

Thornton, Mary Lindsay ^[1]

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By William S. Powell, 1996

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Mary Lindsay Thornton, first librarian of the North Carolina Collection at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2], was born in Cuckoo House, built by her maternal great-great-grandfather in Louisa County, Va. One of four children of William Percy and Elizabeth Pendleton Thornton, she moved with her family to Salisbury when she was nine and to Atlanta, Ga., four years later. As a child she did not like the name she was given at birth, Mary Louise, and chose Mary Lindsay, her paternal grandmother's name. Without going through any formality she simply proclaimed that to be her name. She was graduated from the Atlanta Girls High School and the Carnegie Library School of Atlanta (afterwards the Emory University Library and still later the [Division of Library and Information Management](#) ^[3]).

In 1917, fresh out of library school, she became the librarian of the [North Carolina Collection](#) ^[4]. The university librarian, L. R. Wilson, had pulled together the North Carolina material in his custody and placed it in a small upstairs corner room in the library, the building that later became Hill Music Hall. The collection contained about 1,000 books and 500 pamphlets. Miss Thornton began cataloguing the material in a thorough, analytical fashion, seeking to bring out all that was in the books, as there was so little material at hand. The result was a card catalogue that became virtually an index of every issue of the periodicals and of many of the books as well. Thorough cataloguing became the permanent policy of the collection. In 1918 the university trustees purchased from [Stephen B. Weeks](#) ^[5] his collection of 10,000 volumes of North Caroliniana, and soon a bequest of about 1,200 volumes from Kemp P. Battle further enlarged it.

In processing the new material, Miss Thornton became familiar with the broad acquisition policy developed by Weeks, and from that time until her retirement forty years later she diligently sought to acquire North Caroliniana in all its forms—books, pamphlets, broadsides, serials, government documents, maps, and pictures—just as Weeks had done. To this list she added assorted university "keepsakes" as they were found in campus buildings or contributed by alumni and friends. The collection for a time also contained the university archives. The success of her efforts was demonstrated by the recognized completeness of the collection. By 1958, when she retired, it contained more than 150,000 items and had attained nationwide recognition as a model state collection.

Although she had library training when she went to Chapel Hill, Miss Thornton did not have a formal degree, and in her thirties she began freshman courses at the university. In 1939 she was graduated with a B.A. degree and membership in Phi Beta Kappa, and in 1943 she received the M.A. degree with a major in history, writing a thesis on "Public Printing in North Carolina from 1749 to 1815."

Mary Thornton was friendly, energetic, and enthusiastic. Because she was open-minded and objective in her acquisition policy, the [North Carolina Collection](#) ^[4] came to include scores of books, pamphlets, broadsides, and ephemeral material on such topics as labor unrest, the activity of blacks, minor political parties, and various other issues that a less diligent collector of her day might have ignored as unimportant. Her development of the carefully mounted and organized clipping files and the indexed literary scrapbooks produced sources for which countless people have expressed gratitude. She was, in brief, a scholar-librarian.

Another valuable characteristic was her ability to win the friendship of potential donors. Of course, the university setting and the subject of the collection undoubtedly helped, but it was her enthusiasm and her obvious care for the material that contributed to the decision of [John Sprunt Hill](#) ^[6], [Bruce Cotten](#) ^[7], the family of [Thomas Wolfe](#) ^[8], and others to make significant additions of North Caroliniana as well as donate money to the North Carolina Collection.

Miss Thornton wrote a number of articles published in the [North Carolina Historical Review](#) ^[9] and library journals. From the time of her arrival until shortly before her retirement she compiled for publication the annual bibliography of North Carolina books. She was the author of two very useful bibliographies published by [The University of North Carolina Press](#) ^[10] in 1954 and 1958. The first, [Official Publications of the Colony and State of North Carolina, 1749–1939](#) ^[11], describes and locates thousands of government documents in eighteen depositories. A particularly useful aspect of this bibliography was its concise statements on the origin and development, particularly name changes, of assorted colonial and state agencies. At the time there was no other convenient source for that information. Her second book, [A Bibliography of North Carolina, 1589–1956](#) ^{[12][12]}, lists over 15,000 items. It was virtually a main-entry catalogue of the North Carolina Collection

as it then existed. The inclusion of serial publications made it especially useful.

Her thorough professional competence gave her assurance and confidence in her work that masked a deep-seated shyness and reserve. Because of this, and because of her responsibility in caring for an invalid mother through many years of illness, she stayed close to home, seldom going away to meetings and refusing to speak publicly about her work and her research. Nevertheless, almost every summer she visited Pawley's Island, S.C., for a change of scenery.

Miss Thornton's quiet but effective contribution through her work with the collection and her writing about it and North Carolina continued into retirement as long as her health permitted. For many years she managed the collection in her care with little or no assistance; she was responsible for book selection and ordering, cataloguing, reference, and circulation. Later she had the help of some student assistants and finally one or two other staff members. The collection, nevertheless, served generation after generation of university students, as well as countless readers and researchers of every category.

She died in Chapel Hill at age eighty-two and was buried in the town cemetery.

References:

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Chapel Hill Weekly , 18 Dec. 1953, 4 Feb. 1955, 5 May, 7 July 1958

Citation by Friends of the Library, 2 May 1958 (clipping files, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

Memorial address read at a meeting of the faculty (files, Secretary of the Faculty, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

Raleigh News and Observer , 2 Nov. 1951, 13 Dec. 1953

Subjects:

[Biography](#) ^[13]

[Public service](#) ^[14]

[Women](#) ^[15]

[UNC Press](#) ^[16]

Authors:

[Powell, William S.](#) ^[17]

Origin - location:

[Chapel Hill](#) ^[18]

[Carrboro](#) ^[19]

[Rowan County](#) ^[20]

From:

[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.](#)^[21]

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[4] <http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/>

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[12] http://www.uncpress.unc.edu/browse/book_detail?title_id=2831

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[20] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-13>

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