

Conscious Editing of Archival Description at UNC-Chapel Hill

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Abstract: Archivists at UNC-Chapel Hill are aspiring towards "conscious editing" of archival description. Our goal is to re-envision our descriptive practice so that whiteness is no longer the presumed default, so that language in description is inclusive and accessible, and so that description does not obscure sources of information about the lives of enslaved people. In August 2017 we discontinued our longstanding practice of marking racial identity selectively for underrepresented groups in our collection. Acknowledging the complexity around this practice, our policy is now to include racial identities for all people and families in the abstract field of our archival descriptions. Additionally, Wilson Special Collections Library has formed a task team dedicated to planning and executing the remediation of archival description in a transparent and collaborative manner; the first case study this group tackled was reworking the description of the Julian Shakespeare Carr papers to acknowledge Carr's white supremacy and the racist content in the collection. Finally, we are exploring revising the creator element in the archival description for the many plantation collections held in Wilson Library from the family name of the plantation owners and enslavers to the plantation itself as a corporate body and examining the resulting shift in the description. We have been tremendously inspired and influenced by other archivists' work in this area and would like to join the conversation, seek feedback and guidance on our approaches, and find collaborators in these efforts.

About the Author:

Jackie Dean is the Head of Archival Processing in the Wilson Special Collections Library at UNC-Chapel Hill. She has worked at Houghton Library at Harvard University, North Carolina State University, and the State Library of North Carolina.