

# Unusual Requests for Local History Collections

by Beverly Tetterton

It wasn't a joke. She was serious. The patron on the other end of the telephone line had asked, "How do you baptize a chicken?" I asked for more information and she said that she had been at a grocery store meat counter when she got into a conversation with an elderly woman who provided her with a wonderful chicken recipe. The woman began the recipe with "after you baptize the chicken ..." and the patron was too embarrassed to ask more about the baptism. I quickly checked Paul Green's *Wordbook: an Alphabet of Reminiscence* and a listing of local sayings that we had been gathering for many years, but I couldn't find a thing about baptizing chickens. After calling around to several of my favorite elderly cooks, I came up with the answer. Total immersion or baptism means to wash the chicken thoroughly before cooking. Food questions and recipes, although infrequent, have come up often enough for us to create files on how to make Cape Fear Men's Club punch, winning chowder recipes from decades of yearly contests, and recipes gleaned from early newspapers. The Christmas flounder, eaten by local residents during the Depression, has become an annual request.

The chicken baptism is one of the more unusual questions that I have had over the past twenty years as state and local history librarian for the New Hanover Public Library. Out-of-the-ordinary requests challenge the mind and stir the imagination. There is no greater satisfaction than find-

ing a bit of obscure data or helping patrons find just the information they are looking for, no matter how important or trivial. Local history collections with their eclectic holdings provide the extra information not found in standard reference materials.

For example, in our area of the state there is much talk and worry these days about water-related subjects. Early photographs of maritime forests and estuaries give the experts documentary evidence of the changing landscape. Early maps drawn before and after the construction of the Intracoastal Waterway provide local officials, engineers, and marine biologists with information on the shifting beaches, inlets, and sounds. Water quality can be studied over time by locating historical data on fish kills or chemical spills.

Environmentalists research city directories, insurance maps, and old Chamber of Commerce publications to determine where industrial sites and former wharves were located along the Cape Fear River. Archaeologists use similar documents to research shipwrecks, maritime-related businesses, plantations, and Native American sites.

Animals, fish, and reptile research-

ers are delighted to discover our files that contain 100 years of newspaper articles featuring reports on all kinds of local beasts, including bears, panthers, manatees, alligators, sharks, and snakes. Whether endangered or overly populous, we can usually find it if it walks, flies, or swims. Reports of nine-foot snakes found in Holly Shelter or 1,500-pound alligators in the Green Swamp are simply irresistible. The same goes for information on plants, including record-size Venus flytraps. A Japanese pharmaceutical company considering relocating in the area sent a bevy of researchers to copy scads of materials on native flora and fauna. Their English was minimal, but their knowledge of copying machines was superb.

Climatic reports are used in court cases if the weather made a difference. They also provide minutia for historians, novelists, and family history buffs, but our favorite researcher is a fellow from Buffalo, New York, whom we call "the weatherman." He visits the area once a year and spends a good part of his time looking through newspapers and old weather reports. He also photographs and dates the flowering of local flora. His life's work is to compare the climates of Buffalo and Wilmington. He says he will, one day, give us a copy of his extensive research. In the meantime, we continue to forecast the coming of Spring with his arrival.

Serendipitous research never ceases to amaze us. When possible, our staff eats lunch at Oakdale, Wilmington's largest

*Out-of-the-ordinary  
requests challenge the mind  
and stir the imagination.*

and oldest cemetery. After eating we always take a brief tour of the stones and monuments in the immediate area. One day we dined among the graves of a prominent local family. Later that afternoon a descendant from Texas appeared. His request for information on his ancestors prompted one staff member to respond, "Oh yes, we know them well; we had lunch with them today."

I've always said that if I had a nickel for every writer I've helped to research the setting for her novel, I'd be a rich woman. Occasionally, however, a book does get published and we can take credit for its authenticity. The same satisfaction comes from helping an historian research an interesting topic that results in an scholarly article or book. Working with published authors is always enjoyable.

Wilmington is an old port city founded in 1739. Approximately 400 buildings display historic plaques that reference the date and architectural style of the building as well as the owners' births, deaths, and occupations. National Register of Historic Places inventories and surveys, as well as deeds, city directories, and photographs help identify buildings. City planners and the Historic Properties Commission use the same sources to help preserve the his-

toric landscape of the old town.

New Hanover County is one of the fastest growing areas in North Carolina. Developers use the collection to verify site plans and identify wetlands. County planners use the same resources to verify developers' reports. Staff from the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources (DENR) appear frequently to obtain information for writing reports on the location of new roadways, bridges, and waterways. The same goes for the U.S. Corps of Engineers embarking on new harbor improvements or dredging along the coast.

City and county officials search the collection for older government documents which chronicle everything from city/county consolidation to blue laws. Owners of new businesses, particularly restaurants, check the old maps and records for former food businesses on their site. They can save thousands of dollars in impact fees if even a portion of their building formerly housed a business involved in the sale of food. We're waiting for one of them to share the new-found wealth with us.

Local high school yearbooks help adopted children find their birth parents. The police department uses them to run down missing persons or criminals. Researchers from all over the

globe delight in gazing at famous graduates like Michael Jordan, Laney High School, Class of 1981. Our favorite was a good-looking Italian sports-writer, Giorgio, who spent a week doing research with us.

The "Antiques Road Show" and eBay have people searching their homes for treasures. We can help them identify old bottles and other locally made objects. One patron brought in an old document which she found in a box of books that she bought at a yard sale. One of the first US postage stamps was affixed to it. She said that a New York collector was going to buy it, but first she needed to identify the man to whom the letter was sent. We ascertained that the document was a bill of lading sent to a local turpentine distiller for 400 barrels of rosin. By using the censuses, obituaries, and cemetery records, we quickly found the former owner of the letter. She promised to let us know what it is worth. Another interesting case involved an artifact that family tradition claims was a gift from General Ulysses Grant. Preposterous! What was Grant doing in Wilmington, the lifeline of the Confederacy? We found a brief December 1, 1865, newspaper article which stated, "General U.S. Grant arrived here early yesterday



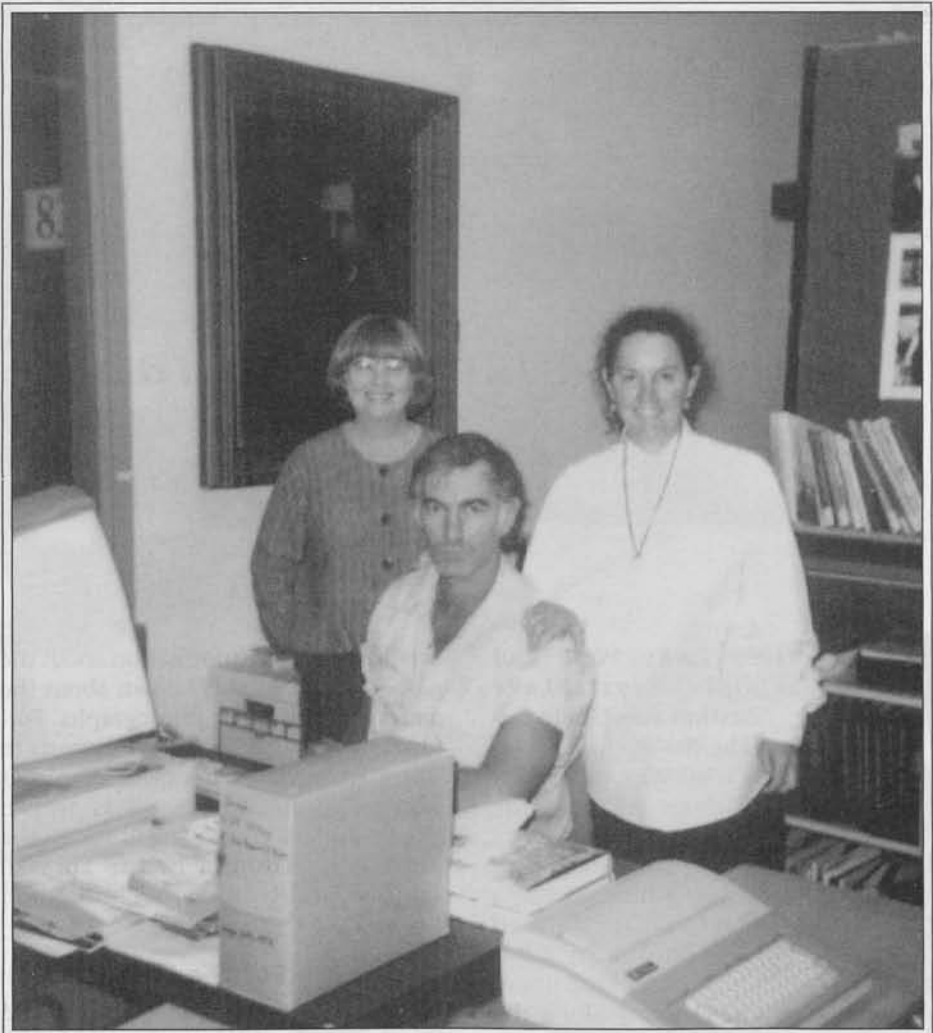
A fun time was had by all during the Wilmington History Mystery Tour last October. Left to right are librarians Joseph Sheppard and Beverly Tetterton with "volunteers" the Blockade Runner still looking for his ship (which sank in 1864), the ghost of a former researcher who comes back after dark to finish his research, and the grim reaper who reminds folks of library books never returned. (Photo taken Oct. 1999 courtesy New Hanover County Public Library)

morning, and, like a sensible man — having traveled all the night before — took a bed at the City Hotel and went to sleep.” The artifact which was circa 1860s could certainly have been given to the family by the famous general.

Requests for local ghosts and legends are frequent, but occasionally we come across a story that gives us chills. A desperate patron claimed that her house was haunted and she wanted to know more about the ghost. Unable to find her poltergeist in any of the books or clipping files, we asked more about her story. She said she was awakened at her Orange Street residence to a woman screaming, “Major Clark, Major Clark, oh please, oh please, don’t hurt him.” The next thing she heard was a gunshot and then the sound of something large being dragged down the stairs and out the front door. Finding no reference to either her ghost story or Major Clark, I told her I couldn’t help her, but she was very persistent and wouldn’t leave. To give her something to do, I pulled the microfilm of the newspaper dated 100 years before the incident. Within a few minutes she called me over to the microfilm reader. The hair on my arms stood straight up when I read the headlines, “Major Clark found dead this morning at the foot of Orange Street.”

Heritage tourism has become extremely popular throughout the state. Entrepreneurs use the collection to research history tours, garden tours, architecture tours, religious tours, Civil War tours, African American tours, pirate tours, and ghost tours of the city. The latest and one of the most popular tours is the “Dawson’s Creek” tour featuring the whereabouts of the cast and the filming of Fox TV’s hit series. Teenagers from all over the United States are flocking to Wilmington to walk the streets portrayed in their favorite TV show!

Screen Gems Studios, located in Wilmington, have brought the stars and



Left to right: Beverly Tetterton (lft.), and Maggie Renzi (rt.) assist John Sayles with research for his next film. (Photo taken Oct. 1999 courtesy New Hanover County Public Library)

the film makers to the area. We are asked to help the movie makers find everything from abandoned warehouses to circa 1940s linoleum. Most of this work is not very exciting, but occasionally we hit the big time. I recently had the grand opportunity to help one of my favorite directors, John Sayles, do research for his next film. One of his main characters will be

from turn-of-the-century Wilmington. He spent two days with us reading old newspapers, and local histories and looking at photographs circa 1900. Those two days were probably the best I’ll have this year, but you never know what unusual and interesting requests are forthcoming.

- Over 21,000 Current & Backlist Titles
- 19 Years of Service
- “Hands On” Selection
- Pre-School Through Adult
- Discounts up to 70% Off
- Now Two Adjacent Warehouses
- Sturdy Library Bindings
- 100% Fill
- Cataloging/Processing Available

## — MUMFORD —

**RELIABLE WHOLESALE SINCE 1977**

North Carolina Representative – Phil May

*“Nothing like seeing  
for yourself.”*

**MUMFORD LIBRARY BOOKS, SOUTHEAST, INC.**

7847 Bayberry Road • Jacksonville, Florida 32256

**(904) 737-2649**

**FAX: (904) 730-8913**

**1-800-367-3927**