



Emily Guthrie. Uncovering Coker: Revealing the Life of a Botanist through a Special Collections Exhibit. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. July, 2003. 80 pages. Advisor: David Carr

This paper describes the process of creating an exhibit of special collections materials for Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The materials included in the exhibit were selected to describe the life of William Chambers Coker, a botanist who taught at UNC during the first half of the twentieth century. The exhibit, undertaken as a thesis project by the author, coincided with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Coker Arboretum on the UNC campus.

Included in the paper are an analysis of the exhibit space in Wilson Library, delineating its limitations, preservation issues, and design possibilities; a review of exhibition theory literature and its relevance to library exhibits; a description of the exhibit research process and the breadth of resources available; and a discussion of the considerations that guided the selections of items for the exhibit.

Headings:

Coker, William Chambers, 1872-1953.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*Nearly 101 years ago, in the autumn of 1902, a man named William Chambers Coker (1872-1953) arrived in Chapel Hill prepared to teach botany courses in the biology department of the University of North Carolina. The young botanist already had a clear vision and immediately recognized the potential that the campus had for being one of the most beautiful in the country. Only one year after his arrival, he sought and received permission to create an arboretum on a parcel of the campus deemed unsuitable for development. It was Coker's tenacious spirit and the help of a few dedicated assistants that allowed him to succeed in creating what has become his most familiar and beloved legacy to the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Coker Arboretum.*

*The year 2003 marks the 100th anniversary of the Arboretum. While it is this legacy for which Coker is perhaps most well known, his numerous lesser-known contributions to the campus, and to the study of botany throughout the Southeast, are equally impressive.*

*With a slightly crooked smile and a tireless exuberance, Coker achieved more during the first half of the twentieth century than many of us would ever dream possible for one person. Branching off from the Biology Department, Coker established a separate*

*Botany Department, and as chairman, he ensured that this newly formed offspring added greatly to the University's academic reputation. To augment the department's resources, he collected and created tens of thousands of botanical specimens that formed the UNC herbarium. He collected botany books as well as the papers of famous botanists in order to study the history of the science. Many of these books were donated to the UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries, and after his death, his own personal and professional records were added to the Southern Historical Collection within UNC's Manuscripts Department.*

*Coker's passion for learning was instilled during his childhood in Hartsville, South Carolina. His passion for botany guided the direction of his life and inspired generations of his students to look more closely at their natural surroundings. Coker selected trees and shrubs to soften the edges of newly constructed buildings and to revitalize the surroundings of the older ones; and as if to build a living laboratory, he transformed the UNC campus into the lush green refuge that it is today.*

*And finally, as if he needed to add to his charm, Coker wrote poetry in his spare time — channeling small events and observations from his everyday life into verse.*

*The contributions that William Chambers Coker made to UNC-Chapel Hill gain importance with each passing year. As the bushes and trees cloaking the campus mature, the time has arrived to celebrate the life of a man whose vision and passion have left a*

*legacy that will be enjoyed for many years to come. (From the introductory essay for the exhibit, William Chambers Coker: The Legacy of a Lifelong Botanist)*

In the spring of 2003, the life of botanist William Chambers Coker was commemorated in an exhibit of manuscripts in the University of North Carolina's Wilson Library. The materials in this exhibition -- selected from UNC libraries and special collections -- comprised letters, books, photographs, and other materials. The presentation was designed to introduce a new generation of students to Coker, to stir the memories of those who knew him or knew of him, and to reveal the story of his life.

As the coordinator of the Coker Exhibit, my goal was to bring about its entire manifestation -- from its conception as an idea of the UNC library exhibit committee, through research and selection of materials, preparation, presentation, installation, publicity, and ultimate dismantling of the approximately 150-piece display eight months later.

The introductory essay featured above is a relatively seamless introduction to William Chambers Coker. Yet the characterizations made in the essay are a distillation of six months of research and planning. At the outset of the project, I knew nothing more about Coker than the fact that he had created and nurtured one of the most beloved parcels of UNC's campus -- the Coker Arboretum.

Along the way, as I frequently explained to different people what I was working on, I learned that my low level of familiarity with the name William Coker was representative of many. On the other end of the spectrum, there were those who knew not only that Coker had created the Arboretum, but also that he had formed UNC's Botany Department and served on its faculty for the first half of the twentieth century.

As a member of the former group, it may come as no surprise that a chain of questions about how the Coker Exhibit would take form soon emerged. The questions began with the basic and moved toward the complex. In retrospect, it becomes clear that the questions surrounding the development of the Coker Exhibit fell into two main categories.

The first group of questions had to do with the intellectual content of the exhibit. Many of the items that were chosen for the exhibit came from Coker's own collection (the William Chambers Coker Papers, #3220) within UNC's Southern Historical Collection. There were other collections (as well as materials from other libraries) that supplemented what was found in this group, but the bulk of the burden of revealing Coker fell upon the body of his own papers. The Coker Collection is composed of approximately 27,000 items and is housed in twenty-three large boxes. Would what was within those boxes reveal who Coker was? Could accurate conclusions be made, based in large part on the twenty-three boxes of what Coker left behind?

With this volume of material, one might suppose that there would be more than enough to choose from for an extensive exhibition. Yet, unlike the

type of evidence sought by a biographer while doing research for a book, Coker's evidence would not only have to reveal his personality and accomplishments in words, but do so in a visually interesting way. What were the chances of being able to use these materials to piece together an exhibit that was enlightening, honest, and visually appealing? Would the evidence be misleading or incomplete? How would I know if it was?

Content questions of how to appease the body of potential visitors for such an exhibit also arose. Although Coker was a renowned botanist during his time, his legend has since been somewhat localized. If someone like myself -- a relative newcomer to both UNC and the Chapel Hill area -- was not familiar with Coker's achievements, chances are there would be visitors to the exhibit who were equally as clueless. But, there was also a sizeable group who *were* familiar with Coker, and who were eager to see the exhibit. How could the exhibit tell the story of Coker in such a way as to balance the interests of these two groups? I could only hope to locate materials that appealed to everyone's familiarity with the campus. I thought of a quotation from the Australian Memorial War Museum: "If you were there you'll *know*. If you weren't, you can *imagine*."

To answer the intellectual needs of the audience alone would not suffice.

Would it make a difference to have knowledge of the demographics of the supposed audience? And if so, how would this information factor into the exhibit's physical manifestation? These factors could come into play in the design stages of the exhibit planning process. If, for example, it had been noted through observation that the majority of visitors *appeared* to be over the age of 65,

then it may have been safe to assume that a larger font size should be used for exhibit labels and captions.

Regrettably, within the time frame of the exhibit, determination of demographics was limited to informal observation of visitors to the previous exhibit, both at its opening reception and upon other occasions. While the informal observations made at this single exhibit were better than nothing, it would have been preferable to make such observations at a few other such exhibits in Wilson Library in order to determine the differences among visitors to disparate exhibits.

The second group of questions addresses the presentation, or design, of the exhibit. While some may argue that the content of an exhibit is the most important factor, it is without question that the presentation of the content is equally important. As mentioned, elements such as the font size used in the item labels and captions can play a role in the ability of visitors to enjoy the experience. This is a problem that is relatively easy to resolve. Of more difficulty was a design concern that arose during the review and selection of materials. It became clear, as will be discussed in further detail later, that many of the materials in the Coker Collection were rich in content but severely lacking in visual appeal. The question then became, should such materials be used anyway? Could the appearance of such materials be enhanced as to increase the level of visual appeal? Most of the Coker Collection is arranged chronologically, and while it would be easy to select a certain number of items from each era of his life, it is easy to imagine how this could result in a rather stale display. Likewise, if items were selected strictly for their physical beauty, the resulting

display may be attractive, but lack the ability to engage the viewer or fully represent its subject.

A major design consideration was the exhibit room. It was plain to see that the room had limitations. The lighting was minimal and inconsistent, and the display cases left much to be desired. The question of if, and how, these obstacles could be used to advantage was present from the start of the project.

Inevitably, questions about the value of library exhibits emerged. Perhaps it is typical of anyone faced with a large project to question the importance of his or her work at some point along the way. While working on the project in the months prior to its installation, I would often pass through the exhibit room en route to another destination and find it completely empty. The only sign of life was the librarian's hard work, revealed through the items and labels filling each case. Was anyone looking? Did anyone care? What, then is the value of the library exhibit if no one looks? Do they justify the time and expense involved? Are they ultimately anything more than a diversion (or hassle) for the librarian?

The challenges presented during the preparation of the Coker Exhibit were both technical and intellectual. This is not surprising, in retrospect, as either a scientific or subjective approach may be taken in creating an exhibit. Ideally, a balanced approach will be incorporated.

The questions presented above led me to consider concepts and possibilities that I otherwise might not have considered. They guided my

choices and decisions over the course of creating the Coker exhibit, leading me to consider the value of the opposite before making a final decision. Most of these questions – issues of who Coker was, how to relay his life through an exhibition, the suitability of the available documents and artifacts for display, the difficulties of the exhibit room, the constraints of narrative, and the application of exhibition theory to a library exhibit– were brought to resolution at various points during the process.

In the following sections, I will provide the answers to these questions as they evolved during the process of creating the Coker Exhibit.

Section II provides a review of literature relevant to exhibition theory and includes discussion of the value of library exhibits; the role of interpretation and the efficacy of exhibit text; and the impact of exhibit design and layout on the visitor’s level of engagement.

Section III discusses the process of creating the Coker Exhibit and incorporates five tasks: an analysis of three components of the exhibit room – its dimensions, lighting, and display areas; a discussion of the breadth of available resources and how they were located; the processes of review & selection of exhibit materials; the composition of the interpretive text; and the general design, or “look”, of the exhibit

Section IV provides final conclusions and observations.

The goal of relaying the story of the creation of the Coker Exhibit is to provoke consideration -- in librarians and patrons alike -- of the potential stories that manuscripts and photographs (among other special collections material) have to tell. For librarians and archivists, the paper may answer questions of how effectively a life may be revealed through an exhibition of library materials, and remind or enlighten them to unique considerations during the exhibit planning process.

At best, library exhibits will heighten the experience of the library visit -- allowing the patron to expect more, and stimulating the quest for knowledge. Just as the reader may find his or her self reflected in the pages of a book, the library patron may relate to, and be inspired by, the story told through exhibit items.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to compare the process of creating the Coker Exhibit to the ideas and methods currently being generated by museum professionals, research that specifically addresses ideas and solutions relevant to these concerns was examined. Pertinent subjects include the comparison of libraries to museums as a means of defining the value of exhibits in the former; the role of intuition and inherent subjectivity during review and selection of exhibit materials; and the challenges of communicating the relevance of the materials to the exhibit and to the viewers' experiences through presentation and interpretation.

### The Value of Library Exhibits

In a library, a visitor will typically self-select materials in response to his or her needs and interests. Access to such materials is usually gained through the use of tools such as a catalog, or with the assistance of a library staff member. And so, the visit to the library may be seen as a self-directed transaction between patron and book, facilitated by catalog, and directed by librarian. This would seemingly leave the librarian with a surfeit of time for activities such as exhibit development.

As noted in the introduction, the majority of literature that explores exhibit development is written by and/or for museum professionals.

Regrettably, there is a deficit of available research regarding library exhibits. Considering this deficit, it may be useful to examine literature relevant to museum exhibits to define the experience of creating a library exhibit. This may be done under the assumption that libraries, like museums, are cultural institutions responsible for building and preserving collections and presenting them to the public for their use (physical and/or intellectual) and enjoyment.

It is safe to assume that the majority of museum visitors go to a museum with the intention of viewing an exhibit, but this is not quite so easily presumed of library visitors. Certainly (with adequate publicity) there are individuals who visit a library in anticipation of seeing an exhibit. More frequently however, patrons will chance upon the exhibit as they come to the library to check out books, to study, or to use the computers. So, outside of the factors that actually draw visitors to the exhibits, are there fundamental differences between the objectives of these two groups that might inhibit the application of museum exhibit research to the library exhibit?

Visitor studies have shown that the stated objectives of museum exhibit visitors are to enjoy themselves and to identify themes and items relevant to their own experiences (Blais, 1998). Little to no research has been done on the motivational factors behind library exhibit visits, but it may be safely assumed that patrons hope to enjoy themselves and to identify themes and items relevant to their own experiences, as do visitors to a museum.

From the perspective of the library staff, if the development of an exhibit is looked upon as an opportunity rather than a dreaded chore, and if it is created

thoughtfully and with the community's interests in mind, questions of worth and expense will fall by the wayside.

Librarians Dutka, Hayes, and Parnell from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) argue that the development of the library exhibit should be held in the same esteem as other forms of scholarly output:

“In addition to traditional forms of scholarly output, such as books and journal articles, we have accepted for our faculty exhibit creation as a legitimate form of scholarly output. Based on our informal survey of library tenure documents and anecdotal examples, it seems that other institutions are recognizing this scholarly effort. There is no question that the standards for quality and comprehensiveness of such exhibits are not uniform. However, our experience shows that if approached correctly, the exhibit offers an opportunity for a library faculty member or team to create a scholarly product. Exhibits call for our best thinking, research, writing, planning, organizing, and time... Most exhibits are time-based and not replicated for the professions like a publication. This should not minimize the potential professional growth offered by this type of scholarly endeavor ” (2001, p.20)

The UNCW librarians make a valid and worthy argument, yet library exhibits are not only to glorify the intellect of the librarian. Ultimately they are for the enjoyment of the patron.

The staff of the Louisville Free Public Library in Kentucky, upon successfully arranging to bring an exhibit of a Gutenberg printing press and other items from a museum in Germany, quickly delineated the four main goals for their two-month exhibit: raised visibility for the library throughout the community; developed person-to person staff interaction with new audiences; expanded recognition for the library as a quality cultural institution; and heightened perception of the library as a valuable community asset. As a reward for their efforts, the library drew in 103,000 visitors over eight weeks and attracted the attention of prominent Louisville residents to serve on their board.

(Morton, 2001, p.40) No mention was made of an attempt to determine what the visitors learned from or enjoyed most about the exhibit, but perhaps the numbers alone speak to the level of enjoyment and engagement.

Dutka et al. concur that exhibits serve as a worthy mode of library outreach, adding, “We find that our interaction with potential and actual customers has changed over time. If an individual can get information via full-text searching for journals, he or she will no longer automatically come into our physical facility. Exhibits are just one method of drawing new customers.” (2002, p.21)

Dutka also expresses that exhibits are important to libraries as teaching tools; a venue for the promotion of unique yet seldom used collections; a means of “creating a buzz” or attracting media attention for the library; and an opportunity to recognize donors and possibly cultivate new ones.

### Interpretation and the efficacy of exhibit text

“In the museum, the interpreter can seldom come into contact with his visitor. In lieu of that, he must leave a message for him.” (Freeman, 1957, p.13)

The National Association of Interpretation (NAI) defines interpretation as “A communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.” (NAI Board of Directors, 2000, 1) Interpretation is a broad subject that may be seen to have applications in many disciplines. It is ultimately useful in the area of exhibit design and development as it promotes discussion of communication, through items and their labels or captions, between a curator and the viewer.

Whereas it may be a temptation for an exhibit curator to create exhibits that only reflect his or her knowledge and experience, it is clearly not good practice. The field of interpretation encourages the transmission of information between curator and visitor / viewer in a way that is mutually beneficial. When the interpreter has made a successful connection between the items in an exhibit and the experiences of the visitor, he or she will likely be rewarded by the success of the exhibit.

The principles of interpretation have been defined and redefined by both museum and conservation professionals. Freeman Tilden, in his 1957 oft-cited *Interpreting Our Heritage*, was one of the first to put forth guidelines for interpretation. His principles may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
- 2) Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. All interpretation includes information.
- 3) Interpretation is an art. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- 4) The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- 5) Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address the whole man rather than any phase.
- 6) Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. (Tilden, 9)

More recent generations of individuals interested in this subject have updated and expanded Tilden's original six principles. Beck and Cable incorporated cognitive map theory with interpretation: "Effective interpretation produces external stimuli that trigger existing maps, thereby allowing the audience to 'get it' and store the information in relation to other information they already possess. If the interpreter expresses irrelevant or completely unfamiliar information, the existing maps will not be triggered." (2002, p.9)

Uzzell and Ballantyne suggest performing “front-end evaluation” (carried out in the early stages of the planning process) as a means of assessing the appropriateness of an interpretive solution to a particular problem. They suggest the following questions (1998,p.190):

- Who are your visitors and where do they come from?
- What facilities and services do they require?
- How do visitors perceive the museum or interpretive site?
- What made them visit the museum in the first place?
- What do visitors know about the interpretive theme of the exhibit?

Bella Dicks cites a failure on behalf of the exhibit-producing community to “examine how the meanings produced through the construction of exhibitions can be linked through to their consumption by visitors” (2000, p.62). Dicks conducted interviews with 45 visitors to an exhibit at a “heritage” museum. The exhibit portrayed a particular diminished culture. The visitors were interviewed both before and after viewing it. Before the exhibit, visitors were asked to describe what they knew about the culture. After the exhibit, they were asked to describe the experience and relay any new information or realizations they had encountered as a result. While Blais (1998) names pre- and post-exhibit questioning as an overused and perhaps ineffective evaluation technique (he feels that it is more important to “map people’s minds” by assessing how a subject is perceived by various individuals), Dicks was able to draw intelligent and visitor-centered conclusions from the gathered information. Most notable was Dicks’ conclusion that there is frequent disparity between the communication styles of exhibit creators and exhibit visitors, especially in relation to history exhibits. She suggests that further research is necessary to

determine how visitors use exhibit text to “map their own experiences and life worlds” (2000, p.79). Dicks is suggesting in this way that it will be useful to examine how and when exhibit designers/creators and visitors make like interpretations of exhibit themes. Freeman aptly notes that, “The visitor ultimately is seeing things through his own eyes, not those of the interpreter, and he is forever and finally translating your words as best he can into whatever he can refer to his own intimate knowledge and experience.” (1957, p.14)

Anita Zeigler and John Surber performed an experiment at an exhibit of artifacts of the Plains Indian Religion in a natural history museum. Their goal was to examine how study participants “read”, or comprehend, museum exhibits. To this end, they adapted the text-comprehension methodologies of R.E. Johnson. Johnson’s methods indirectly ask the participants to determine the “importance structure” in a text by having them read passages and mark places at which they would pause were they reading the texts aloud. Johnson’s method also takes into consideration the idiosyncratic interests of the readers. Zeigler and Surber felt that Johnson’s method would be “particularly suitable” to the determination of visitor comprehension of exhibits (1999, p.4). They anticipated that the experiment would show that visitors/study participants would agree on the importance structure of the exhibit, and that the unique *interests* of the visitors would influence their importance judgments of the exhibit items. The authors concluded that their research made two major contributions: effective proof that past experiments designed to evaluate reader comprehension of text may have parallel applications in evaluation of exhibit comprehension; and that with their research they have developed a useful tool for studying how exhibit

information can be structured to increase the comprehensibility of exhibits (1999, p. 13).

### Exhibit Design and Layout

Should the layout of an exhibit space be a consideration in shaping a learning experience for the exhibit visitor? Researchers Bourdeau and Chebat (2001) propose that the physical space of an exhibit is indeed a factor. In an effort to measure the degree to which this is true, they directed a group of study participants along a planned route through an exhibit, while a second group was given no direction. Through qualitative observation of the participants' movements through the space, Bourdeau and Chebat sought evidence that a visitor's interest in display materials is augmented by the physical arrangement of a display space. Upon exiting the gallery, visitors were simply asked to sketch the path taken through the exhibit, and there were no interviews conducted with the gallery visitors. The lack of further interaction with the study participants is a weak spot in their study. Flow was observed, but to what end? Bourdeau and Chebat concluded that "the path followed by subjects during their visit is conditioned by the design of the exhibition galleries", and that "individuals can visualize the layout of exhibition galleries even though they have only visited them once" (2001, p.12). I had greater hopes for their conclusions. Although presumably drawn from thorough and trained observation, the conclusions seem to be based on speculation or existing knowledge. At best, the conclusions confirm the obvious. While observation is a useful research method (Patton,1990)

it is only made more powerful when combined with the visitor's insight and perception of the experience (Wolf, 1990, p.212).

In the distant but not unrelated field of information architecture, Clement Mok (1996) offers the following principles (among others) of gathering information in a *virtual* space: the focus of the user should be on content rather than format or navigation, and the user should be able to control the rate of movement through material (or an exhibit). These principles may hold true for individuals who are purposefully or inadvertently gathering information from an exhibit space. Of information architecture in virtual space, author Scott Warren states, "When confronted by a situation that utilizes navigational and spatial metaphors like site, architecture, location, and surfing (all words describing physically real spaces)...the human mind attempts to forge a familiar artificial world to accommodate and integrate its experience in gathering information." (Warren, 2001, p.139) Similarly, navigators of an exhibit space are attempting to "forge a familiar artificial world" by identifying themes and items relevant to their own experience. They are attempting to draw parallels between the known and unknown.

Through review of this small portion of relevant literature, one may conclude that the visitor's interest level may be enhanced (using texts, spaces, objects, and images) when their basic knowledge level is evoked. The most interesting and meaningful exhibits result from a planning process that considers the experiences and opinions of the visitors. It is clearly difficult to achieve a balance of interests, and at times it would seem that such exhibit evaluation as

described in these studies opens up the possibility that every component of an exhibit will be simultaneously praised and scorned (Korenec & Young, 1991). As the mathematician Blaise Pascal once said, "Too much noise deafens us; too much light dazzles us; too much distance or too much proximity impedes vision; too much length or too much brevity of discourse obscures it; too much truth astonishes us."

At the same time it ensures that the individuals on the other side of the exhibit walls are accounting for differing values and perspectives when measuring exhibit impact. Analyses of exhibit evaluation methods seem to support such visitor inclusive approaches. Indeed, evaluation of an exhibit is ideal way to determine necessary improvements and generate ideas for future exhibits. Yet libraries rarely have the staff time and budget allotment to evaluate their exhibits. Time constraints precluded the possibility of measuring the impact of the Coker Exhibit on its visitors.

Regardless, the results of such studies provide useful lessons to the exhibit coordinator, and generate thought-provoking questions to bear in mind during the exhibit development process. Robert Wolf reminds both exhibit and research designers to consider the following questions: Were the visitors' lives enriched? Did they have a meaningful experience? Will the experiences bring them back, and why? What specific aspects of the experience seemed to be the most engaging? What behaviors were exhibited? (1990, p.210) While he is not suggesting that the solution is to directly ask these questions, he is encouraging those involved in designing exhibits (and exhibit evaluation) to remember that visitors are the reason for the exhibit.

### III. PROCESS

At the outset of the Coker Exhibit, a work plan for the completion of the project was devised. The plan delineated specific tasks and the deadlines by which they were to have been completed. (*See Appendix A*)

A strong concern that arose at this point and which remained on the forefront through the planning stages was the question of how best to determine the number of items needed, for lack of a more graceful phrase, to fill the cases. The layout of the exhibit room was already somewhat familiar to me, and I could easily recall the look of previous exhibits there. But when faced with the task of filling the cases, the room suddenly became shrouded in mystery. Any time spent there at this stage would serve to unveil it.

It was anticipated that a determination of the dimensions of each case and the total square footage would be useful in answering the question. In addition, the measurements of the exhibit room itself would prove to be useful in determining how the cases could be reconfigured within the space if and when this became necessary.

The primary obstacle presented by the physical aspects of the exhibit room would turn out to be lighting. Lighting was one of the three components of the space that was examined during the analysis. Also examined were the display cases and the overall measurements of the room.

### A. Physical Space: Dimensions, Lighting, and Display Areas

The exhibit took place in the “Melba Remig Saltarelli Exhibit Room”, which is located on the third floor of UNC’s special collections library, Wilson Library. The room is dauntingly large at 2,464 square feet. It is a long rectangular hallway that originally served as the card catalog area when Wilson Library was the main library on the campus.

The exhibit room was analyzed in consultation with individuals who had created exhibits there in the past. The consultation provided an insider’s view of the previously unnoted limitations and possibilities for the space, as well as useful information about security issues. A measured drawing of the room was made, including each case and its dimensions.

#### Overall Measurements

The following observations were made about overall dimensions and layout:

The exhibit room measures approximately thirty-two by seventy-seven feet. The south wall (77’) features three inset display cases grouped in the center of the wall. The opposing north wall has three entries/exits, including the entrance to the Rare Books Reading Room. Only the south wall may be used for display purposes. Spanning the east-west length of the room is a series of display units, which as a group, divides the room into two long walkways. The aisle flanking the north wall is generally not used as exhibit space due to limitations of the security system.

## Lighting

As mentioned, lighting was of concern. An initial impression of the room was that it was surprisingly dark for its purposes. The following observations on lighting were included in the final analysis of the space:

The exhibit room features several skylights that allow for natural lighting. As the skylights are grouped above the center of the room, the ends of the gallery are considerably darker than the center. Overall, the gallery is dimly lit. The only electric fixtures are small sconces spaced widely along the south, east, and west walls. Three display cases inset in the south wall feature fluorescent lighting thinly disguised by a plastic lattice screen. There are three large freestanding display cases that are independently lit by one fluorescent tube each. As none of the remaining display units features its own lighting system, visibility of materials in cases is limited to daylight hours.

The minimal lighting in the exhibit room was difficult obstacle to circumvent. It failed to provide a comfortable level of visibility for the items on display, and one may easily assume that when visitors to the exhibit are not able to easily view and/or read the materials, they will be more likely to make an early departure. Conversely, while the lighting was not consistently bright enough to view the exhibit easily, it may be maintained at such a level for preservation reasons. The low wattage minimizes the threat of damage from ultraviolet rays to the rare books, photographs, and manuscripts that are frequently displayed there. Shahani and Wilson, in their article, "Preservation of Libraries and Archives", address this issue in the following statement: "Exposure of library and archive collections to light is not usually a serious factor except for

items on exhibit...Some dyes and related compounds, lignin, and metal ions can absorb light in the near ultraviolet and visible region of the spectrum, and in their excited states induce photo-sensitized degradation of cellulose." (1987, p.243) In other words, as exhibit items are subjected to light over the lifespan of an exhibit, the materials of which they are composed (namely paper and cloth) will run an increased risk of becoming brittle or otherwise fragile.

Whether this is the real reason behind the dim lighting in the room, or if the room is dark as a result of budgetary limitations or poor design, is uncertain.

### Display Cases

The display cases in the Melba Remig Saltarelli Exhibit Room provided an approximate total of 82 square feet of space for the flat display of items, and 280 square feet for materials displayed upright. Descriptions of the display units were included in the analysis:

INSET CASES: Three cases built into the south wall. Especially appropriate for exhibit items that may have conservation issues, as the light in these cases is relatively uniform throughout the case, yet temperate. These are also the most secure cases. Each features two glass shelves that are adjustable and capable of holding relatively heavy items. As each case is lit from the top, the items on the glass shelf will cast shadows on the items below it. As such, care must be taken to ensure the visibility of the materials in the lower areas. Reproductions of original materials may be suspended from the plastic lattice ceiling of these cases to maximize the use of the space.

**COLUMNS:** Three square columns are evenly spaced along the center aisle of the room. Each features black display boards to which facsimiles may be affixed with Velcro tabs. The outermost panels of the end columns are in constant shadow, and should be reserved for large and/or bright materials. Because the columns are not secure, only facsimiles may be displayed on them.

**FREESTANDING GLASS CASES:** Three freestanding glass cases are placed against the south wall of the exhibit room. Although they are freestanding, they are also extremely heavy and would be difficult to move. Each features adjustable glass shelves. The shelves are only seven inches deep and cannot support large or heavy items. The floor of each case may be utilized and serves as suitable space for heavier items. Items on the shelves must be placed on easels. If items such as labels or facsimiles are to be affixed to the backdrop of the case, this must be done using thumbtacks, as Velcro tabs will not stick. The fluorescent lighting in these cases is supplemented by the wall sconces directly outside of each.

**HORIZONTAL CASES:** The cases provided for the horizontal, or flat, display of items are tables of various sizes with glass tops. The display surfaces of these cases are between twenty-five and thirty inches from the ground, creating a long distance between the items and the eye of the adult viewer. Items such as books and photographs may be visible, but care should be used when selecting items that require the viewer to read them. Likewise, item labels should be created in a large font for readability. The glass tops on many, if not most, of the tables are badly scratched. When placed under the skylights, a glare is cast upon the glass, increasing the visibility of the scratches, and decreasing the visibility of the

display materials within each case. The display surface of each case is a board covered in off-white fabric.

### Observations

The Melba Remig Saltarelli exhibit room is strikingly elegant. It was renovated within the last fifteen years, but would benefit tremendously from another renovation under the consultation of designer or architect. The color of the room and the display cases show unflattering signs of age. The atmosphere may be described as cavernous, and as such is less than inviting to visitors. Hence, the confines within which the exhibit coordinator must work potentially limit the magnitude of an exhibit's success. Idealistically, one may think that the qualities of the items on display and their interpretive text would be all that matters; or that a visitor worth his or her salt will be so engaged by the materials as to be able to overlook, so to speak, technical issues such as glare and dim lighting. As Eudora Welty once said, "Place is one of the lesser angels – feeling wears the crown." In reality, however, the physical qualities of an exhibit space play no small part in the enjoyment of the exhibit and its subsequent success or failure. Every visitor deserves to be able to see the exhibit.

It may be worth mentioning here that the exhibits mounted in Wilson Library have somewhat of a guaranteed audience. It is necessary for patrons to pass through the exhibit room in order to reach the Rare Book Collection. The room is the first area a visitor comes to as the main staircase from the front entrance of the building is ascended. The special collections held by Wilson

Library attract visitors from all over the country, and students from all over the campus. This is not to say that all who pass through stop and look, but unlike a museum or art gallery, there is a steady flow of visitors who chance upon the exhibit en route to further destinations.

The pool of likely visitors also includes the “Friends of the Library”, donors who have vested interest in the library, and who receive invitations to each exhibit opening. Attendance at several exhibit openings in Wilson Library may lead one to easily conclude that the majority of “Friends” are well into their senior years. It may be easily assumed that more direct and consistent lighting, as well as updated display cases would greatly facilitate their enjoyment of exhibits in this space.

The fact remains, however, that the exhibit space in Wilson Library is part of a state university and is subject to fluctuations in budgetary allotments. Similar remarks can be made about most libraries, academic or other, whose budgets reasonably go first toward the development of the collection and toward staff salaries. Library exhibit spaces are luxuries of sorts and, because they are not typically the top draw for patrons, minimal funds may be allotted to their upkeep.

It may superfluous to add that any exhibit coordinator who uses the Wilson Library exhibit room must develop creative means to reach a successful end. All spaces within the Melba Remig Saltarelli exhibit room are not created equal. Creative adjustments were made for the Coker Exhibit in an attempt to balance enhanced visibility with sound preservation practice. The display boards in the tabletop cases were wrapped in a dark fabric, a measure taken to

allow the display items to be distinct from the backdrop (originally an off-white) and to reduce the effect of the glare from the skylights above. Many of the items, namely letters and photographs, displayed vertically in the upright cases were affixed to dark mat board for the same reasons. Each of the item labels, or text cards, featured a font size of 20+ in order to increase the legibility behind the glass and in shadowy areas of the exhibit room.

Some of the letters selected for display that would have been legible under ideal conditions, but whose legibility was compromised by the physical conditions, were displayed in their original form and accompanied by text cards with enlarged, transcribed quotations from the body of the document. This technique was also used for handwritten documents that were perfectly visible, but whose illegibility was a result of the author's style of penmanship.

The analysis of the room was useful in moving toward an answer to the original question of how many items would be necessary for an exhibit there. It was never assumed that the answer would magically arrive in the form of a number or formula. Rather, a catalog of mental images from having examined the room in-depth, as well as a stack of measured drawings would serve as points of reference during the research, review, and selection phases of the exhibit preparation.

## B. Research

At the time the exhibit project was assigned, William Chambers Coker was but a name I associated with UNC's Coker arboretum. I regret that I knew literally nothing about Coker. There were no biographies of his life and few living individuals who had known him personally. At times it seemed that the library would have been better served in this purpose by someone who already knew the story of his life and accomplishments and need only pick out the letters and photos that would best relay that story to others. Regardless, this was indeed my story to "write", and to compensate for my initial ignorance, I sought out people who had indeed known him or who were intimately familiar with his work.

No further definitive technique was followed during the research phase. I simply let each resources direct me to the next, and made sure that all realistic possibilities were exhausted.

### Personal Sources

As mentioned, the impetus for the exhibit was the impending 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Coker Arboretum. The anticipation of the anniversary inspired a flurry of ideas for ways in which to celebrate. The anniversary inspired Coker's niece, Mary Coker Joslin, an accomplished educator and author, to write about her uncle. Her writings were co-published by the University Library and Botanical Garden Foundation under the title, *Essays on William Chambers Coker, Passionate Botanist* in the spring of 2003.

I was fortunate to receive an early draft of the book during the first few weeks of the project. Joslin had spent countless hours in UNC's Manuscripts Department and North Carolina Collection poring over the written evidence of her uncle's life. The outcome of her research was a series of thoughtfully composed essays that defined Coker's personality, the magnitude of his interests, and his lengthy list of accomplishments. Most importantly, the essays served as a personal introduction to Coker by someone who knew him well.

*Essays on William Chambers Coker, Passionate Botanist* features chapters with titles including "The Student; Early Life", "The Mycologist", "The Field Botanist", "Founder of the Herbarium", and "The Teacher and His Students". Other sections include personal recollections that reveal much about Coker's endearing, intense, and quite often humorous ways. At the time that I read the book, I had not yet looked at any of the primary source materials relevant to Coker, and the citations in the book offered a preview of the types of materials I would find in the Coker Papers and guided me toward other sources of relevant material.

Ms. Joslin was very excited that her uncle was to be commemorated in an exhibit, and eventually we arranged to meet. I had contacted her not long after reading her book. I had made a cursory perusal of the manuscript collections, and noting that the collections were largely comprised of typed letters and mimeographs, I contacted her to see if she had, and would be willing to provide, any personal items that had belonged to Coker.

It is important for a biographical exhibit to bring the individual in question to life for the viewers. While this may be done to some degree of

success using only letters and photographs, everyday items such as tools, glasses, etc., serve to draw the viewer in and touch his or her experience.

Regrettably, Joslin did not have any such artifacts to offer. She was kind enough, however, to put together a mini-exhibit of the Coker materials that she did have. Included in this group were family photographs and early publications by and about Coker. When we met, she had laid all of the materials out on her dining room table and gave an explanation of each item and its significance. As she was familiar with the credentials of Wilson Library, she offered to lend any of the items for the purpose of the exhibit.

She, in turn, was eager to get an idea of how Coker would be portrayed in the exhibit. It was not difficult to perceive that she had reservations surrounding this issue. It was later revealed that her father, a prominent South Carolina businessman, had been cast in a negative light in an article written by a UNC history professor. Proper characterization of Coker was a guiding concern. I did not foresee finding any scandalous materials buried within the papers of the humble botanist, yet if I did, was it or was it not my obligation to reveal the complete spectrum of his life? While it would not have been an obligation, it would have been a conscious choice. Indeed nothing scandalous was found and Joslin was assured that the exhibit would focus strictly on Coker's numerous accomplishments and the passion for botany that he inspired in his students and community.

Joslin accepted an early draft of the exhibit item list. She reviewed it thoroughly and offered helpful feedback and suggestions. Thus our meeting was of mutual benefit. She was assured that the exhibit would stem from the

best of intentions, and I learned a tremendous amount about the individual who was the subject of the exhibit.

Bill Burk, the longtime librarian at Couch Biology Library in UNC 's Coker Hall, introduced me further to Coker. Although Burk did not know him personally, he has become a scholar on Coker's career and the careers of other botanists of UNC. He collects materials about their lives, and is probably the person most familiar with the range of materials that would prove to be useful in creating the Coker Exhibit. Burk and his assistant, Jeffery Beam, compiled a list of the types of information they could provide. They offered to confirm the list of specimens named by and for Coker in the UNC Herbarium and identify copies of Coker's publications in the Couch Biology Library that he had annotated. Burk and Beam were consulted on numerous occasions over the course of the exhibit's development. They uncovered a lantern-slide viewer, or delineascope, that Coker had used in the laboratory and classroom, a microscope from the early years of the Botany Department, and papier-mache mushroom models, and offered all for inclusion in the exhibit. Their ability to verify or dispute my findings about Coker was invaluable.

The North Carolina Botanical Gardens in Chapel Hill proved to be another useful resource. The idea for the NCBG was conceived by Coker and Dr. Henry Roland Totten in the 1920's, but did not come to be until decades later. As the NCBG was to play a leading role in the publication of Mary Coker Joslin's book and the events surrounding the Coker Arboretum centennial celebration,

members of the staff had heard of the Coker Exhibit being planned for Wilson Library. As had been done with Joslin, their assistance in locating artifacts relevant to Coker's life and work was sought. During my research on early 20<sup>th</sup> century botanists, I found frequent mention of a device called a vasculum. A vasculum is a simple metal tube or box in which collected plant specimens could be kept on field expeditions. The NCBG staff had, of course, heard of such things, and kindly dug one up from deep within one of their closets. It had not belonged to Coker, but rather to Totten. Regardless, it added dimension and visual interest to the exhibit where it was much needed.

Finally, I contacted the UNC Herbarium. It was revealed through my research and through Joslin's book that Coker had been largely responsible for collecting and/or mounting most of the specimens in the herbarium. The UNC Herbarium is one of the largest and most renowned in the Eastern United States. It seemed important to pay tribute to Coker's efforts in this area by including a few specimens. The intentions for the exhibit were explained to a staff member of the herbarium, and together we selected one specimen that Coker had collected and mounted, and one that had been named after him. Also in their collection was an uncatalogued copy of Coker's *Trees of the Southeastern United States*. When it was opened, one of Coker's poems fell, or leaped, out.

### Primary and Secondary Source Materials

As the Coker Exhibit was to be composed primarily of original materials generated by and about Coker during his life, it was expected that the majority of time would be spent sifting through boxes of letters and photographs in the UNC

Manuscripts Department. Indeed most of the research period was spent in this way, all the while learning about Coker and flagging items for potential inclusion.

During this endless reading of manuscripts I was often overwhelmed with the possibilities for the exhibit. The task led me down a multitude of roads, many of which reached dead ends. A cursory perusal indicated that the material addressed an array of subjects, from the mundane to the fascinating. I realized that, although I only intended to get a sense of what the collection contained, I was already making selections for the exhibit. Guidelines for selection at that stage were informal. In retrospect it becomes obvious that the items that were easy to relate to, spontaneously created (seemingly), and/or unique in format were being selected. Such qualities alone did not qualify the items for inclusion in the exhibit, nor did they frame further selections, and yet they became importance in balancing out the more formal items selected later.

The William Chambers Coker Collection within UNC's Southern Historical Collection is comprised of approximately 27,000 items, and fills thirty-four linear feet of shelf space. As anticipated, it became the main source of materials for the exhibit. The finding aid to the Coker collection is lengthy. Its abstract reads as follows:

"Correspondence and varied other personal and professional records of Coker. University of North Carolina botanist, chiefly 1914-1950. Coker's papers concern family and personal matters; his research, writing, and international correspondence as a botanist; his activities at the University as a professor and as chairman of the Botany Department for 36 years; the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society Journal, of which he was editor, 1904-1945; and numerous civic interests. Also included are the files of the Highlands, NC Museum and Biological Laboratory, 1930-1950, and of a University-affiliated group founded by Coker to advise on the design and improvement of public school grounds, 1920-1925."

Coker was active for many years on the University's Buildings and Grounds Committee. The papers of this committee are held within the University Archives under the "Special Committees" section of the Faculty Affairs Division. This group proved to be a lively and useful bunch. Because many of the items within had relevance to both Coker and the UNC Campus, it was easy to select materials that would be of interest to viewers.

In addition, the papers of many of Coker's colleagues from the Botany Department and elsewhere in the University are held by the Manuscripts Department. This greatly facilitated location of letters written by Coker and the pairing of letters and responses. Most of the collections were accompanied by sets of photographs. Included in this group are the papers of Coker's former student, close friend, and fellow professor, Henry Roland Totten; the collection of another former student and later member of the Botany faculty, John Nathaniel Couch; the UNC Department of Botany Historical Collections as well as the Records of the Botany Department (within the University Archives); the papers of Coker's cousin and UNC zoology professor, Robert E. Coker, and more.

Coker was a prolific author and constant collector. His publications were, as could be expected, scientific in nature. Copies of each of his books are kept in the UNC libraries. As most of the books were published in the early part of the twentieth century, many have since been given new bindings. Fortunately, a few copies of Coker's books, in their original bindings (and featuring his annotations) are kept by the Couch Biology Library and the UNC Herbarium.

Coker also collected rare botany books for the use of his students. Many of these books dealt with mycology (the study of mushrooms and fungi), which was his main area of research. Several of the mycology books are held by the Rare Book Collection and feature beautiful hand-colored illustrations.

The Photographic Archive in Wilson Library was also a generative source of Coker materials. With the assistance of the photo archivist, several images of the Coker Arboretum (among other useful images) were located.

Finally, relevant newspaper articles, UNC yearbooks, and like publications were gleaned from the North Carolina Collection, a library whose collections include all things UNC and North Carolina.

Throughout the research process, a three-ring binder was used to organize ideas and materials. It held blank pages onto which daily notes and activities could be recorded. Duplications of important materials, such as schedules, emails, finding aids, photocopied letters and photographs from manuscript collections were easily secured and transported within its covers.

### Observations

As with most non-scientific research, the researcher seeks generative resources that will lead to a bevy of other resources that, once complete, will round out the body of knowledge of the subject. Research for the Coker Exhibit was no different. It was hoped that a selection of materials that could connect to tell the story of Coker's life would surface. It was hoped, as well, that the materials found would be intellectually stimulating and visually engaging. It

was hoped that such materials would leap out of the boxes as if they had been waiting for the opportunity for several years.

More often, they had to be sought out, coaxed, and reminded of their beauty and importance. There were exceptions. Some items immediately stood out as the defining artifacts of Coker's life. In Mary Coker Joslin's book, she quoted a 1902 letter in which Professor H.V. Wilson of the UNC Biology Department offered a young Coker the teaching position at UNC. There was no doubt that this handwritten letter, and its response from Coker, would be included in the exhibit.

Also of immediate appeal were certain notebooks found in the Coker Collection. They varied in purpose and subject. Some were Coker's from his time as a student at Johns Hopkins University. Some were the notebooks of other students, filled with notes taken in the classes Coker taught at UNC. The notebooks were appealing on a few levels. It seemed that the visitors would appreciate them because most everyone has kept a notebook and as such they were easy to relate to. They were also more spontaneous and less formal, revealing more about the personality of the authors than the letters that constituted the majority of the collections. They also contained some great sketches.

As has been alluded to, there were items located during the research phase that were rich in information but truly lacking in visual appeal. The Coker Collection itself was heavy with typed and unsigned copies of letters that Coker had written. He was a charming letter writer, and many of his most important ideas were expressed in this format. Had visitors to the exhibit taken the time to

read these letters, it is certain that they would have found them to be both enjoyable and informative. Yet, it was easy to anticipate that drawing the visitors toward such non-descript items would be challenging. I considered including more attractive labels that would introduce and explain the letters. Indeed this was done in some cases, but it seemed best to avoid giving the visitors more to read in an increasingly text-heavy exhibit. For such letters, I also considered temporarily affixing a facsimile of Coker's signature to the document to clarify for the viewer that it was written by Coker. This idea was rapidly nixed by my supervisor.

While gathering information about Coker's life and work, I gained an understanding of the breadth of his interests and accomplishments. I knew that it would not be possible to address all of them in the exhibit. But there were a few that were especially interesting and conducive to the role that storytelling plays in an exhibit.

One such accomplishment was hinted at within, of all places, an obituary of Coker from a July 1953 edition of the Chapel Hill Weekly newspaper. The obituary noted that, in his retirement, Coker and his wife Louise had dedicated time to trying to save a "great ocean-side forest that stretched from the vicinity of Little River to Myrtle Beach." Try as I might, I could not locate *any* further mention of this effort in letters, articles, or photographs. I could not even find evidence that there had been a "great ocean-side forest" in South Carolina. The volume of material in the Coker Collection begins to wane after Coker's retirement from UNC in the late 1940's, and the later years of his life are largely undocumented.

I also hoped to tell the story of how Coker searched for the remnants of the South Carolina garden of the 18<sup>th</sup> century botanist Andre Michaux. Mary Coker Joslin included this story in her book under the subtitle, "William Chambers Coker, Detective". Coker documented his pilgrimage to the site of the garden in a 1911 issue of the *Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society*. In this case, there were drafts of the article and black and white photographs of an overgrown parcel of land, but the *National Geographic*-type balance of adventure tale and unbelievable images did not come to be.

Conversely, there was an abundance of material about aspects of Coker's work that were of unquestionable importance, but which simply did not make good exhibit material -- at least not in a way that I could imagine. Examples of this include the aforementioned *Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society*. Coker served as the editor of this publication for most of his career, and many of his articles were published on its pages. Because this was such a large part of his life, it seemed as if there would be a gap in the exhibit if this role were left unaddressed. Yet as I looked over the relevant materials, I found that my interest was not sustained and could not help but wonder if it would have the same effect on exhibit visitors.

It may have been unwise to make the assumption that what is uninteresting to one will fail to be interesting to others. Considering the breadth of Coker's accomplishments, occasions such as this were frequent. It became necessary to ignore the drive to address all of his accomplishment regardless of appeal, and let the intuitive process take over. This in and of itself felt risky. I could only lean back on intuitive choice and what I knew of the potential pool of

visitors to make decisions about whether or not such material would engage them.

Once the breadth of materials had been examined, and before the review and selection process was officially begun, it was necessary to define the principles that would guide further selection of exhibit materials. Up until this point, certain items simply asked to be included. As mentioned they were of ten less formal, incorporating Coker's humor, or in a unique format, such as a notebook or sketch which could be easily related to the visitor's experience. When they were found, it was as if I had discovered more about who Coker was, as opposed to learning about what he achieved.

There are visitors who would prefer to know less about who Coker was, and more about what he did. In order to strike a balance, it would be necessary to select items that revealed such information. These items would frame the exhibit and create a timeline of Coker's life accomplishments. Thus a guiding principle during the selection process was to find further materials that revealed Coker's nature, and select items that defined his accomplishments.

As will be discussed in the following section, the review and selection process amounted to a balancing act. Items were sought for their ability to balance formal and informal interests, and visual appeal and informational content. Furthermore, with each selection, it was necessary to consider how it fit into and/or affected the body of items already selected.

### C. Review and Selection

“There are no uninteresting things, there are only uninterested people.”  
-Gilbert K. Chesterton, novelist

The process of reviewing and selecting materials for inclusion in the exhibit was not entirely distinct from the research phase. In fact, there were frequent overlaps between these two elements of the process.

Ultimately, the research phase resulted in a thick stack of note cards, each of which described a semi-finalist for inclusion in the exhibit. Note cards (or index cards) were kept close at hand while performing research. When a potentially exhibit-worthy item was identified, the following information was written on the card: its date (if known), the collection and/or library in which it was located, format (i.e. letter, photograph, book, etc.), size (for consideration in case designation and arrangement), and a lengthy description including potential use and relevance to other items. Note cards, as opposed to a written list, were originally selected for their portability and willingness to be shuffled and divided into stacks.

Once it was mostly certain that all of the relevant material had been examined, the note cards were reviewed and separated according to emergent themes. An original intention and a guiding motive during the research was to use the chapters of Joslin’s book as themes in the exhibit. Items that were in alignment with the chapters would be selected, and the display cases filled accordingly. This proved to be a useful way to get started. Eventually the approach became too restrictive. The materials found within the collections surpassed the limitations of the Joslin book or failed to come together in an

interesting way, and additional themes (or chapters) were devised. The message behind each grouping was also determined at this point. The items were divided into the following groups:

- I. **Early Life** (1872-1902): Sense of Coker Family interest in nature and Coker's burgeoning interest in botany
- II. **Mycology**: Why mushrooms?
- III. **Teacher** (1902-1946): Coker's dedication to lifelong learning and discovery as made evident through his teaching
- IV. **Campus Beautification Efforts**
  - a. Founder of the Arboretum: Coker's legacy to the campus
  - b. Campus Development: "Beauty of Chapel Hill is monument to Coker"(title of newspaper article)
- V. **Lifelong Collector / Field Botanist** : Dedication to botany; renowned regional expert
- VI. **Later Years** (1946-1953): Continued dedication to natural history
- VII. **Alma Holland Beers**: introduction to Coker's administrative assistant

For those items that did not fit into any of the categories, there was a miscellaneous pile. Only truly exceptional items were allowed to remain in the miscellaneous pile.

Once the themes were delineated, an attempt was made to determine how well the items in each category would work together as a group. Guiding questions included: Was there a balance of visual and non-visual materials appropriate to the theme? Were all of the sub-themes adequately represented? Were there too many or too few items to fill the designated case(s)? How could the intended message of each theme be enhanced (i.e. what, if any, additional materials would clarify the purpose of the grouping?)

The selection and grouping process amounted to a series of trials and errors. In response to the answers to these questions, some items were eliminated and others added to the groups. As the planning process moved on, the information on the cards was transcribed into a list arranged according to theme. At this stage it was important to be able to quickly see how the items were grouped and to share the information with others. The list was an easily replicable format for this purpose. (*See Appendix B*)

A group that was added late in the process was titled *Poetry*. In a manila envelope in a plastic shopping bag within an unprocessed addition to Coker's collection of manuscripts was a batch of poems that he had written. I had noticed bits and pieces of scribbled verse throughout the collection and assumed it was a hobby of his. Yet within the bag of poems was a letter from an editor at the UNC Press, critiquing poems that Coker apparently had submitted for publication. This discovery revealed a whimsical and less scientific side of Coker that was not otherwise evident in the selected exhibit materials. I thought that visitors would appreciate his verses, but I actually wondered how he would feel about having his poetry exposed to the public. Would he have been embarrassed or pleased? It was decided that, because Coker had attempted to have the verses published, it would be acceptable to include them in the exhibit.

While items for were selected for their ability to conform to the emergent themes, a strong effort was made to include materials, such as the aforementioned notebooks, that would relate to the visitors' own experiences. Freeman Tilden places strong emphasis on this idea: "The visitor is unlikely to respond unless what you have to tell, or to show, touches his personal

experience, thoughts, hopes, way of life, social position, or whatever else. If you cannot connect his ego...with the chain of your revelation, he may not quit you physically, but you have lost his interest...When a person reads a novel or sees a play, he instinctively measures the fictional behavior against what he imagines his own character and conduct, under such circumstances, to be." (1957, p.13)

As was noted earlier, many of the potential visitors had knowledge of and a certain fondness for the Coker Arboretum. In response to this, and of course in response to the centennial of the arboretum, arboretum-related materials formed one of the largest groups in the exhibit. The group included an early hand-drawn plan and key, multiple photographs of the arboretum, and letters by individuals remarking on their love of the Coker landmark. Of particular potential interest for visitors was a letter written by Coker himself. Addressed to Professor N.W. Walker and dated June 28, 1920, the letter described Coker's interaction with one particularly defiant student who picked the finest cluster of flowers in the arboretum to give to his female companion, and then refused to give Coker his name when he was caught in the act. The letter was unintentionally humorous, and it was suspected that its content would appeal to students and former students alike.

Also selected to relate to the experience of the visitor were several letters to Coker written by his young students. Content of the letters included pleas for financial assistance, requests for career advice, and arguments for grade changes – all themes that anyone who was ever a student may be able to relate to.

Selecting an array of items that were simultaneously informational, relevant to the viewer experience, pleasing to the eye, and legible despite the

physically challenged display cases was challenging. John Veverka, an exhibit evaluation consultant, suggests the following two questions for consideration when planning and/or critiquing an exhibit: Why would a visitor want to know this? And, how do you want the visitor to use the information the exhibit is presenting?"(n.d., p.6). It is unlikely that this balance of interests and requirements was achieved with each item or each case, but it was maintained as a goal throughout the selection process. Ideally, post-exhibit evaluation would have been performed to measure how close the Coker Exhibit came to reaching the goal.

#### D. Text

“I have found in the writing of inscriptions that it is of great advantage to have in mind some person of my acquaintance and write straight to him.” (Tilden, 1957, p.59)

Equally as challenging as the review and selection process was the task of composing the interpretive text to accompany the display items. Early on it was realized that the majority of the selected materials required the viewer to read them. Despite the fact that a large number of photographs and other visual materials were included, it was anticipated that the exhibit was going to be text-heavy. Perhaps erroneously, in retrospect, a decision was made to keep the interpretive text to a minimum and let the items speak for themselves. It seemed preferable, at the time, to not build upon the amount of reading required of the visitor.

The exhibit would have an introductory essay delineating Coker’s significance. Each item would be accompanied by a label naming the collection and/or library from whence it came, its date, and a designated title. Only a small percentage of the items would have further information.

Throughout the research stage, a list of quotations from a variety of sources was made. In some cases, they were derived from materials that were not strong enough, or inappropriately formatted, to stand alone; or from materials that contained information beyond which was interesting. Of quotations used in exhibits, Tilden says, “Sometimes a quotation will be found more effective than anything we can currently invent, to project the right mood into the reader” (1957, p.60). A quotation for each group or theme in the exhibit

was sought. It was thought that the quotation, when displayed prominently, would act as a surrogate for a straightforward explanation of the case's theme. An example of this is the following quote used in a display case containing items relevant Coker's childhood:

"The children's growing years at Hartsville had been outdoor years, where their waking interests were almost synonymous with the great variety and color of growing things... The Major talked of nature to the children, sitting together on the piazza or walking through the woods on Sunday afternoons. All the children were keen students, with respect for nature's inexorable processes, and there was in the family the feeling that to work with nature was worthy of a person's time and energy and best efforts." (From George Simpson's *The Cokers of Carolina*)

The display of items surrounding the quotation included photographs of Coker's mother and father, photographs of each of Coker's siblings, a photograph of Coker at age five, a letter written by Coker containing reminiscences of his early childhood, a notebook kept by Coker featuring a list of plants that grew in his hometown, and two late 19<sup>th</sup> century botany books for children.

Many excellent quotations were used. Although it was not always possible to find an entirely suitable match between quotation and display case, it seemed that this approach was, at best, a worthy experiment. The outcome of the experiment was not officially measured, yet it was noted that many visitors remarked upon their enjoyment of the quotations.

## E. Exhibit Design

It was suggested at the beginning of the project that the Coker Exhibit be given a general look. In response to this suggestion, the art nouveau style was chosen and manifested in the item labels and promotional materials.

Art Nouveau was selected for its undeniable beauty, and because it was a prominent style from around 1890 – 1920. The items selected for the exhibit, and the information presented in Mary Coker Joslin's book, suggested that it was during this same era that Coker made some of his most notable achievements. Items designed in this style were composed of organic shapes and lines (i.e. leaves, vines, and flowers) in a palette of earth tones (i.e. muted greens, browns, reds, etc.). Considered to be a reaction to the mass production of goods as a result of the Industrial Revolution, the style was intended to reflect an interest in nature and all things natural.

Finally, the exhibit was named. Banners and posters were soon to be made, and the graphic designers needed a definite title. It was certain that the word *legacy* should be included in the title, as it was appropriate to both the subject and the nature of the materials being exhibited. Many suggestions were solicited, and the suggestions were shaped and reshaped until one was settled upon. The exhibit was titled *William Chambers Coker: The Legacy of a Lifelong Botanist*.

#### IV. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Library exhibits, at their best, heighten the experience of the library visit, allow the patron to expect more from the library, and stimulate the quest for knowledge. Six months were allotted for the planning and preparation of the Coker Exhibit in Wilson Library. The exhibit was in place for two and a half months -- from February 1 through April 13, 2003.

As discussed at the beginning of the paper, I knew very little of Coker when I started the project. The Coker Exhibit was the finish line of a six-month long walk. The destination at the beginning of which was nebulous, but increased in clarity as I progressed. I knew that by the time the end of the road was reached, I would have to tell a story about Coker. The story would require the best qualities of any story, allowing the "listeners" to imagine themselves in such circumstances. So, along the way, bits and pieces of Coker's life were picked up and carried toward the end. The story would begin with the quote mentioned earlier: "If you were there you'll *know*. If you weren't, you can *imagine*."

Perhaps another traveler headed toward such a destination would have chosen a different route. Had the destination been reached by a group rather than an individual, it is easy to imagine how the members of the group would

have struggled to agree on a route, about what to pick up along the way, and about who got to tell the story once the destination was reached.

Regardless of who was making the journey, the story told at the end is inevitably filtered through personal experience.

The path taken by the exhibit coordinator is, to some degree, a reflection of the interests of its creator and the creator's ideas about society. When working alone, or possibly even when working with a group, the coordinator is sometimes called upon to make assumptions about the interests and experiences of their anticipated audience. The assumptions result in the need to make educated yet intuitive choices about what items will simultaneously relate to the subject and the experiences of the visitor.

The process of planning the exhibit on my own left me with both a deficit and a benefit. There were numerous occasions on which I definitely would have welcomed the opinions and advice of individuals with experience in library exhibits. Those opinions that were received were put to good use.

The benefit of having the entire exhibit in my hands was that I was able to spend six months with a fascinating individual, to see how his life was lived, and to build his story. I was forced to rely largely on my own intuition regarding what would constitute a successful exhibit. This became a fascinating process, and one that would have had completely different value had I been part of a team.

I have mentioned that many of the choices made during the process were intuitive. While intuition typically refers to instinctual knowledge not based on

conscious reasoning, what does it mean to make intuitive choices under the circumstance presented by the Coker Exhibit?

I had wondered at the beginning if the research materials would reveal who Coker was. I found materials that seemed to answer this question, but it seemed doubtful that I would ever be able to confirm that certain items were representative of Coker's personality, or just a single event or occurrence that was potentially irrelevant to who he was. Upon such occasions, the decision of whether or not to include items came down to intuitive choice.

Another early concern was whether or not I would be able to locate materials that appealed to the interests and experiences of the visitors, with their wide array of existing knowledge and experience. While I knew that this was an important consideration, I realized later that I had failed to ask myself what these materials would look like, figuratively speaking. Again, in selecting materials to meet this demand, I concluded that the exhibit curator is a surrogate for the user, and supplemented my minimal knowledge of the body of visitors with intuitive choice about what would or would not speak to them.

In the third week of February of 2003, an article by journalist Dave Hart, titled "Botanist's Legacy", was printed in the Chapel Hill News. The article introduced Coker and announced several of the events taking place during the centennial celebration. It was clear from reading the article that Hart had paid close attention to the exhibit. Much of the information in his article was gleaned from deep within the lines of the letters on display, he included at least one of the quotations used to define the subject of a display case, and most importantly,

Hart described the exhibit as “Guthrie’s lively collection of letters, photographs, books, specimens and other artifacts.” Having carried the Coker story that far, it was validating to have someone listen to it closely enough to be able to retell it in a way that reflected his own interests and experiences. It was just what I had hoped that someone would do.

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## Appendix A: Work Plan

## Work Plan for William Coker Exhibit

August 2002 – January 2003

1	Analyze the exhibit space in consultation with Charles McNamara and Libby Chenault.	8/9/2002
2	Draw a scale model of the space with each case and its dimensions.	8/16/2002
3	Research the subject and locate potential exhibit items. Mary Joslin's book will be the primary reference text.	10/14/2002
4	Verify availability of materials proposed for use in exhibit.	N/A
5	Make all necessary arrangements for borrowing items from other departments in consultation with supervisor.	N/A
6	Designate a secure area for examination and storage of items.	N/A
7	Evaluate the items for feasibility of exhibiting (e.g. size, condition, support materials needed, aesthetic appeal, readability, etc.)	10/21/2002
8	Select the type of interpretive and/or descriptive material (individual captions, group labels, introductory text, etc.).	10/21/2002
9	Select the display materials (mat board, etc.).	10/21/2002
10	Write proposal for the exhibit, outlining the vision, themes, scope, content, intellectual and physical design, and general look for the exhibit.	11/1/2002
11	Meet with committee to discuss proposal.	TBA
12	Consult with poster designer.	11/15/2002
13	Make final selection of items.	12/1/2002
14	Prepare any items requiring reproduction (photographs or facsimiles). Arrange with supervisor and Photographic Services to have reproductions made.	12/8/2002
15	Write copy for descriptive and interpretive text.	1/6/2003
16	Edit and format text.	1/13/2003
17	Physically prepare items and text for display.	1/27/2003
18	Install exhibit.	1/31/2003

19	Attend the opening reception.	3/20/2003
20	Dismantle the exhibit with Charles McNamara and Libby Chenault.	4/12/2003

## Appendix B: Item List

Item List :William Chambers Coker Exhibit  
Prepared by Emily Guthrie, Exhibit Coordinator

**CASE 1**

QUOTE: "It has been said that one man cannot make an atmosphere, and this is true, but there will sometimes appear a man with so great 'a light within his own clear breast' that he looks out upon the obscure world about him with a soul that is illumined."

- William C. Coker, 1910

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- 1.) Coker with brother David, undated  
From *Mr. DR: A Biography of David R. Coker*
- 

- 2.) *Botany for Young People: How Plants Grow* by Asa Gray, 1858  
From the Rare Books Collection

Asa Gray was one of Major James Lide Coker's instructors in botany at Harvard University. W.C. Coker donated this book to the library.

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- 3.) *The American Forest Series: Trees of America* by Francis L. Hawks , 1834  
From the Cotten Collection in the North Carolina Collection

An example of an early children's botany book such as Coker may have studied as a child

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- 4.) W.C. Coker to his father, March 13, 1916  
From the W. C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

*Dear Father,  
This is about the time that you and I used to go out into the garden, about thirty-two years ago, and plant vegetables together. The time never comes around that I do not think of how much fun it used to be. I have been out today a good deal for the first time, taking advantage of the good weather to get some planting done in the cemetery, arboretum, etc.*

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- 5.) Children of Major James Lide Coker and Susan S. Coker, 1910  
Courtesy of Mary Coker Joslin
-

- 6.) Major James Lide Coker, undated, and Susan Armstrong Stout Coker 1860  
From *The Cokers of Carolina* by George Lee Simpson and courtesy of  
Mary Coker Joslin
- 

- 7.) *The Plant Life of Hartsville, SC* by W.C. Coker, 1912  
Courtesy of the UNC Herbarium

Coker's study of the climate and plants of his hometown was originally published in 1912 by the Pee Dee Historical Association.

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- 8.) "Hartsville plants," undated  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
- 

## **CASE 2**

- 1.) South Carolina College's *The Carolinian*, 1892  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

This issue of *The Carolinian* features "Thought and Language", an article by written by Coker while he was earning his Bachelor of Science degree at South Carolina College, today the University of South Carolina.

*As a beautiful picture reads upon the painter and creates in him a still greater love for the beautiful, so pure language reacts upon thought, its maker, and makes it purer still... Knowing the immense influence of language on thought, should we not preserve with the most scrupulous care the purity and beauty of the language we use?*

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- 2.) W.C. Coker as a graduate of South Carolina College, 1894  
Courtesy of Mary Coker Joslin
- 

- 3.) Atlantic National Bank, Wilmington, NC, undated  
From the Photographic Archives in the North Carolina Collection

Upon graduation from South Carolina College, Coker moved to Wilmington to begin work at this bank. He stayed for 2 years, eventually becoming second vice-president. Despite a promising future in banking, Coker left Wilmington in 1897 to pursue a dream of becoming a botanist.

He had been accepted to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he would begin work toward a doctorate in botany.

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- 4.) W.C. Coker to Dr. R.P. Cowles of Johns Hopkins University, May 21, 1943  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 5.) Physiology class notebook kept by Coker at Johns Hopkins University, 1900  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 6.) *On the Gametophytes and Embryo of Taxodium*, 1903  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Coker's dissertation examined seed development in *Taxodium distichum*, the bald cypress, a tree native to the swamps and banks of Black Creek near his childhood home in Hartsville, South Carolina. In the introduction, Coker thanked his professor, Dr. Duncan Scott Johnson, and added, "I also wish publicly to thank my brothers for their assistance in sending me material at frequent intervals."

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- 7.) A view of Franklin Street as it may have appeared at the time of Dr. Coker's arrival, 1905  
From the Photographic Archives in the North Carolina Collection
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- 8.) Dr. H.V.P. Wilson to W.C. Coker, January 28, 1902  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

*Dear Dr. Coker,*  
*In June the trustees will elect an Associate professor of Botany in my department. The pay will be \$1000. As to increase in pay and promotion it seems that nothing can be promised. The incumbent will be placed in charge of the property of the laboratory (the distribution of property to students will be left in the hands of the instructor), in charge of the laboratory work of the class in General Biology (2 sections, making 8 time hrs. weekly). He will also be expected to give the lectures in this class on botanical subjects (3 lectures weekly for the last 2 mos. of the year – or if he prefers 2 to 3 mos.) The rest of his work will be in botany...*

*If you feel disposed to stand for the place will you as quickly as possible drop a line to President F.P. Venable saying so – and send me a line too...*  
*Yours Very Truly,*  
*H.V. Wilson*

- 
- 9.) W.C. Coker to UNC President Francis P. Venable, July 19, 1902  
From the University Papers in the University Archives
- 

### CASE 3

- 1.) George Atkinson to W.C. Coker, March 9, 1915  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
- 
- 2.) George Atkinson, undated  
From the UNC Botany Department Historical Collections in the Southern Historical Collection
- 
- 3.) *Studies of American Fungi* by George Atkinson, 1900  
From Davis Library
- 
- 4.) Exchange list, undated  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

(Items 1-4 above will have the following common caption:)

W.C. Coker was greatly inspired and influenced by the work of noted mycologist George Atkinson of Cornell University. He is rumored to have arrived in Chapel Hill with a copy of Atkinson's *Studies of American Fungi* under his arm. The book was one of the first to feature color photographs of fungi, and includes recipes for *Lactarius deliciosus stewed*, *Pickled Clavaria*, and *Puffball Omelet*. Atkinson was among the many mycologists whom Coker listed in the notebook and with whom both information and specimens were regularly exchanged.

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- 5.) Vasculum  
Courtesy of the UNC Botanical Gardens

This tin box originally belonged to Dr. Coker's colleague and friend Dr. H.R. Totten. It is typical of the boxes used by botanizers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century for the collection and storage of botanical specimens that were collected on field expeditions.

Elizabeth Keeney, author of *The Botanizers*, states that such vascula were "ideal for collecting material to be used soon, especially for classroom

specimens”, and that the boxes “became an emblem of the botanical community, serving as a means of mutual recognition”.

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#### CASE 4

1.) *Fungi Tridentini novi* by Giacomo Bresadola, 1881

2.) *Flore Mycologique Illustree* by Jean-Baptiste Barla, 1888

#### **From the Rare Books Collection**

(These 2 books will share the caption:)

Coker donated these two mycology books to the library. At the request of Coker, H.R. Totten and John Couch acquired these and other books in France c. 1919.

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- 3.) *The Boletaceae of North Carolina*, W.C.Coker and Alma Holland Beers, 1943  
*The Clavarias of the United States and Canada* by W.C.Coker, 1923  
*The Gasteromycetes* by W.C.Coker and John N. Couch, 1928  
*The Saprolegniaceae* by W.C.Coker, 1923  
*The Stipitate Hydnums of the Eastern United States* by W.C.Coker and Alma Holland Beers, 1951

From the UNC Botany Library

Although Coker’s studies were not limited to mycology, he is perhaps best well known in the scientific community for his work on fungi and water molds. Fifty-nine of his publications, including these volumes, dealt with fungi.

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4.) *Amanita* mushrooms, undated.

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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5.) Two UNC students on field trip to Audubon Nurseries, 1926.

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

The vehicles were named *Amanita* and *Boletus* after two species of mushrooms.

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## 6.) Microscope

Courtesy of the UNC Botany Library

This microscope originally belonged to Dr. John Couch, a former student and later a colleague of Coker.

(Will be displayed with the following quote by Coker: )

*I have been, I think, more of a collector and traveler than the average student of botany...but I must say that I have never yet seen any substitute for hard work in the laboratory and with books, which is the real foundation on which the broader and more genial views that come from outdoor observation should be based.*

**CASE 5**

## 1.) Lantern slide viewer

Courtesy of the Botany Department

Sometimes referred to as a Delineascope, lantern slide viewers were commonly found in science laboratories from the turn of the century through the 1930's. Lantern slides are glass plates onto which photographic images were burned, and a lantern slide viewer allowed the slide to be projected at a large scale for study or classroom use.

2.) *Design and Improvement of School Grounds* by W.C. Coker and Eleanor Hoffman, 1921

From the UNC Botany Library

UNC President Edward Kidder Graham and Coker shared the belief that the mission of the university was not only to educate its students, but also to meet the needs of the community when and where possible. To this end, Coker served as an extension agent for the university, a title under which he designed and planted schoolyards throughout the state.

## 3.) W.C. Coker to E.J. Coltrane, March 2, 1918

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

**CASE 6**

## 1.) Plan for Coker Hills, 1959

From the H.R. Totten Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

W.C. Coker owned several plots of land in the Chapel Hill area. Coker Hills, located in north central Chapel Hill, was developed for housing. The streets were named after botanists:

**Velma Road:** former UNC botany alumnus and Coker College professor, Velma Matthews

**Michaux Road:** French Botanist Andre Michaux who recorded the botany of the Carolinas in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. An attempt by Coker to identify the site of Michaux's South Carolina garden is detailed in his article, "The Garden of Andre Michaux", published in a 1911 issue of the *Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society*

**Allard Road:** 1905 UNC graduate H.A. Allard, specialist in the U.S. Department of Agriculture

2.) W.C. Coker and his nephew, undated  
Courtesy of Mary Coker Joslin

3.) W.C. Coker, undated (photo)  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

4.) Dr. and Mrs. W.C. Coker to Dr. H.R. Totten and his wife, Addie, January 6, 1946.

From the H.R. Totten Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

This letter opens with a rhyming verse written by Coker to thank friends his Dr. and Mrs. Totten for a gift of oranges. A note on the verso of the second page says, "The only letter we have ever received from Dr. W.C. Coker in his own handwriting. Keep it! – A.W. T. (Addie Totten)".

5.) W.C. Coker and Alma Holland Beers to Dr. Lindsay Olive, April 9, 1945.  
From the Lindsay Olive Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

6.) Dr. John Couch, UNC Botany Department, to Dean R.B. House, July 12, 1944  
Dean R.B. House to Dr. Couch, July 13, 1944  
From the Records of the Buildings & Grounds Committee in the University Archives

These letters concern Coker's appointment to the title of Kenan Research Professor, a title under which he retired from his teaching responsibilities but retained the privilege of performing research in the botany department.

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- 7.) UNC President Frank Porter Graham to W.C. Coker, April 7, 1942  
From the Records of the Buildings & Grounds Committee in the University Archives

W.C. Coker served as the chairman of the Buildings and Grounds Committee from 1913 to 1942. He preferred to call the committee "Grounds and Buildings", a reflection, perhaps, of his priorities.

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- 8.) Notebook  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 9.) H.R. Totten to James Hutchins, October 6, 1953  
From the H.R. Totten Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Coker passed away in 1953, leaving an endless bounty of specimens to be identified and letters to be answered by his able colleagues. Totten remained on the staff of the botany department through 1963. In this letter, Totten identifies specimens and remarks upon the loss of Coker.

### **CASE 7**

- 1.) O.E. Moore to W.C. Coker, May 20, 1917  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 2.) L.A. Linn to W.C. Coker, June 15, 1909  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 3.) L.M. McLucas to W.C. Coker, September 1, 1908  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 4.) J.I. Somers to W.C. Coker, May 16, 1917

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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- 5.) W.C. Coker to student J.I. Somers, May 23, 1917  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 6.) Orren W. Hyman to Dr. Coker, January 8, 1944  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 7.) Botany III notebook of student Orren W. Hyman, 1911  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Coker kept the notebooks of some of his best students, such as this one belonging to Hyman, for use in teaching subsequent classes.

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- 8.) Sanguinaria, undated  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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### **CASE 8**

- 1.) Davie Hall, c. 1910  
From the Sarah Rebecca Cameron Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Davie Hall as it stood on Cameron Avenue adjacent to the Coker Arboretum was home to the botany department from 1908 to 1967. The department moved to the newly completed Coker Hall, located on South Road when the original Davie Hall was demolished.

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- 2.) Botany I lecture by Dr. Coker, December 2, 1909  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 3.) William de Berniere MacNider to W.C. Coker, June 17, 1920  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

A letter of congratulations from friend and colleague MacNider (1881-1951) regarding Coker's appointment to the prestigious

Kenan Professorship. MacNider was a professor of pharmacology, and dean of the UNC School of Medicine from 1937 to 1940.

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- 4.) W.C. Coker to University of Texas professor Caswell Ellis, November 12, 1919  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 5.) Notebook of H.R. Totten, undated  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Totten was a student and lab assistant of Dr. Coker before he became his colleague. This notebook dates from Totten's time as a lab assistant. The following note is written on the inside cover:

*The main part of this notebook were notes taken on Dr. Coker's class by H.R. Totten, who had charge of the laboratory, but attended the lectures again (3<sup>rd</sup> time) to better tie the laboratory work with the lectures. The notebook was given to Dr. Coker by Dr. Totten and Dr. Coker used it for the basis of his course later. HRT*

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- 6.) W.C. Coker on field expedition with his brother J.L. Coker, Alma Holland Beers, and John Couch, 1921

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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- 7.) Botany Department budget, 1923-1925  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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## **CASE 9**

- 1.) Lindsay Olive to W.C. Coker, March 4, 1945  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Lindsay Olive graduated from UNC with a Ph.D. in botany in 1942. During his studies at UNC, he adopted Coker's passion for mycology. He joined the faculty of the botany department in 1968 and served until 1982.

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- 2.) Yackety Yack Senior Profiles of Henry Roland Totten and John Couch, 1913 and 1918  
From the North Carolina Collection

Couch and Totten were Coker's students who later joined the faculty of the botany department. Together with Coker, the three men formed the core of the botany department for the decades following its genesis in 1908, developing the program into one of worldwide reputation.

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- 3.) H.R. Totten to W.C. Coker, November 24, 1918  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Totten (1892 – 1974), known to his friends as Roland, served on the faculty of the botany department from 1913 to 1963. With Coker, Totten coauthored *Trees of the Southeastern States*, 1934, and *Trees of North Carolina*, 1916. He was also instrumental in founding Chapel Hill's North Carolina Botanical Garden. Totten composed this letter to Coker while serving in France during WWI.

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- 4.) Dr. Henry Roland Totten, undated  
From the Photographic Archives in the North Carolina Collection
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#### **CASE 10**

QUOTE: "The most pleasing improvement to the campus is the Arboretum which is under the care of Professor Coker. This will occupy some two or three acres on the eastern side of campus. Much had to be done to prepare the ground but the planting of trees and shrubs has progressed rapidly, and it already forms a most attractive and beautiful corner of the campus. This work will continue as rapidly as the means allow."

- From the Records of the Board of Trustees, January, 1909 in the University Archives

- 1.) Professor W.B. McDougall to W.C. Coker, July 25, 1917

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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- 2.) W.C. Coker to Professor W.B. McDougall, July 28, 1917

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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3.) *The Alumni Review*, March 1926

Courtesy of Mary Coker Joslin

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4.) Branch of River Plum from the Coker Arboretum, undated

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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5.) "President's boggy cow pasture is now Carolina's beauty spot" in the *Raleigh News & Observer*, April 8, 1934

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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6.) *Rhododendrus glabra L.*, 1938

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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### CASE 11

1.) (This case will feature Coker's poetry. All of the poems are his, with the exception of one by his niece. The case will have one caption, reading as follows:)

Poems by W.C. Coker, undated  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

In addition to being a world-renowned botanist and full-time professor, Coker had a flair and appreciation for verse. His poems range from humorous rhymes written for friends to thoughtful reflections on nature.

(The poem by Coker's niece will have the following caption: )

Poem by Eleanor Coker, niece of W.C. Coker

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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2.) Alice T. Paine of UNC Press to W.C. Coker, March 9, 1946

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Letters in the Coker Papers indicate that Coker sought to have his poetry published. Perhaps due to failing health or higher priorities, the publication was never realized. This letter is typical of the professional feedback received by Coker in response to his literary pastime.

### **CASE 12**

- 1.) River Plums on East side of Arboretum, April 15, 1931  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

- 2.) *The Daily Tar Heel*, October 19, 1930  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

- 3.) Hannah Whitson Letter, undated  
Photo of Traveler's Tree

### **CASE 13**

QUOTE: "Nothing could so distinguish us as the presence of these trees, and in their possession we stand without a rival among the colleges of the country."  
- "Our Campus" by William C. Coker, *University of North Carolina Magazine*, March 1916

- 1.) J. Bryan Grimes to W.C. Coker, March 29, 1922  
From the Records of the Buildings and Grounds Committee in the University Archives

Coker served as the chairman of the Buildings and Grounds Committee throughout most of his career at the university. His committee was largely responsible for the design and development of campus south of Cameron Avenue, in addition to landscaping. This letter from Secretary of North Carolina, J. Bryan Grimes, is a response to the committee's requests for a list of prominent North Carolinians after whom new campus buildings could be named.

- 2.) Professor John M. Booker to W.C. Coker, December 5, 1939  
From the Records of the Buildings and Grounds Committee in the University Archives

A letter of concern written by Professor Booker in response to the proposed omission of the word "The" from the stone inscriptions at the entrances to Woolen Gymnasium, Hill Hall, and Howell Hall

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- 3.) Buildings & Grounds Committee meeting minutes, December 15, 1939  
From the Records of the Buildings and Grounds Committee in the University Archives

These minutes refer to a consultation with an English professor over Professor Booker's concerns about the word "the". The issue is resolved.

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- 5.)Untitled verse by W.C. Coker, undated

Coker's strong feelings about enhancing and protecting the beauty of the campus are manifested in this verse about respecting the campus lawns. In a 1916 essay, "Our Campus", Coker strenuously suggested that,

*Each of us who has a conviction of sin should do everything possible to build up a sentiment against cutting up our grass with trails or littering it with trash.*

From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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- 6.) W.C. Coker to Dean R.B. House, March 13, 1940  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Coker expressed concern to a university dean after discovering evidence of unauthorized shooting in the university woods.

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#### **CASE 14**

QUOTE: " He was not talkative, but in subjects such as natural history, in which he was interested and well read, he was a most engaging conversationalist. He was fond of animals, and although he always chose a mongrel for his dog, the dog somehow assumed the aristocratic dignity of its master."

- John Couch and Velma Matthews, "William Chambers Coker",  
*Mycologia*, May/June, 1954

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- 1.) Kemp Battle's list of Chapel Hill Plants, 1852  
 From the UNC Department of Botany Historical Collections in the  
 Southern Historical Collection

Kemp Battle (1831-1919) was a professor of history and served as college president from 1876 to 1891. Coker greatly admired Battle's efforts as a naturalist, and was probably given this notebook containing lists of Chapel Hill plants and the dates sighted. So great was Coker's admiration for Battle that he constructed an observation tower in his name. The following is a note written to Battle by Coker, excerpted from Battle's publication, *History of the University of North Carolina* (1907-1912):

*" Dear Dr. Battle:  
 To express in some way the regard in which I hold you, and my  
 appreciation of the wonderful influence you have always exerted toward  
 simple living and the enjoyment of nature, I have erected in your honor an  
 observation tower on my Rocky Ridge Farm.  
 Very Sincerely Yours, WCC"*

- 2.) Charles Raynal to W.C. Coker, January 21, 1928  
 From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Similar to dozens of letters in the W.C. Coker Papers, this letter from a Statesville resident asks Coker for advice on botanical nomenclature, and for names of books about the "marvelous botany" of North Carolina. The extent of letters such as this reveal how widely Coker was valued as the regional expert on all things botanical.

- 3.) Map of botanizing grounds near Licking River, Kentucky, October 1834  
 From the Charles Wilkins Short Papers in the Southern Historical  
 Collection

This map, drawn as a guide to an area ideal for plant gathering, is from the collection of physician and botanist Charles Wilkins Short (1794-1863). In a continuing effort to develop the library's collection of botany materials, Coker acquired Short's papers. The papers include letters from relatives and fellow botanists, and several botanical drawings.

- 4.) *Trees of the Southeastern States* by W.C. Coker, 1934  
 Courtesy of the UNC Herbarium

- 5.) *How to Know and Use the Trees* by W.C. Coker, 1924  
From the Botany Library
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### **COLUMN 1**

[This column will also have the exhibit poster, a timeline, and intro. essay.]

- 1.) New East Biological Laboratory, 1886  
 From the Photographic Archives in the North Carolina Collection

The biology department was located in the New East building on Cameron Avenue when Coker arrived at the university in 1902. This is an image of the science laboratory in New East as it may have appeared during Coker's first years as a professor.

- 2.) W.C. Coker, undated  
 From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 3.) Davie Hall, c.1910  
 From the Photographic Archives in the North Carolina Collection

### **COLUMN 2**

Quote: " Dr. Coker was never too hurried..."

- 1.) Lindsay Shepherd Olive, 1944  
 From the Lindsay Shepherd Olive Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 2.) Velma Matthews, undated  
 From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 3.) W.C. Coker and Harry Ardell Allard, 1948  
 Courtesy of Mary Coker Joslin
- 

- 4.) River Plum, undated  
 From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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- 5.) Coker Arboretum, facsimile of plan and key, undated  
 From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection
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6.) The Botanical Garden of the University at Bonn, Germany, 1998  
 Courtesy of the Coker College archives

Soon after receiving his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1901, Coker sailed for Germany to further his studies in the laboratory of Professor Eduard Strausburger. As the director of the University at Bonn's Botanical Garden, Strausburger introduced Coker to one of the most renowned gardens in Germany. One may see how the Botanical Garden, depicted here, may have inspired Coker's design and development of the arboretum on the UNC campus.

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7.) W.C. Coker to Professor N.W. Walker, June 28, 1920  
 From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

In creating the Arboretum, Coker left a legacy for the enjoyment of students and other visitors for generations to come. Perhaps as a result of never having experienced the urban refuge that such an arboretum may provide, or perhaps in search of a gathering place outside of strenuous summer classes, students enrolled in the summer session of 1920 found unorthodox ways to inhabit the arboretum and catch Coker's attention.

(Letter will be displayed on column face with photos of the arboretum from the photo archives)

Students in the Coker Arboretum, undated

From the Photographic Archives in the North Carolina Collection

A blooming branch from the Coker Arboretum, undated

From the Photographic Archives in the North Carolina Collection

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7a.) Frank McLean to W.C.Coker, October 10, 1923  
 From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

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8.) QUOTE: " The things that are around us act upon us and elevate or depress us according to their nature. As Byron says, 'I live not in myself, but I become a portion of that around me'".

- *Design and Improvement of School Grounds* by W.C. Coker, 1921

a. Sugar Camp Creek Poplar, 1903

b. Reems Creek Poplar, undated

c. Cornwallis Oak of Guilford Battleground, NC, undated

- d. Reems Creek Poplar, undated
  - e. Large Cypress tree, 1929
  - f. W.C. Coker with Sequoia tree
  - g. Arthur Rogers and Sparkleberry tree, undated
  - h. Letter from J.W. Kistler to W.C. Coker, July 25, 1936
- Above items a-g (photos of people with trees) and f will be displayed together with one caption:  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

Coker solicited and welcomed community members to send plant specimens for identification. While there were many who sent photographs and dried plants for identification, others posed by trees that they knew Coker would regard as outstanding specimens.

### COLUMN 3 (CoC)

[One side of this column will feature the exhibit poster]

- 1.) John Nolen to W.C. Coker, November 19, 1918  
From the W.C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

John Nolen, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the landscape architect for the expansion of campus south of Cameron Avenue. Coker and Nolen had become acquainted when Nolen, at the request of Coker's father, had visited South Carolina to create a plan for the campus of Coker College. In addition to fourteen new buildings, Nolen's plan proposed a large expanse of lawn south of the South Building to eventually be enclosed on the southern end by Louis Round Wilson Library.

- 2.) Alma Holland Beers, 1951  
From the UNC Botany Department Historical Collections in the Southern Historical Collection
- 3.) "Coker was impressed with her" in the *Durham Morning Herald*, October 14, 1951  
From the UNC Botany Department Historical Collections in the Southern Historical Collection
- 4.) Statement of resignation, 1951  
From the UNC Botany Department Historical Collections in the Southern Historical Collection
- 5.) Letter from W.C. Coker to President Frank Porter Graham, June 27, 1939

From the Records of the Department of Botany in the University Archives

Items 2-5, above, will share the following caption:

Alma Holland Beers (1892-1974) was considered by some to be the backbone of the botany department. While Coker's student in the summer of 1917, Alma became smitten with botany, and impressed Dr. Coker with her precise and careful work. He asked her to remain at the university as a research assistant, and although she had already begun a career as a schoolteacher, Alma reportedly burned her teaching certificate and joined the botany department. Although her title was limited to "Research Assistant" for the duration of her career, she achieved a diverse and abundant array of accomplishments. She gradually earned a B.A. degree, receiving it in 1925. The degree, together with her prior teaching experience, allowed her to become an effective instructor of several of the botany department's courses, including a class on ferns.

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6.) Spirit of Life statuette

From the Arthur C. Nash Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

This statuette, which graces the first landing of the grand stairway in Wilson Library, was purchased by Coker and donated to the University. Created by Daniel Chester French, its title is "Spirit of Life". Mary Coker Joslin, Coker's niece, notes that,

*This graceful figure of a young woman, holding high a blooming branch in her right hand and the overflowing bowl of life and learning in her left, symbolizes the passion of William Chambers Coker, its donor, for plants and for all learning.*

7.) Letter from Daniel Chester French to Julia Booker, February 14, 1924

From the W. C. Coker Papers in the Southern Historical Collection

A letter from the sculptor of the statuette to Coker's friend, Julia Booker. The statuette is the study for a full size statue at the Spencer Trask Memorial in Saratoga Springs, New York.