are part of the mythology of UNC. In particular, the memory of its founder, J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, persists in the minds of archivists, historians, and other users of the collections. Hamilton, a professor of history at UNC from 1906 to 1948, is remembered as much for his own racially-charged writings about the people of the nineteenth-century American South as for his twentieth-century rambles around the region in his trusty Ford in search of old family letters, plantation records, diaries, and photographs documenting that bygone civilization. Hamilton’s work to create the Southern Historical Collection made him a worthy preservationist to some, but a thief to many others, who sometimes called him J. G. de “Ransack” Hamilton, for his habit of taking historical records from other states back to North Carolina.

The mythologizers, the admirers, and the critics all fail to remember the true intricacy behind the founding of the Southern Historical Collection. Though Hamilton was the greatest factor in its creation, his efforts would have been wasted without the inspiration, assistance, funding, and support underpinning them. Hamilton’s training as a historian and a teacher, the welcoming environment at UNC, including supportive faculty
and administrators, and his own gregarious personality were all necessary ingredients in the creation of the Southern Historical Collection. As fellow historian and later UNC chancellor J. Carlyle Sitterson asserted, “The founding of the Collection was the fortunate combination of man, idea, and times.”

This paper considers Hamilton and the founding of the Southern Historical Collection from three discreet perspectives that, when seen together, give a more distinctive picture of his life and work than has previously been presented. First, a brief biographical sketch of Hamilton, his family, and his training as a historian provide insight into why he was driven to collect and his vision of the American South. Second, a discussion of UNC and its long-term commitment to collecting historical documents, the development of its Department of History, and the growth of its library provide a foundation for understanding the place and time in which the collection was developed. Finally, the nature of the Southern Historical Collection itself is discussed through an examination of Hamilton’s collection process. Specifically explored here are how Hamilton made connections with potential donors; the extent of his travels; and the techniques he used to educate an often-skeptical population about the value of their family documents to historians. Along the way, Hamilton both upset and inspired fellow collectors at other universities and public repositories. These interactions, which were often viewed as competitions, were sometimes friendly and sometimes not. In all cases, they influenced the scope and nature of the collection over time and are analyzed here.

Hamilton and his work with the Southern Historical Collection are not entirely unique subject matter. Both historians and archivists have reviewed his personality and

---

the nature of the collection multiple times over the past eighty years. However, previous
studies tend to focus on a single aspect of the man or the collection, without considering
the context for either. For instance, at each quarter century since the Southern Historical
Collection’s official founding in 1930, the collection and Hamilton have been feted with
speeches. The first two anniversary celebrations were filled with anecdotes and fond
remembrances, and few criticisms. The seventy-fifth anniversary celebration in 2005 was
more censorious of Hamilton and often highlighted his collection biases, which favored
the elite of old southern society.2

Multiple masters’ papers have also used the Southern Historical Collection and
Hamilton as lenses for exploring aspects of archival history. Two specifically focus on
Hamilton. The earliest, by Gay Garrigan Moore, was written in 1958, and the author had
the advantage of interviewing Hamilton and early employees of the Southern Historical
Collection.3 The paper is largely a polite work providing a fairly straightforward
narrative about the financial and spatial difficulties faced by the collection and its keepers
in early years. The interviews included in Moore’s work offer valuable insights into the
early workings and dynamics of the collection. A more recent paper, by Stephanie
Adams, is more abstract, and considers Hamilton’s collecting quest against the
philosophical paradigm of “archives fever.”4 Other papers have examined particular

---
2 See, *Bookmark* (1961); *Bookmark* (1980). As of the fall of 2011, speeches given at the seventy-
5 fifth anniversary celebration, the Southern Sources Symposium, were available through the Carolina
3 Digital Repository <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/>. They have since been removed.
5 the University of North Carolina, from the Beginning of the Collection through 1948.” MA thesis,
6 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1958.
7 Stephanie Adams. “The accidental archivist: J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton and the Creation of the
8 Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill.” MA paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
9 2000.
aspects of the Southern Historical Collection, such as changes in archival description practice.\textsuperscript{5}

A number of works have broadly examined the development of UNC, its libraries, and its history curriculum during the first half of the twentieth century. The eminent librarian Louis Round Wilson wrote a history of UNC’s growth between 1900 and 1930 in which the development of the library and archives receives particular attention. Wilson’s successor, Charles Rush, edited a compendium of UNC’s various library resources in 1945, which gives a snapshot view of the Southern Historical Collection in its early decades. Multiple works consider individuals—historians, administrators, and librarians—important to UNC and the early years of the Southern Historical Collection. Rarely is the collection itself a part of their individual biographical sketches. These absences mark the further importance of this current work.\textsuperscript{6}

For firsthand knowledge of the Southern Historical Collection during its early decades, historian Carl Pegg’s unpublished history of the UNC Department of History to 1950 provides valuable decade-by-decade insight into personalities shaping that department.\textsuperscript{7} Finally, of course, the Southern Historical Collection and associated archival collections at UNC hold many of the keys to their own histories, with the collected papers of Hamilton, the Department of History, and the Manuscript Department

\textsuperscript{7} Carl H. Pegg. \textit{History and Historians in the University of North Carolina, 1795 to 1950.} (Chapel Hill?: n.p., 1990.) [Unpublished manuscript held by the North Carolina Collection.]
each housing accounts of the collection’s early years. In particular, this work has the advantage of being among the first to analyze Hamilton’s diaries, which were under seal from the time of his death in 1961 until November 2011.

This paper differs from those works that have come before in three significant ways. First, it shows the development of the Southern Historical Collection from a broad perspective. Hamilton was the central driving force, but he did not create the collection without support or outside inspiration. This paper considers Hamilton’s upbringing and training as a historian as well as the UNC community and its contributions to the founding of the Southern Historical Collection.

Second, access to Hamilton’s diaries has cast more light on his collecting process than previously available. The diaries reveal Hamilton’s personal thoughts as he traveled through the South on collecting trips. From these diaries, we can learn how Hamilton plotted his trips as well as how he encountered and interacted with potential donors.

Third, this paper is less concerned with what ultimately ended up in the Southern Historical Collection in favor of how the collection was formed. There is no doubt that Hamilton’s techniques resulted in a heavily biased collection. In the mythology that has built up around Hamilton in the half century since his death, these obvious biases have clouded scholars’ perspectives on the complex circumstances and the shear effort needed to create the collection. Context does not diminish the inequalities of Hamilton’s work but it does provide a more holistic picture of how the Southern Historical Collection became what we know today. The goal here is neither to demonize nor to sanctify Hamilton’s efforts but to understand how he used the influences around him to envision and ultimately create an invaluable archival resource.
This paper is divided into three main chapters, each exploring an aspect of the Hamilton/Southern Historical Collection story. Chapter One gives a biographical sketch of Hamilton, his life and education, showing how these elements laid the foundation for his life’s work. Chapter Two concentrates on UNC before and during Hamilton’s tenure. Historically, UNC was invested in the idea of collecting documents. Hamilton and his generation of historians, librarians, and administrators pushed the university to allocate more resources in that direction. They also created a publicity campaign to support the burgeoning collection. Chapter Three discusses Hamilton’s “ransacking” techniques— that is, how he collected documents in the field. It is in this chapter that the new dimension of detail available through Hamilton’s diaries becomes most clear. In addition to fieldwork, Hamilton used speeches, articles, and correspondence to convince southerners that the region’s history could only be told through the use of primary documents. The issues of criticism and competition within the larger archival community are also explored in this chapter. The regional scope of the Southern Historical Collection was heavily questioned and often resented in the early years. Hamilton had to find ways to overcome these issues, and convince his archival peers that the Southern Historical Collection was not really built on the ransacking of the South, but on the best intentions of a visionary historian and university.
CHAPTER ONE

“Fired with Enthusiasm”: J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton’s Life in History

J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton’s own family history and educational training impacted how he thought about the history of the American South and influenced how he created the Southern Historical Collection. This chapter discusses Hamilton’s elite southern family, the impact of his education and his role in the Dunning School, his career at UNC, and some elements about his personality. Hamilton’s family, education, and career shaped his beliefs about the South and the value he found in documenting the region and its people. These connections also influenced the scope of what would become the Southern Historical Collection. To understand Hamilton’s biography is to see how the collection began to take shape.

Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton was born in Hillsborough, North Carolina, on August 6, 1878, to Daniel Heyward Hamilton, Jr., a Confederate veteran, and Frances Gray Roulhac Hamilton. He was known as Roulhac throughout his life, always abbreviating the first two names, which he considered “just a damn nuisance,” to initials. The Hamiltons, Grays, and Roulhacs were prominent North and South Carolina families, with extensive branches throughout the South. Hamilton could claim descent from two signers of the Declaration of Independence and North Carolina Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin. He was a grandson of Joseph Blount Gregoire Roulhac, a prominent Raleigh merchant, and a great-grandson of James Hamilton, Jr., South

---

10 Moore, 13.
Carolina’s nullification governor. In Schooled at home by his mother, it is easy to suppose that stories relating to Hamilton’s family’s place in the American narrative would have populated his earliest history training. In his later years, Hamilton collected papers documenting his family, with plans to write a genealogical history and a biography of his great-grandfather. Neither work came to fruition but even the plans speak to Hamilton’s interest in history as something that could be gleaned from the personal. In a 1940 letter to members of the Daughters of the Confederacy, Hamilton emphasized this point: “Remember that family letters throw light upon history that comes from no other source.”

Hamilton studied for his undergraduate and masters degrees at Sewanee, then known as the University of the South. Attending this private Episcopal college not only gave Hamilton access to an elite educational experience but it also put him in Tennessee near many members of the extended Roulhac family. At 22, Hamilton went to Columbia University to work on his PhD under William A. Dunning, one of the most renowned historians and political scientists of the day. Dunning’s own training and historical writing style profoundly influenced Hamilton’s entire career.

---

11 Moore, 13. Robert Tinkler. *James Hamilton of South Carolina*. Baton Rouge: (Louisiana State University Press, 2004). For general context about these families, see also, Ruffin, Roulhac, and Hamilton Family Papers, 1784-1951, # 643, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

12 Sitterson, 49; Boone.

13 Tinkler, 268-269. *James Hamilton Papers, 1781-1944*, #1489, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

14 From J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton to Members of the Daughters of the Confederacy, 8 March 1940, Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1939-1940,” in the Records of the Manuscripts Department, 1926-2006, #40052, University Archives, Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Collection hereinafter cited as, Manuscripts Department.)
William Archibald Dunning (1857-1922) was a native of New Jersey, but his Civil War-era childhood left him with a sympathetic view of the American South. He studied at Columbia University and then Berlin, Germany, where he learned the newly popular scientific method of historical discovery and writing. This methodology would become the cornerstone of his teaching and influence. Upon completing his studies in Germany, Dunning accepted a professorship at Columbia, where he remained his entire career.

Practitioners of the German Historical School of writing advocated for a scientific method, which emphasized an orderly research technique to achieve answers, rather than the fulfillment of presupposed theses. Both Dunning and Herbert Baxter Adams at Johns Hopkins University were advocates for this method of study. Between them, they influenced several generations of American historians and political scientists coming of age around the turn of the twentieth century. Dunning’s students were unified by their methodologies and often their subjects, frequently studies of the Civil War and Reconstruction South, to the point that their work is referred to collectively as the Dunning School.

Hamilton’s work is typical of a Dunning School student in several ways. Besides using the scientific method, many of Dunning’s students wrote state-based studies to complement his own broad studies on the Civil War and Reconstruction. As Hamilton wrote of his teacher, “[N]o one did more than he to rewrite the history of the generation

---

16 For a more detailed analysis of the German or scientific method, as well as Dunning’s influence over its transmittal among American historians, see: Peter Novick. That Noble Dream: the “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
following the Civil War, his own brilliant studies being supplemented and enlarged by
the work of those of his students who followed him into his chosen field.” Hamilton’s
dissertation was “Reconstruction in North Carolina,” later published under that same title,
and many of his later works also centered on this topic. Though Hamilton’s career was
built on the idea that a regional archival collection would lead to comprehensive studies
of the South, his own writing career upheld Dunning School tradition: nearly all his
published works were about North Carolina.

Hamilton’s work further typified the Dunning School because of its biased view
in favor of the American South. Dunning’s soft view of the white southern population,
emphasizing wrongs suffered by the pre-Civil War planter class at the hands of
northerners during Reconstruction, influenced his students’ evidence and presentations.
Twisting the philosophy of the scientific method, Dunning School students wrote studies
that “were broader and deeper” than those of Herbert Baxter Adams’ students, but
without the necessary “objectivity.” Dunning’s students suffered from what Jacquelyn
Dowd Hall calls “The sin of certitude. They were convinced that they—and they alone—
were impartial observers who had simply found their facts in the archives.” In reading
the primary documents they uncovered, Dunning and his students often failed to see
beyond their own perspectives on the nature of truth contained within those documents.
Further, in selecting what to preserve, these historians-turned-archivists often failed to

17 J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, Introduction to Truth in History and Other Essays, by William A.
18 J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, Reconstruction in North Carolina. (New York: Columbia
University Press, 1914).
19 Stephenson, 6.
20 Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. “The ‘Ceaseless Quest for the Truth:’ the Southern Historical Collection
and the Making and Remaking of the Southern Past” (paper presented at Southern Sources: a Symposium
Celebrating Seventy-Five Years of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill, 18-19 March 2005), 4.
save those documents that did not come from people of their own race and class, thus blighting any chance for a well-rounded perspective.

Because of its inherent partiality, the Dunning School’s reputation has not stood the test of time. Though the scientific method is still the cornerstone of modern historical writings, Dunning’s own racially charged opinions, which frequently found their ways into his works and apparently his lectures, have diminished the value of his own scholarship. Similarly, the works of many of his students, Hamilton included, have also lost favor because of similar attitudes about race and the Lost Cause. Hamilton’s *Reconstruction in North Carolina* is a thoroughly documented study; however, his interpretation of the issues and his overly sympathetic view of southern white people have diminished the lasting influence of his work. Still, because of their strong methodology, many of the works from the Dunning School are considered starting points for modern historiographies of the South.

Dunning’s emphasis on the value of primary sources surely planted thoughts in Hamilton’s mind of the need for a public collection of such documents. In writing history, Dunning emphasized the value of original documents, averring, “‘Nothing so delights me as getting right at the making of history through the papers of its makers.’”21 In this final important point, Hamilton further exemplified the Dunning School. Several other Dunning students also went on to establish important archival collections. For example, Ulrich B. Phillips was also inspired to examine and collect historical documents for the sake of the greater good rather than his own research needs. Phillips completed a vast survey of documents held throughout Georgia’s courthouse and county records.

---

offices. Disgusted with the disarray he found, Phillips campaigned for an organized collection model to be implemented throughout the state. Phillips and Hamilton were on friendly terms and Phillips encouraged Hamilton’s collecting ambitions. In addition, Dunning trained William Kenneth Boyd, first archivist at Duke University and Hamilton’s closest collecting rival. The South was awash with newly born archival collections in the first four decades of the twentieth century and Dunning School students were often their founders.

Dunning himself influenced how Hamilton taught history. Hamilton considered Dunning “great as a scholar and writer,” but “far greater as a teacher.” By taking teaching to a popular audience, Dunning found a way to make history valuable to an audience larger than just the young men in his classrooms. Wendell Holmes Stephenson, himself a southern historian, believed “Dunning’s books and articles and reviews, his correspondence with colleagues and students, his conversations with acquaintances—all involved the art of teaching.” During his own career, Hamilton would also find ways to excite both students in the classroom and the larger public about the value of history. Generating such enthusiasm would be a vital element of his collecting efforts.

After his time as a student, Hamilton remained in contact with Dunning, writing to him frequently and seeking his advice, particularly when job offers came up. Dunning even came to Chapel Hill on several occasions to discuss career matters with Hamilton.

---

26 Pegg, 46.
Hamilton also contributed essays and speeches in honor of his mentor and edited a volume of Dunning’s collected essays. In the volume, published after Dunning’s death, Hamilton’s heaping praise of his mentor speaks to a lasting influence: “His was a new field for scholarly investigation; it, as well as he, attracted many who, raw and untrained in research and presentation, possessed a pioneer spirit and under his inspiration became fired with enthusiasm.”

Having achieved his degree at Columbia, Hamilton came to UNC in 1906 and assumed the role of Alumni Professor of History in the newly created Department of History. A second faculty member, Henry McGilbert Wagstaff, whose tenure at UNC would nearly parallel Hamilton’s, joined the department in 1907. Hamilton was de facto head and then official head of the department, which soon became the Department of History and Government. Hamilton was the southern historian on staff during the early decades of his career, though he would teach widely across the modern historical curriculum as needed. By the 1910s, when the department was big enough, he began supervising the graduate work of students studying the American South. Some of his well-known students included Fletcher M. Green, later professor of history at UNC, and James W. Patton, later second director of the Southern Historical Collection. By 1930,

---

28 In 1931, the program in government broke away from history to become an independent school. At that time, the history curriculum resumed its former name, the Department of History. For the sake of clarity, this shorter name is used throughout this paper.
the Southern Historical Collection had enough funding to allow him to devote his attention to it nearly full time.\textsuperscript{30}

During his tenure at UNC, Hamilton had the opportunity to teach and interact with other historians at institutions and universities throughout the United States and Europe. These temporary assignments gave him the chance to improve his communications with students and fellow historians, see other archives in action, and to make connections with potential donors to and advocates of the Southern Historical Collection. In early 1918, he and his fellow historians R. D. W. Connor and W. W. Pierson taught at Camp Greene outside of Charlotte.\textsuperscript{31} After World War I, Hamilton went to France to teach history to recent American veterans. Later, he held summer classes in Michigan and California and attended conferences, round-table discussions, and professional meetings across the country. A trip to Florida proved especially fortuitous, as it was there that he met Charles W. Dabney, a former professor of chemistry from North Carolina State University “who was now working on a history of Education in the South” and himself in search of primary documents on that subject.\textsuperscript{32} Hamilton and Dabney would be allies in the quest to collect historical documents from their meeting in 1928 until Dabney’s death in 1945.\textsuperscript{33}

As a professor, Hamilton instilled in his students the need for better resources with which to study the South. Carl Pegg, a student at UNC who later became head of the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{30} “Memorandum Defining the Relation of J. G. deR. Hamilton to the Library of the University of North Carolina and to the Department of History and Government in regard to the Southern Collection,” 5 April 1930, Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1928-1936,” Manuscripts Department.
\textsuperscript{31} Pegg, 38-39.
\textsuperscript{32} Pegg, 88.
\textsuperscript{33} Dabney donated many of the papers he collected to the Southern Historical Collection. See, Charles William Dabney Papers, 1715-1945 #1412, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
\end{flushright}
Department of History, recalled a course he took with Hamilton in 1924 in which, “he made it clear even to undergraduates that he felt that the southern region had suffered culturally and politically because its records had not been preserved nearly as well as those of the North, and that this was in great part the reason why Northerners had written most of the history books and why the South had not been give full credit for what it had done in the building of the nation.”

He repeated the message outside the classroom as well as through newspaper articles and lectures.

Hamilton’s teaching style was apparently much like his personality—outgoing and enthusiastic. A student from one of his summer courses, taught in Chicago, wrote to thank him for an insightful course: “It was a real privilege to benefit at first hand from your ability to make flesh and blood of history.”

Equally, though, Hamilton’s lectures were filled with personal bias that did not sit well with all his students. C. Vann Woodward, later a preeminent historian of the South, was put off by Hamilton’s disparaging opinions about the worth and abilities of African Americans, which he freely shared in classes.

Throughout his career, Hamilton continued to publish articles, both popular and scholarly, books, and edited volumes. A complete list of his published works would stretch to well over one hundred entries. Among his most important works are included his dissertation-turned-book, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* and the edited papers of

34 Pegg, 73.
35 From Franklin L. Burdette to J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, 30 September 1936, Folder 375, in the Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton Papers, #1743, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (Collection hereinafter cited as, Hamilton Papers.)
Randolph Abbott Shotwell, Thomas Ruffin (a Hamilton relative), and Benjamin Sherwood Hedrick, respectively. With his good friend R. D. W. Connor and his chief collecting rival William Kenneth Boyd, Hamilton co-wrote several North Carolina history textbooks. At all times, his writings were built on the primary resources he was rapidly accumulating at UNC. Many writings were about history of archives in the South, in which Hamilton rarely missed an opportunity to scold southerners for their long neglect of their own historical documents. Hamilton also wrote a brief biography of Henry Ford and later contributed articles to Ford’s infamous newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*. Hamilton long held out hope that the automaker would provide funding for the Southern Historical Collection. Though Henry Ford never contributed directly to the cause, it is worth noting that throughout his collecting career, Hamilton always drove a Ford car around the South.

A respected historian throughout his career, Hamilton often sat on the boards of professional organizations. He was president of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association (1920) and somewhat reluctantly, because it interfered with his collecting time, also held the post of president of the Southern Historical Association (1943). After his retirement from the UNC faculty, he stood as president of the Historical Society of North Carolina (1954).

Hamilton was married to Mary Cornelia Thompson, with whom he had two sons, Roulhac, Jr., a newspaper writer, and Alfred, a doctor. His wife was also interested in history and together they coauthored *The Life of Robert E. Lee for Boys and Girls*. She frequently joined him on his collecting trips. They lived at 517 North Street, within walking distance of UNC’s campus, as was common among faculty during Chapel Hill’s
days as a small village. He was jovial and quick to joke or tell outlandish stories, often about his travels around the South. Writing about his time as a student in the 1920s, Carl Pegg remembered, “I saw much of Hamilton in Saunders hall during these years, and he was always moving fast or talking fast, and sometimes doing both at the same time.”

Despite disagreeing with Hamilton’s opinions on race, C. Vann Woodward called him “a man of great charm and geniality.”

Hamilton remained at UNC until 1948, at which time the directorship of the Southern Historical Collection was handed over to his former student James W. Patton. In his retirement, Hamilton continued to communicate with potential donors, give lectures, and participate in historical societies. He died November 11, 1961, and was buried beside his wife, who had predeceased him by two years, in the Old Chapel Hill Town cemetery, on the campus of UNC. Today, the Southern Historical Collection and Hamilton Hall, the Department of History’s modern home, stand as memorials to his life and work.

---

37 Pegg, 80 fn. 4
38 Roper, 18.
CHAPTER TWO

The UNC Community’s Role in the Southern Historical Collection’s Growth

This chapter explores historical efforts at UNC to collect documents, the powerful personalities who supported Roulhac Hamilton’s efforts to create the Southern Historical Collection, and how they participated in the earliest collection efforts. The university’s nineteenth-century attempts to amass historical documents provided Hamilton with precedent for his efforts and his cohort of historians, librarians, and administrators provided the succor necessary for the collection to grow. UNC and the community that developed there in the early twentieth century were the perfect combination of ideas, funding, and enthusiasm. By supporting the Southern Historical Collection, they signaled a shift in how a modern university would interact across its own departments and with the larger citizenry of the state and region.

As early as 1833, Governor David L. Swain sought to create a manuscript collection documenting Colonial- and Federal- era North Carolina. He became president of UNC two years later and in 1844 he formally organized the North Carolina Historical Society. The Society’s members actively collected historical documents pertaining to North Carolina, especially its Colonial period. Civil war and poverty, followed by Swain’s death in 1868 and the subsequent closure of the university from 1871 to 1875
effectively ended the Society. Further, many of the Society’s papers were mixed into Swain’s estate and it took the university trustees some time to win them back.\textsuperscript{39}

Kemp Plummer Battle was the next important voice for the historical record at UNC. A lawyer, semi-trained historian, and lifelong advocate of the university, Battle became a trustee to the recovering post-war university in 1874. Two years later, he was named president of UNC, a post that he maintained until 1891, when, at the age of 70, he resigned to become the first Alumni Professor of History. During his presidency, Battle revitalized the post-war campus, advocating for structural improvements, helping to increase the student body beyond even pre-war levels, and modernizing the curriculum.

Battle was interested in the history of North Carolina, especially relating to the university. He wrote the \textit{History of the University of North Carolina}, which is still considered a definitive account of the university’s first hundred-plus years.\textsuperscript{40} This two-volume work was built on Battle’s ability to extract first-person remembrances from Chapel Hill old-timers (like himself) and through careful examination of surviving documentation about the university, including documents from the North Carolina Historical Society. Battle sought to write and teach history by using “the modern methods of instruction in the use of original sources to produce monographs of great men, institutions, and the progress of national questions,” making him an untrained follower of


\textsuperscript{40} Kemp P. Battle. \textit{History of the University of North Carolina}, Vols. 1 and 2. (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1907.)
the German methodology. In the pre-Civil War era he supported President Swain’s document collecting efforts and was a member of the short-lived North Carolina Historical Society. It seems unsurprising that, when he helped to create a freestanding Department of History he would advocate for the hiring of a young, locally born North Carolina history scholar trained in the German method, Roulhac Hamilton.

Francis P. Venable became UNC’s president in 1906. A Virginia-born, German-trained chemist, Venable “championed ... good teaching” and made a number of important hires during his fourteen years as UNC’s president, including hiring Hamilton and other early members of the history faculty. Venable was an advocate of expanded research facilities across the university, including in the humanities. During his tenure, in 1907, a new library was constructed, with matching funds from the Carnegie Institute. This library included a vault for storing historical documents. In an open letter to “Alumni and Friends of the University” in 1909, President Venable signed to support the library’s and Department of History’s efforts to “build up here and place at the service of investigators a great collection of material relating to North Carolina.” His early support, decades before the Southern Historical Collection was realized, signaled the larger university’s willingness to back campus-based research facilities. This support was vital to, not only the growth of archival holdings at UNC, but to the university as a whole.

---


42 Snider, 142.

Edward Kidder Graham followed Venable in the president’s seat, serving from 1914 to 1918. Like Venable, he held faculty projects in high regard, a point that he emphasized in his welcoming address to students, stating, it is “the necessity for each person in the faculty to produce work of distinctive quality in some legitimate field of university endeavor.”

Graham showed his support for Hamilton’s work in June 1918 at a special meeting of the UNC Executive Committee of the Broad of Trustees, when he voted in favor of purchasing the Stephen B. Weeks Collection of Caroliniana.

Graham’s short presidency ended when he died from Spanish Influenza in late 1918.

Harry W. Chase’s presidency followed Graham’s and during the 1920s he was particularly important to the development of the Department of History, including Hamilton’s documentary efforts, and to the development of the library. Chase lobbied the state General Assembly for funds to build a new large, fireproof library. He lent his name and support to nearly every document relating to the early days of the Southern Historical Collection, even authoring a few publicity statements himself. Finally, once the collection was sufficiently funded, Chase gave Hamilton release from his teaching duties in the Department of History and created the position of Director of the Southern Historical Collection for him to fill.

Chase believed UNC should serve the South, providing resources to extend the intellectual potential of the whole state, beyond the student body. Therefore, for him, the

---

44 Edward Kidder Graham quoted in Coates, 8.
46 Coates, 37-38.
47 “Memorandum Defining …,” 5 April 1930, Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1928-1936,” Manuscripts Department.
Southern Historical Collection was more than just a library undertaking but in his own words, “one of the major projects of the University.” Chase encouraged Hamilton to “go to any meeting or any combination of meetings that looks profitable for the southern collection,” during Hamilton’s summer teaching stint in Michigan in 1928.

Finally, Frank Porter Graham, a cousin of the late President Edward Kidder Graham, was a longtime advocate of Hamilton, having studied with him as a student. Hamilton helped the young Graham get into Columbia where he earned his PhD, as another Dunning student. When Graham became president of the university in 1930, the Southern Historical Collection was an increasing reality and already an integral part of UNC’s environment. During his presidency, he continued President Chase’s advocacy for the collection and the expanding library system.

Two further leaders (now called chancellors) would follow Graham during Hamilton’s tenure at UNC and they both continued to recognize the value that the expanding collection brought the university. The Southern Historical Collection could easily have remained a small side project of one outgoing professor in the Department of History. But the support of a succession of university presidents provided the necessary funding, schedule adjustments, and understanding of the necessity of research in the humanities to make the collection possible.

---

49 Harry W. Chase to J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, 26 July 1928, Folder 372 Hamilton Papers.
Within the Department of History and its associated programs, Hamilton found numerous colleagues willing to assist his growing dreams. His first associate, Harry Wagstaff, helped Hamilton anchor the department into the World War I era. Wagstaff supported Hamilton throughout this time by writing letters in support of the burgeoning collection. Howard Odum, who would guide the creation of one of UNC’s best-known education elements, the Institute for Research in Social Science, was another Hamilton advocate. In the 1920s, Odum’s Institute shared grant funds with Hamilton, allowing him and another history faculty member, K. C. Frazer, to make some of the first collection trips outside of North Carolina.  

Perhaps Hamilton’s greatest supporter was R. D. W. Connor, a fellow North Carolinian and advocate of history based on primary documents. Connor’s importance to the Southern Historical Collection in its infancy was nearly as great as Hamilton’s. Had Connor not left North Carolina to become the first Archivist of the United States in October 1934, his name might have become just as associated with the Southern Historical Collection as Hamilton’s. Hamilton and Connor were born about a month and eighty-five miles apart. Connor attended UNC, and then taught in the state’s public schools for several years before helping to create the State Historical Commission, an intellectual descendent of President Swain’s Historical Society. In his role as secretary to the Commission from 1907 to 1921, Connor actively collected historical papers from around North Carolina, making him well informed about both the need to collect and how to do it. In the 1910s and 1920s, he used his connections within the archival community to promote the young Southern Historical Collection. By the time he retired as national

---

51 Moore, 20.
archivist and came back to UNC in 1941, the Southern Historical Collection was well underway.\textsuperscript{52}

The collection was further supported by sympathetic librarians, especially Louis Round Wilson, who not only revolutionized the library system at UNC but also saw the value of primary document collections, and their need for space with the library’s walls. Wilson served as University Librarian from 1901 to 1932. His efforts to modernize and standardize the university’s library would find conjunction with Hamilton’s efforts to create his great Southern Collection. These two aspects together would change the nature of UNC’s academic resources. Wilson concurrently helped develop the North Carolina Collection, which also had its roots in the failed North Carolina Historical Society. In 1917, librarian Mary Lindsay Thornton was hired to run this collection, a position she held for forty-one years. There is no indication that Thornton and Hamilton had a working relationship of any sort. Still, the development and stability of the North Carolina Collection gave Hamilton another talking point when convincing donors that UNC was a good place to deposit family papers.\textsuperscript{53}

By the end of World War I, the elements of strong leadership and willing resources were largely in place for the growth the Southern Historical Collection. Funding was to remain an issue until 1929 when Sarah Graham Kenan gave $25,000 to the collection. The Kenan family’s interest in UNC’s archives dated back to around 1907 when the Kenan Fund for Southern History became part of the library’s endowment.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{53} For details about Thornton’s time as curator of the North Carolina Collection, see Alexander.

\textsuperscript{54} Moltke-Hansen, 14.
Even before securing funding, Hamilton and his fellow historians, in accord with Wilson, were beginning to envision how the collection would ultimately look. A first, major goal was finding out if creating such a collection was even feasible. Hamilton began by outreaching to potential donors through correspondence. He also scoured the newspapers for notices of estate sales and made contact with agents who might inform him when valuable documents or printed primaries went on sale.\textsuperscript{55}

In 1908, Hamilton began making short excursions into the field to collect manuscripts; these efforts were largely an extension of Kemp Battle’s collecting habits, left over from writing his history of UNC.\textsuperscript{56} At the same time, Hamilton began making notes regarding both his collection trips and the whereabouts of potentially interesting manuscripts. These notes were tucked away on index cards, which would sport an individual’s or family’s name, sometimes their town, and the dates of Hamilton’s visits. He would reference these cards throughout his collecting career.

The first official collecting trip came in summer of 1927, when the Institute for Research in Social Science proved funding from a Rockefeller grant it had received. With this funding, Hamilton traveled through North Carolina making good on some of his earlier correspondence, and “he brought back a considerable amount of material and was able to locate between one hundred and fifty and two hundred places where papers existed.”\textsuperscript{57} He sent Kenner C. Frazer—a UNC professor of government and political science—to explore his home state of Alabama for relevant documents. These two trips

\textsuperscript{55} Hamilton kept many of these ephemeral clippings and notices in a series of scrapbooks, which are now part of the Hamilton Papers.

\textsuperscript{56} Untitled history (J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton?), 25 November 1936, Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1928-1936,” Manuscripts Department.

\textsuperscript{57} Moore, 20.
proved that documents were still out in private hands and that people were willing to turn them over to UNC. Frazer’s trip in particular showed that such collecting was possible outside of North Carolina. Thanks to another donation in mid-1928, this time from Andrew Milton Kistler of Morganton, Hamilton himself took a trip to explore North Carolina and neighboring states to follow up with other correspondents, add more to the collection, and to spread the word about the Southern Historical Collection.58

Now that the collection was beginning to take shape adequate facilities were needed to store the documents. Not only was the little vault in the Carnegie Library full, the building was not fireproof. As the safety of documents was increasingly part of Hamilton’s guarantee to donor families, a building that was neither big enough to accommodate the documents nor safe from a careless accident would not do. Wilson agreed, largely because the student population had blossomed around the World War I period, leaving the 1907 Carnegie Library far too small to house all the books and without space to seat all the people who wanted to read them. Further, Wilson was condensing all the disparate libraries across the campus, of which there were dozens.59 By 1921, the Department of History and its associated programs had moved into Saunders Hall where they had a small library of their own, but again this was no place for primary documents to be stored.60 The solution needed to be a new main library for the campus. Through the combined power of these two forceful men and with the blessing and aid of President Harry W. Chase, UNC gained funding for a new library from the

58 Moore, 20-22.
59 Wilson, The University of North Carolina, Chapter 34.
60 Pegg, 63.
state legislature. The University Library, later renamed in honor of Wilson, opened in 1929 with plenty of room for books, archives, and students.

With a new, fireproof library in place, Hamilton and his fellows in the Department of History and the librarians were ready to announce the Southern Historical Collection to the country. Publicity was intended to spark interest in the collection so that potential new donors might come forward. The official announcement also became a sort of calling card for Hamilton once he began to travel in earnest. At a meeting of UNC alumni in Baltimore in December 1927, Hamilton made a speech detailing the UNC’s intent in creating the collection. Text of the speech was printed in the Baltimore Sun and later as a small pamphlet, which Hamilton and his colleagues distributed liberally throughout the next two and half decades.\textsuperscript{61} The other members of the Department of History began to reach out to their home states, to fellow historians, and to archivists and historical societies. They helped advertise the collection and answered questions or concerns via returned correspondence. Hamilton never really stopped advertising the collection, frequently seeking out publicity in newspapers over the next two decades.

The Southern Historical Collection may have been largely the vision of one man, but Roulhac Hamilton could not have achieved his goals without the support of his home institution or the support of his fellow historians. UNC was, as an institution, historically willing to collect primary documents, but not until Hamilton and his cohort of historians, librarians, and administrators came to campus was a concerted effort made to actively pursue the building of such a collection. This lucky combination of personalities, topped

\textsuperscript{61} J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton. \textit{A National Southern Collection at the University of North Carolina}. (Baltimore: n.p., 1928.)
with timely funding created a working environment in which the Southern Historical Collection was able to grow.
CHAPTER THREE

“No matter how negligible it may appear:” The Processes and Challenges of Collecting

Gathering the documents that became the Southern Historical Collection took decades. Roulhac Hamilton did this work for the remainder of his professional career and even beyond his official retirement. Colleagues at UNC helped promote the collection and offered Hamilton letters of introduction to potential donors but it was Hamilton himself who put in the most work hours. The collection process took multiple forms, from letter writing to promotion in newspapers and through lectures to actually going into the field and meeting potential donors. Along the way Hamilton encountered resistance, misunderstanding, and even sometimes competition from fellow collectors. Creating the Southern Historical Collection was a challenge that required persistence and a conviction about the necessity of such work. Hamilton had both characteristics and these ultimately brought him many successes.

Two obstacles in public perception hindered the collecting process. First, Hamilton had to convince donors that UNC was the right place for their ancestors’ papers, in terms of security, accessibility, and sensibility. Second, Hamilton had to educate the public on the importance of the documents in their possession. The first obstacle was largely overcome once the new university library building was completed in 1929. The issues of public education became the underlying theme throughout Hamilton’s years of collecting.
Hamilton was a prolific correspondent. In the 1910s and 1920s, before the Southern Historical Collection was fully developed or had a real home on the UNC campus, letters were Hamilton’s collecting tool. Letters provided outreach to donors and as a way to locate potential caches of old papers. Broadly, Hamilton’s letters about historic documents can be divided into two types: those seeking to learn about the location of documents, and consequently if those documents might come to UNC; and those in which Hamilton offer advice on the care of documents in private collections.

Hamilton’s letters in search of collections were frequent in the 1910s and early 1920s. Often, Hamilton used family and professional connections to reach out to potential donors. Writing to William McMillan, a professor of drama at Yale University, Hamilton states, “Our mutual friend, Mr. George Taylor, mentioned to me yesterday the fact that you have in your possession a considerable body of manuscript material relating to Southern history.”62 In other cases, donors came forward hoping to make their papers part of the Southern Historical Collection. David Rankin Barbee, managing editor of the Asheville Citizen, sent Hamilton “a package of old newspapers which Miss Virginia Terrell found in the Old Swannanoa Inn at Swannanoa, N.C.”63

Equally, correspondence could lead to disappointment in collecting. In a brief letter to Harriet T. Stanly, Hamilton requests to learn of “the whereabouts of any of the papers of the Hon. Edward Stanly of North Carolina? Some years ago your address was given to me by a gentleman whom I met casually, as that of one who could probably help me out in ascertaining if these papers are still in existence....” In reply, Harriet Stanly

---

63 David Rankin Barbee to J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, 14 January 1928, Folder 371, Hamilton Papers.
simply stated, “Our home in New Jersey has been broken up for many years, most every one of his papers were destroyed at that time.”  

Hamilton also tried and failed to collect the papers of Kemp Battle’s father, Judge William Horn Battle. Writing to Kemp’s brother, Thomas, in June 1927, Hamilton declared, “It is my very earnest desire that the papers of Judge Battle should be here in the University library,” urging that the papers “will be mended and preserved, and they will be of very definite historical use.” Thomas Battle agreed to view the letters with his surviving brothers but by September 1927, he wrote back: “The investigation we made of these papers shows conclusively that they are purely personal letters of Judge Battle and his wife to each other—purely personal and of no historical value. There is hardly a single paper in the whole lot that is not of this nature and we think that there is nothing to be gained by your going over them.”

These failed collection attempts illustrate the two obstacles Hamilton had to overcome in order to create the Southern Historical Collection. First, both neglect and willful destruction of the historical record was not uncommon. Throughout his career, Hamilton would bemoan “the energetic broom of the overzealous housewife” and the neglectful family, destroying papers. Hamilton often only found out about destroyed papers after the fact. In one unusual case, Hamilton learned about manuscript destruction as it was happening. Writing to the future senator Sam J. Ervin, Jr. in Morganton, North  

64 J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton to Harriet Stanly, 9 April 1924; Stanly to Hamilton, 24 April 1924, Folder 369, Hamilton Papers.  
65 J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton to Thomas Battle, 30 June 1927; Battle to Hamilton, 21 September 1937, Folder 370, Hamilton Papers. At least some of Judge Battle’s papers did come to the Southern Historical Collection within the Battle Family Papers, 1765-1955 #3223, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.  
66 Untitled Speech by Hamilton, 1939, Folder “Publicity: General, 1928-1950, Manuscripts Department.
Carolina, Hamilton related that B.S. Gaither had “destroyed a trunk of old letters, but that there are still a good many left.” Hamilton requested that Ervin visit Gaither “and urge him not to destroy any more until I can get a chance to talk to him about the wisdom of giving them to the University.” Ervin soon visited Gaither and advised him “to take good care of the remaining papers and I am sure that he will do so.”

Hamilton’s second obstacle was convincing people that private letters had historical value. Thomas Battle and his brothers saw no value in their parents’ correspondence. In such cases, Hamilton could still acquire the papers, but only if he could educate the public on how historians actually use documents, as opposed to how the public thinks they use documents. Battle’s letter rejecting Hamilton’s request showed what he thought historians were looking for in historic manuscripts: “I cannot image what papers ... you found to be of historical interest, excepting law licenses and commissions from Governors to hold courts or to revise the statutes.” As Hamilton would later write in an essay about collecting historical documents: “High-light material will always appeal to the imagination, but in many ways the run-of-the-mill stuff is more important and interesting.” For Hamilton, the true story of the South was not in formal documents but in the private letters the Battle brothers deemed inconsequential.

Letters were also a way to reach out to other professionals when promoting the burgeoning collection. R. D. W. Connor, with his connections among professional archivists, wrote to Waldo Leland, “enclosing a little pamphlet”—the printed text of the

---

67 J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton to Sam J. Ervin, 20 September 1927; Ervin to Hamilton, [September 1927?], Folder 370, Hamilton Papers.
Baltimore speech—about the collection. Leland would become a supporter of UNC’s efforts and would correspond with Hamilton regularly throughout the 1930s. Connor also wrote to Clarence S. Brigham of the American Antiquarian Society, who was a little less enthused by the project: “It is a fine idea and I wish you success,” he wrote. “Of course Duke University is making great strides in the same direction and the questions of duplication between your two institutions should be settled.” Connor replied like any good UNC partisan when confronted with a question about the school over in Durham: “I think there is no danger of duplication between the University and Duke University. Of course, we have at present a much larger collection than Duke, a collection which has been under way for twenty years but there is ample for us both without overlapping, and we welcome Duke into the field.”

Hamilton also used well-sculpted newspaper articles as a means to educate the public about the new Southern Historical Collection and about the value of historical documents. He made friends with newspaper writers and this allowed him to craft the Southern Historical Collection’s image. As mentioned above, the Southern Historical Collection first came into the public consciousness largely through an article in the Baltimore Sun. The publication in that newspaper was largely born from Hamilton’s friendship with writer and editor Gerald Johnson, a former journalism professor at

---


UNC. On another occasion, Hamilton wrote a “Memorandum to Claude G. Bowers,” in which he laid out, point-by-point, all the information he wished to see included in a New York *Evening World* article. Hamilton also used newspapers as a way to educate the public about the value of old documents. In an undated clipping from his scrapbooks, a Savannah newspaper relates Hamilton’s ethos: “He goes all over the South in the hunt for these letters, so many of which have been carelessly destroyed as of no value or because they were felt to be personal family documents without general interest. Dr. Hamilton always emphasizes the fact nothing of this sort, no matter how negligible it may appear, should be destroyed.” In a newspaper interview around 1938, Hamilton framed his philosophy this way: “Famous men were always conscious that their letters might see print; they wrote guardedly. ... In the letter of a son to his mother, there is no concealment.”

Letters and newspaper could only do so much in promoting the young collection. Hunting the field would prove the most successful way to acquire documents because it allowed Hamilton to not only reiterate points made in letters and newspapers but also to exhibit his winning personality and vast knowledge of southern genealogy. Further, Hamilton used these face-to-face encounters to really sell the Southern Historical Collection, touting both the safety that the documents would find in UNC’s fireproof library and the use they would receive from southern historians.

---

72 For more on Hamilton and Johnson’s friendship, see Pegg, particularly Chapter 9.
73 “Memorandum for Mr. Bowers,” Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1928-1936,” Manuscripts Department.
74 “Again on Quest for Old Letters,” Undated clipping from an unidentified Savannah, Georgia, newspaper, in Scrapbook Number 6, Hamilton Papers.
Hamilton began devoting most of his time to collecting in the field around 1931, when he first received course release from the Department of History. Around the same time, the Kenan funding was in place, the new University Library was open, and he was officially named director of the Southern Historical Collection. With his new title, dedicated collecting time, and a steady funding source in place, Hamilton began to travel in earnest. For the next two decades he spent about six weeks at a time, usually two or three times a year, traveling the South in search of documents. This new phase in the collection process built on the foundations established by Hamilton’s letter writing campaign of the 1910s and 1920s. Hamilton maintained detailed diaries about his travels during the 1930s and 1940s. These diaries provide insight into how Hamilton was able to engage with potential donors in person. There is a notable shift in tone away from the semi-formal voice found in his letters to a personable style.

The traveling process took on a logical rhythm over the years. An itinerary would be written up. Meetings would be arranged with perspective donors. “He would write ahead” to potential donors and, “he would find a social bond,” writes David Moltke-Hansen. Hamilton would spend a good deal of time with these donors, often visiting them again and again on each trip through an area. Outside New Orleans in November 1934, Hamilton made a return trip to see a Mrs. Baumgarten. “She was very apologetic for not having gone into the garret since I was there [previously], but has been ill and

---

76 “Memorandum Defining …,” 5 April 1930, Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1928-1936,” Manuscripts Department.
77 Moltke-Hansen, 17.
says, too, that she really doubted that I would ever come back. I assured her how mistaken she was and she says that I can have the letters."78

A lot of time was left in between scheduled meetings, leaving Hamilton open for serendipitous encounters on the road. He might stop at a likely looking old plantation home in hopes that the family might possess an attic full of old letters. Equally, Hamilton often ran into the extended families of his correspondents, all of who seemed to possess someone of note in their family trees. In some cases, Hamilton would learn connections as he traveled. In meeting with Judge Samuel M. Wilson and his wife in Kentucky, Hamilton learned that the “wife was descended from Thomas Hart of Hillsboro, N.C., which was, of course, a matter of interest to me.”79 Hamilton did not act on this new information during the visit but there is no doubt that he tucked the connection away in his mind, saving it for later as a potential route to hidden documents. As J. Carlyle Sitterson said of this technique, “Hamilton was the essence of patience when talking with prospects about their family papers. Although an interesting and enthusiastic conversationalist and incomparable storyteller, he was careful not to talk too much on early acquaintance and wisely did not ask for everything on the first visit.”80

A favored tactic Hamilton liked to use on the road was to flip through the local telephone directory in search of historically relevant names. He would then call the families in question to see if they were indeed the scions of a famous southerner, and, if so, did they possess any papers? On one of his first major collecting trips, Hamilton “telephoned Humphrey Marshall on the strength of his name.” Marshall had recently died

78 J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton diary entry, 15 November 1934, Folder 263, Hamilton Papers.
79 Hamilton diary entry, 9 December 1933, Folder 263, Hamilton Papers.
80 Sitterson, 52.
but relatives told Hamilton that his guess was right: “he was a descendent of the two Humphrey Marshalls who served in Congress, and ... their papers were in the possession of his son who lives in Illinois and whose address I got.”

Hamilton, ever interested in his own family history, again used this approach some days later in Tennessee. “I saw several Roulhacs in the telephone book and chose one of them to look up. I first selected a physician, but he seemed to live pretty far out, so I chose a lawyer whose office was near the hotel. He proved to be a descendant of Francis Roulhac ... and was the first of the name I have ever met outside my immediate family.” Interestingly, the physician Hamilton decided not to seek out turned out to be “of color.” It would have been enlightening to find out how Hamilton reacted to meeting an African American who shared such a rare family name.

These unanticipated encounters reveal Hamilton’s vast knowledge of southerner familiar history, a grasp for names, and an encyclopedic memory for interrelationships and the migration patterns of southern families. Carl Pegg recalled Hamilton’s philosophy on approaching potential donors in the field: “He said that the most effective approach that he had discovered was to know and tell as much as possible about the history of the family. ... And to stress at the same time how the records that contained the family history would be kept in fireproof quarters and made easily available to genealogists and historians, and would thus help to give an element of immorality to the members of the family.” Along with a personable spirit, which made talking to

---

81 Hamilton diary entry, 11 December 1933, Folder 263, Hamilton Papers.
82 Hamilton diary entry, 16 December 1933, Folder 263, Hamilton Papers.
83 Pegg, 109.
strangers easy for him, Hamilton used his genuine interest in the historical people of the South in order to create a bond with their descendants.

The innovative nature of the Southern Historical Collection was the cause of much early skepticism and criticism. In attempting to gather a collection from across the South, rather than from within an individual state, Roulhac Hamilton was breaking an unwritten rule. Archivists across the nation, but largely within the South, commented on his efforts and southern archivists often actively lobbied against them, through letters, newspaper editorials, and word of mouth. Hamilton and his rivals would all frequently claim that their collecting efforts were not a competition, but their actions often said otherwise. However, by the late 1940s, there was a notable shift in attitude: archivists began turning to Hamilton and the Southern Historical Collection staff for advice. This shift signals a change not only in levels of acceptance but also in ideas about the importance of a region-based collection. Such a shift was the beginning of the Southern Historical Collection’s—and Hamilton’s—true legacy.

Some fellow archivists-cum-historians contacted Hamilton to learn more about the collection before passing judgment. Dumas Malone, the renowned Thomas Jefferson scholar, was working at the University of Virginia (UVA) in 1928 when he first heard about UNC’s plans. He reached out to Hamilton, saying that UVA also had plans to collect documents, though “we shall concentrate on Virginiana and Jeffersoniana.” Malone sought a “gentlemen’s agreement” between the two schools wherein neither would gather materials of interest to the other “except to the extent of a working
Hamilton replied by sending a copy of the Baltimore speech, emphasizing, “We do not conceive the work as one of competition,” but making politely clear that “it is impossible to set any definite limits to such a collection.” Malone was equally cordial in his reply but it was clear that no gentlemen’s agreement would be struck. Still, there was some level of cooperation between the two universities over time. Fifteen years later, Hamilton wrote to the UVA librarian Lester J. Cappon: “Here is a tip for you. I was in Richmond recently, and have every reason to believe that if you will push the thing diplomatically, you may get the Confederate papers of the Tredegar Iron Works.” Hamilton admitted that he wanted the papers for the Southern Historical Collection but “was perfectly aware that there was no chance of my getting them.” The next best option was UVA and he was happy to pass on the information.

Not every interaction was so cordial or became one of cooperation. Hamilton seemed to have an especially difficult time with the various keepers of state archives throughout the South. One of Hamilton’s more fearless critics seems to have been Marie Bankhead Owen, of the Alabama Department of Archives and History. Owen was an early and firm detractor against Hamilton’s efforts. In a letter to the editor of an Alabama newspaper, Owen lambasts Hamilton for coming into the state at all. Alabama, she writes, has been collecting its own papers for decades (their state archives is the oldest in the nation), as have other southern states. “I am very glad that Prof. Hamilton has this

---

84 Dumas Malone to J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, 6 April 1928, Folder 371, Hamilton Papers.
85 Hamilton to Malone, 13 April 1928, Folder 371, Hamilton Papers.
87 J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton to Lester J. Cappon, 9 April 1943, Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1943-1944,” Manuscripts Department.
splendid South-wide vision. I have no criticism of his aspirations. I admire them.”

However, she argues, Alabama documents enrich the history of their own state and should not be sent to a regional collection. Owen’s real gripe may have been with the Alabama state legislature, which had made “no appropriation” for acquiring documents, though other outside institutions were ready and willing to pay for them. “For instance,” she argues, “the rich correspondence ... that were left by the late Mrs. Virginia Clay Clopton, are being sought for by several institutions with money enough to buy them.”

Georgia archivists also protested Hamilton’s collecting work. Ruth Blair, the state historian of Georgia, wrote directly to UNC President Harry W. Chase in 1930 to complain about UNC and Duke University collecting in her state. “The logical place to look for Georgia records is in Georgia. ... We congratulate North Carolina on the possession of two such wide-awake universities, but we are unwilling for you to think that Georgia is not able and willing to care for her own records.”

Hamilton seems never to have responded directly to these critics, or others, but it is clear that he believed in the value of a region-based archival collection over that of one based on state boundaries. Hamilton’s attitude reflected different intellectual priorities than those held by state archivists. An article in the Chattanooga (Tennessee) News—which, no doubt, Hamilton had a hand in sculpting—notes, “Within the next half century, the South will be the scene of a striking economic development. ... The preservation of past and present records will insure for the student of tomorrow information of the

---

88 Marie Bankhead Owen, letter to the editor, unidentified Alabama newspaper, n.d., Scrapbook 6, Hamilton Papers.
89 Ruth Blair to Harry W. Chase, 4 January 1930, Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1928-1936,” Manuscripts Department.
greatest value to the nation and the South.” To understand this history and the changes about to come to the South, the whole region had to be understood at once. Therefore, a regional manuscripts collection made more sense to Hamilton than did the state-based collections.

Though he never thought of his work as a competition, it is clear from his diaries that Hamilton had to fight off other historians and archivists, all courting the same perspective donors. Dunbar Rowland, a leading archivist in Mississippi (and, incidentally, R. D. W. Connor’s main competitor for the position of first Archivist of the United States) was a continual rival and, like Hamilton, used personal contacts to influence donors. In rural Louisiana in November 1934, Hamilton visited a Mrs. Murray, a potential donor facing some uncertainty. “She clearly wants to give us the letters,” Hamilton recorded in his diary, “but feels that perhaps she ought to ask Dunbar Rowland about it. That would probably mean that we would not get them even if Rowland didn’t want them.” The full extent of Hamilton and Rowland’s relationship is not known, but it is clear from this diary entry that they were not on friendly terms.

In the deep South, Hamilton also often faced the increasingly well-funded collectors from Louisiana State University (LSU). In New Orleans, he found that the writer Grace King’s papers had been sold to LSU for $4,000 sometime before he could inquire after them. On another trip, this time to Birmingham, Alabama, Hamilton...

---

92 Hamilton diary entry, 29 November 1934, Folder 263, Hamilton Papers.
93 Hamilton diary entry, 14 February 1936, Folder 268, Hamilton Papers.
visited Mrs. Palfrey, who “had an interesting bundle of letters which she does not think interesting.” His potential donor’s son was “very insistent upon LSU” receiving their family papers, but his mother “will give us [UNC] part.” Hamilton knew what was best for the scholars who would one day use the papers and “urged her against any division but finally agreed to accept the letters of one of the family, all from the Confederate army.” His diary entry continues in a pleased tone, “She says if she likes Macmillan the rest will go to LSU, if she does not, we get them. Told her I was afraid she would like him but he would not give me a good name. She bristled at that and said she would not stand for anything of the kind. I do hope he was true to form.”

Some richer prizes had seemingly every archivist’s attention. In an amusing diary entry, Hamilton recalls his quest for the Baber-Blackshear family papers: “I called on the Misses Baber-Blackshear. Miss Mary is very well again and seems reasonably sane. They are still in the air about their letters. [Duke University’s William Kenneth] Boyd has been trying very hard to get them and the Georgia Historical Society has also approached them. I think there would be no difficulty if it could rest in the hands of Miss Birdie.”

In the end, none of these competitors won out and Miss Mary and Miss Birdie gave their papers—documenting their family’s move from Virginia to Georgia, a famous duel, and several naval careers—to the University of Georgia.

At some point, the wave of animus against Hamilton, UNC, and the Southern Historical Collection began to shift. The late 1920s through the mid-1930s seemed to only bring complaints against the growing collection. By the late 1930s, however, the

---

94 Hamilton diary entry, 9 May 1937, Folder 280, Hamilton Papers.
95 Hamilton diary entry, 31 October 1934, Folder 263, Hamilton Papers.
96 Baber-Blackshear Family Papers, ms11, Manuscripts and Photographs, Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia.
Southern Historical Collection became increasingly admired—and Hamilton was looked to for advice. In 1937, F. P. Summers was working at the University of West Virginia as both “head of the department of history ... [and] so-called archivist.” He wrote to Hamilton seeking advice on how to balance the two tasks.⁹⁷ In 1941, Margaret Jemison, the Librarian of Emory University, wrote a general letter to the Manuscripts Department seeking advice on creating “some definite policy regarding the use of manuscripts.”⁹⁸

Equally, states across the South began to question, not why UNC wanted their papers, but why they themselves did not try harder to preserve their own documents. The Richmond (Virginia) News Leader admonished local archival agencies in a 1948 editorial: “Ignorantly, or from financial necessity, or because our own institutions have been negligent, many of the most valuable collections of family papers have been sold or given to” institutions outside of the state. The editorial continues, “We Virginians may blush at our own tardiness in entering the field, but we cannot forget that the North Carolina institutions [UNC and Duke] have preserved for us and for the rest of the nation precious folios that would have been burnt up or thrown into trash cans.”⁹⁹ After decades of collecting, in which Dumas Malone, Lester J. Cappon, and others had plenty of time and opportunity to gather Virginiana documents, North Carolina collectors were still doing a better job of the work.

⁹⁷ Hamilton was teaching only infrequently by this point and could not offer much advice. F. P. Summers to J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, 3 February 1937; Hamilton to Summers, 19 February 1937, Folder 382, Hamilton Papers.
⁹⁸ Margaret Jemison to [UNC] Manuscripts Department, 7 March 1941, Folder “Administrative Correspondence General, 1941-1942, Manuscripts Department.
There is no way to know exactly why this shift in opinions and attitude occurred. It seems possible that it took Hamilton a full decade of active collecting to calm other archivists. In 1928, in an early speech about the Southern Historical Collection, Hamilton claimed, “We want to conduct a house-to-house canvass” in search of documents. Clearly such a hyperbolic and herculean quest never really occurred; but Hamilton’s willingness to publicize the burgeoning collection in such a way must have put other document hunters on edge. It took time to see the true nature of his approach to document collecting and, therefore, time for other collectors to trust his motives.

Hamilton himself may have increasingly understood his own limitations. Boundaries, contacts, and loyalties were set, and Hamilton knew if he found a Dunbar Rowland partisan, his chances of collecting from that person were non-existent. Rowland surely knew the same. Hamilton’s lust for documents would never diminish but he knew a lost cause when he saw one, as in the case of the Tredegar Iron Works papers. These invisible boundaries, institutional rivalries, and reluctant donors all silently shaped the Southern Historical Collection but they could not stop its growth. In the end, all the years of letter writing, publicity campaigns, and travels around the South paid off. By the time Hamilton officially retired in 1948, the Southern Historical Collection held millions of documents divided into hundreds of collections, nearly all brought to UNC by his efforts.

---

CONCLUSION

Roulhac Hamilton did not conceive the Southern Historical Collection as a way to immortalize his own reputation. Even so, by 1939, the *Atlantic Monthly* dubbed him the “most famous explorer of manuscripts in North America” and through the decades, his reputation drifted into mythology. In public memory he is often nothing more than an old racist historian and his efforts to create the Southern Historical Collection are condensed to a snapshot view of him, driving his Ford through the South, running manuscripts like a bootlegger. In reality, Hamilton and the Southern Historical Collection were both much more than the mythology suggests.

The Southern Historical Collection was born with a lofty goal: to gather documents about the history of the entire South. This goal was achieved through a series of intricate relationships between Hamilton and the larger UNC community, the donors and the rivals, the publicity agents and the critics. Further, Hamilton’s own understanding of the South and its place in history, as well as his own family and educational background influenced how the collection would form in its earliest decades. All of these elements—“man, idea, and times”—came together to make the collection something both unique and sustainable. By contextualizing the founding of the Southern Historical Collection within the contexts of Hamilton’s biography, UNC and its community’s

---

commitment to collecting historical documents, and finally through its earliest collection processes, Hamilton and his life’s work take on new, more realistic dimensions.
Bibliography

Primary sources

Baber-Blackshear Family Papers, ms11, Manuscripts and Photographs, Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia.

Battle Family Papers, 1765-1955 #3223, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Charles William Dabney Papers, 1715-1945 #1412, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

James Hamilton Papers, 1781-1944, #1489, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton Papers, #1743, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Records of the Department of History of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1921-2010, University Archives, Louis Round Wilson Special Collection Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Records of the Manuscripts Department, 1926-2006, #40052, University Archives, Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Ruffin, Roulhac, and Hamilton Family Papers, 1784-1951, # 643, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Stephen Beauregard Weeks Papers, 1746-1941 #762, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Secondary sources

of the Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill.” MA paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000.


Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. “The ‘Ceaseless Quest for the Truth’ the Southern Historical Collection and the Making and Remaking of the Southern Past” (paper presented at Southern Sources: a Symposium Celebrating Seventy-Five Years of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 18-19 March 2005).


Rush, Charles E, ed. *Library Resources of the University of North Carolina: a Summary


