

Ol' Rip Writes:
North Carolina's Nineteenth-Century Collegiate Literary Magazines

250 Years of Printing in North Carolina: a One-Day Conference, UNC-Chapel Hill
November 12, 1999

Kevin Cherry

*"Looking over some off numbers of the North Carolina University Magazine, we have been painfully impressed with the fact that exceedingly few people who take pen in hand know how to write anything that will be worth the trouble of reading ten or twelve years thereafter."*¹
Cornelia Phillips Spencer.

As usual, Chapel Hill's bell-ringing, female curmudgeon writer has a point. But scattered amongst college literary magazines' sophomoric humor, the dated doggerel, and the syrupy sweet tales of enough lost love to challenge even Nashville's yearly output, are not a few gems and treasures. However, the greatest value of these publications is not to be found in the individual pieces, but in the works as a whole—the genre—and what it can tell us about the young men and women who created it, and the institutions that supported them.

The first college literary magazine in the United States seems to have been Dartmouth College's *The Gazette*, which was initially published in 1800. Six years later, Yale attempted a magazine, *The Literary Cabinet*. The *Cabinet*, like so many of its later brethren, failed to see its first anniversary. It was not until 1837 that the Elis began to produce their successful *Yale Literary Magazine*. Harvard's entry into the genre was the short-run *Harvard Lyceum*, which began in 1810. It preceded a number of equally ephemeral, sister periodicals before the *Harvard Magazine* began its long and serious life in 1854. Similar publications at smaller institutions, such as Hamilton College's *Talisman* (1832) came into existence during the thirties and forties.²

There was, then, a precedent for these types of publications—and perhaps a model or two to follow—when in 1843 Richmond County's Edmund DeBerry Covington met with the president of the University of North Carolina, David Lowry Swain, and sought his approval for such a literary venture in Chapel Hill. Within the year, a committee of Carolina's seniors had created North Carolina's first collegiate literary magazine.³ You can imagine the pride of the boys as they rushed out to meet that first shipment, fresh off of Thomas Loring's Raleigh press. And you can imagine their chagrin when they discovered that the printer had generously salted their high-minded efforts with several page's worth of newspaper filler. The students had wanted a 48-page periodical, and—thoughtful man that Loring was—he had given it to them, even if the students had not supplied enough raw material for its full production.

¹ C. [Cornelia Phillips Spencer], "Writing for the Future," North Carolina Presbyterian, May 1, 1872.

² Davidson College Magazine January-February 1911. Vol 27, no.4 p. 169 and Brandis.

³ Covington's diary, Southern Historical Collection. UNC-CH.

The *North Carolina University Magazine* did not survive its first year. The editors, perhaps, should have considered this likelihood, when in the second number, they were able to publish the list of subscribers in its entirety. (There were 40, although four charitable individuals requested two subscriptions.) The youthful editors had expected to have a list of 500 names and eventually received only 200, “more than half of whom have failed to comply with the terms of payment in advance.” And thus began the on-again, off-again life of what became known as the longest-running literary magazine in the South.

Instead of tracing the starts and stops of this publication and the others that would follow it in the state, I hope to look briefly at it and several of its sister magazines, telling their story in a corporate fashion.

In Davidson--“the quietest place in the state . . . as to dissipation, I don’t suppose there is so much as a cigar going there. A deep snow and a rabbit-hunt are all the young gentlemen have to look forward to, and to ensure the latter, the former must always happen on a Saturday”⁴ –the students began the *Davidson College Monthly* in March, 1870.

At Wake Forest, the students enjoyed the “witticisms, criticisms and burlesques” of publications that were published orally on Saturday mornings. (Editors, understandably, remained anonymous, and those that wished a copy of the various quips and putdowns made it by hand from the original.) In 1882, the *Wake Forest Student* supplanted the academic village crier.

The *Guilford Collegian* made its appearance in 1888, following student Robert C. Root’s oration to his Brightonian Society, “Shall Guilford College Have a Paper?” “Upheld in the affirmative,” as collegiate societies of the day would have put it.

Without this repeated “affirmative” of collegiate societies, none of these publications would have been sustained. It was the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies at UNC, which eventually supplemented the *University Magazine* and made it viable. It was the Euzelian and Philomathesian supporting the *Wake Forest Student*, the Eumenean and the Philanthropic, publishing the *Davidson College Monthly*, and the Brightonian, Claytonian, and Websterian, along with Guilford’s female society, Cicadian, (later renamed the Philagorean), which saw to it that the *Guilford Collegian* made its publication schedule. Student societies, with their mouth-filling monikers, were the driving force behind these publications—as they were for most aspects of nineteenth-century college student life.

Collegiate societies had their roots in the enlightenment and immersed their members in enlightenment ideals. Wake Forest’s societies had nothing less as their object than “the intellectual improvement of its members,” and the Dialectic Society in Chapel Hill sought the “cultivation of lasting friendships and the promotion of useful knowledge.” These friendships were created and strengthened, and this useful knowledge was forged and disseminated primarily through weekly debates, orations, and compositions, as well as the creation of libraries. Students used their societies to provide the practical training required by the nineteenth-century college-educated, a high percentage of whom would be the state’s, lawyers, teachers, and preachers. These debates and the building of libraries were also the way that students kept abreast of

⁴Cornelia Phillips Spencer in Davidson College History.

religious, historical and sociological developments of the day. In short, societies provided the student what the college curriculum did not. After all, it was not until 1870 –under the “illiterate and ill-bred Republicans”—that the subject of English got its own chair in Chapel Hill.

Student literary magazines reflected the enlightenment ideals and practicality of their sponsors. Leave it to a society that has as one of its officers an individual entitled “Censor Morum,” to crank out a publication “devoted to literature and the formation of correct taste.” (The Dialectic Society and the *University Magazine*.) Leave it to a group of boys who conduct their own symposia once a week “to afford a channel through which those students who are so inclined may educate themselves in this most useful and practical accomplishment, the art of journal writing.” (The Eumenians and Philanthropics and the *Davidson College Monthly*.) But other than these and the desire to see one’s own writing in print (which is strong, indeed), it seems to have been the redemption of the South’s reputation and North Carolina’s, especially, which drove many of these budding journalists. Observing a lack of literary output in North Carolina, Wake Forest students modestly proposed “to fill a vacant place in the circulating literature of North Carolina,” while Davidson College’s editors hoped the South would stop its intellectual and moral slide—not surprisingly—through the work of college literary periodicals, and their own in particular.

As an 1878 editorial in the *University Magazine* states, “the South . . . has not contributed her due share to the rich literary heritage of the American people.” But, the editors promise, eyeing the press about to roll, “We will soon retrieve our laurels.”

Let us open the covers of the magazines to see how successful that retrieval was.

“If the young men who conducted the Magazine fifteen or twenty years ago, instead of alternating in their topics between Romulus and the Queen of Scots and the very poorest fun and college slang, had given plain and vivid sketches of something they themselves had actually seen and known and felt, pictures of life such as it was in southern plantations and villages and cities, time would have but increased its value . . . [instead] we are presented with the watery hash of someone else’s cold meat.” Cornelia Phillips Spencer again. And again a point well made-.

The first issue of Davidson’s magazine held a speech in which the attributes of our fair state, especially “her lovely daughters” was praised; a history of the attempts at founding a college in western, NC; a scientific essay on air (“men of science have long sought to travel in the air, but so far with little success”); a bit on Washington at Brandywine, and a piece of poetry entitled “Love’s Relief,” which is just as bad as you are probably thinking it is. The *University Magazine*’s first issue promised equally as dull a fare 26 years earlier.

Poetry, history, biography, a bit of fiction, some criticism, attempts at humor, college happenings, notes on the alumni, exchanges with other college magazines, and pieces of news pertaining to education fill the pages of North Carolina’s nineteenth-century student publications.

Poetry rhymed. It sang the praises of natural beauties—both landscape and blushing--and was, for the most part, as saccharine as any bump-dee-bump-dee-bumping literature has ever been.

One writer in the *University Magazine*, at least, did write of what he knew—Mrs. Spencer just missed it. He immortalized in verse the daring deed of midnight college bell ringing.⁵

As for humor, Davidson's student writers often relied upon their classical training: “What did Caesar say when Brutus asked him how many eggs he ate for breakfast? ‘Et Tu, Brute,’” while variations on the term “pony,” as a pre-translated Greek or Latin text was called, are endless.

Many a sleepy scholar, facing a stern-faced Latin instructor surely agreed with the writer of :

“So here we go at easy speed,
O'er places rough and stony,
In all the world you search around,
There's nothing like a pony.”

Speeches were always a favorite of student publishers (and probably easier articles to coax from their authors.) Often top student debaters or state leaders could be found expounding on topics of serious consequence. President of the College G. Wilson McPhail's “Address Delivered Before the Fredericksburg Total Abstinence Society,” was probably quite popular with Davidson's teenagers.

It is, perhaps, in their historical pieces that these college magazines shine. Under the influence of David Lowry Swain, the *University Magazine* at UNC came to carry a wealth of well-written history. Gov. William A. Graham, Col. J. H. Wheeler, Samuel Field Phillips and Governor Swain, himself, among other state luminaries, wrote articles: “Memoirs of General Robert Howe,” “Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge,” and “Twentieth of May; The Mecklenburg Declaration” among a good many others. Indeed, by the 1890s, the *University Magazine* had become a valuable repository of historical and biographical information, attracting the attention of historians and historical societies from across the country.

Although the other magazines investigated here did not achieve the reputation for historical writings as did the “U. Mag.,” some of their best pieces were historical, as well. The *Wake Forest Student* carried the reminiscences of Dr. William Royall, a former missionary in Florida. Another professor recounted Civil War prison life and his “securing a rat for breakfast.” And, if you were a professor and managed to die when your school's magazine was being published, then you were almost guaranteed an adjective-filled memorial. Indeed, college magazines became the repository of all sorts of biographical information, as they marked the death of the state's worthies.

The student writers with pen drawn quite often criticized their schools and commented upon social issues in their magazine. In 1852 one anonymous UNC student complained because he and his cohorts could not vote while on the Hill because they were not considered permanent residents. The writer reasoned that he was as permanent as any of the professors, any of whom would pack up in a heartbeat, if some other institution would only just offer a bit more money, while in Mount Pleasant, NC the students at the Mont Amoena Female Seminary asked in their publication, “Should Women Have Representation in the Boards of Female Schools?”

⁵University Magazine IV, no 1.

Wake Forest and Guilford students used their magazine to question school polices, as well, while Davidson's editors generally did not. To do so, they figured, would give "too wide a display of our dirty linen." Still, nineteenth-century Davidson writers didn't recoil from controversy. One writer let his thoughts be known about the curriculum in an article titled, "Too Polite Altogether: A Proof that No Good Comes From Studying Latin and Greek."

The reason that most of these periodicals are pulled from the shelves today are for the glimpses of college life hidden in the brief notices: one-liners, for the most part, which were never intended to play a featured role in the magazine. Under headings such as "College News" may be found mentions of a professor gone to deliver a paper or notices of a telegraph wire being strung to a main building, or brief descriptions of baseball games. (The Mecklenburgs beat the Red Jackets—all Davidson students—55-9 back in 1870) or nuggets such as Mont Amoena's 1898 magazine notice that Miss Minna Layton "has the largest weight gain, so far as we know" since the opening of school, which would explain a favorite cheer at the school that year, "Hurrah! A New Supply of syrup!" The magazines are, then, valued for preserving college traditions and institutional memory. And while cries for syrup never made her histories, dear ol' Cornelia Phillips Spencer did her part in the *University Magazine* by writing "Old Times in Chapel Hill," a series which spread over six years, 1884-1890. Along those lines are articles in the Guilford publication such as "Building a College" and "New Garden—How I Heard of It."

These too-short notices offer "pictures of life such as it was" and to paraphrase Mrs. Spencer, "time has but increased their value."

Unfortunately, much of this value was not apparent to many of the magazines' contemporary audience. As one of the *University Magazine*'s first readers wrote his son in New Haven, "It is such a dull affair that I don't care you should show it to anybody—lest some of the dull fellows should laugh at the expense of the 'Rip Van Winkle of the South.'" It wasn't just the Chapel Hill-bound boys who fell victim to such criticism. The *Printers Circular*, a Pennsylvania periodical, tossed a zinger at the Davidson magazine stating, "its contents are a series of essays that fairly exhibit the sophomoric enthusiasm of the 'Sunny South.'" Much to their credit and probably because of this enthusiasm, the Davidson boys reprinted the criticism and laughed right along—as did Chapel Hill boys a few years earlier when they noted that the seniors didn't care for their publication, the juniors sneered at it, the sophomores yelled disapprobation and the "puny fresh" dared to "raise his piping voice in disapproval." They had to acknowledge that even the ladies "no longer praise it." As the editors said, "We actually thought for a time that our magazine was bad."

Toward the end of the 1800s, many of the magazines' contributors ceased to be students, although students still edited the publications. In every magazine there may be found editorials complaining that editors are supposed to edit—not write all of the material. One editor of the *Guilford Collegian*, noting that students had contributed just one essay and one oration during the year, stated "bluff and deceit in the form of unsigned articles by the editors and the alumni giving the student the advantage of doubtful authorship have become abominable," which explains Dr. Mendenhall of the same college's complaint, "Robert has beset me again for an article for the *Collegian*."

In 1895 Chapel Hill students actually decided to stop publishing the University's magazine when it was at its peak and claimed the largest circulation of any college magazine in the world. The reason? Only eight of the 65 articles appearing in the publication were written by students, as the *Tar Heel*—the new publication on the block—editorialized, “Let the magazine go. Not because it is not a good thing but because it is a good thing in the wrong place.” The *Magazine*'s editors surprisingly agreed, stating that their publication had been an “ignominious failure” because it had not accomplished the main purpose of a college magazine—the improvement of thought and composition among the students.

Of course, the magazines had not failed. If for no other reason than having to beset someone for an article is good training for any editor. Just ask Mr. Powell.

North Carolina's college literary magazines reveal a body of students sensitive to their state's literary reputation. They show a group of young people concerned with the latest issues of their day, as well as preserving their history and traditions. They present a group of institutions and people who believed that humanities were a good in and of themselves, but were also a “good” capable of doing good. Like those society debates they illustrate the students' enlightenment ideals and their practical application.

It was one goal of these college magazines to build a class of literary men in North Carolina and thus enhance the state's reputation. The *Wake Forest Student* supplied writers and editors for the *Biblical Recorder*, *The Christian Sun*, the *State Journal*, the *Baptist Record*, the *Greensboro Telegram*, *News and Observer*, *Greensboro Daily News*, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, *Richmond Journal*, *Gastonia Gazette*, *Progressive Farmer*, *Monroe Journal*, *Elizabeth City Advance* and the *London Times*. There are among its list of editors poets, historians, biographers, and writers of fiction.

Among the 170 editors that can be determined from the University of North Carolina's nineteenth-century magazine, only twelve were professional journalists but to their number are added the authors of the *Life of Vance*, *Prisons of the Civil War*, *The World War*, *From Cotton Field to Cotton Mill*, among others, and the founder of Carrollton College, the editor of *English Prose from Chaucer to Kipling*, *American Poems 1776-1900*, *Current Literature*, and *Review of Reviews*, the state's first Ph.D. in History, the first archivist of the United States, and professors all over the south, Chapel Hill especially. It was this group of men who taught the next generation of collegiate magazine writers: Thomas Wolfe, Paul Green, Phillips Russell, Jonathon Daniels, LeGette Blythe, Walker Percy, Joseph Mitchell, and Walter Spearman--just to name a few from one institution.

These boy editors could, of course, have pursued a career in letters despite college magazines, but I suspect that the sight of their names in print encouraged their literary pursuits. I know from firsthand experience that staying up late to meet a deadline with a group of people encourages friendships that last—even when the college literary magazine doesn't. For example, I don't know if they truly remained friends or not, but I suspect that the Di editor and the Phi editor who revived the *University Magazine*--yet again--in 1882 probably respected each other because of this shared history. When they carried their baby downtown to find that the printer's devil had

the liquid stumbles, another young man just happened by and volunteered to set the type. The Di editor was Edwin Alderman, later president of the University; the Phi was Horace Williams, the irascible and later legendary professor of Philosophy at UNC, and the replacement printer was Collier Cobb, later to be UNC's professor of Geology, and the man who would oversee the business portion of the magazine during its heyday.

The Guilford Collegian became a newspaper in 1914. The *Davidson College Monthly* ended in 1925 when a story featuring smoking females, dancing, drinking, men in drag, and heavy petting, if not more than that, appeared and failed to meet the faculty's taste. (They got that cigar going in Davidson and skipped the rabbit hunt, Mrs. Spencer.) *The Wake Forest Student* ceased in 1930, and the *University Magazine* held out until 1948, when four votes of the student body led to its replacement by *Tarnation*, a humor magazine.

It has been said that the liberalization of the curriculum, the enlargement of the student body, other extracurriculars, especially athletics, and a change in library management brought about the decline of the student societies. The same can be said for their organs, the magazines. They both lacked focus. They both had purposes idealistic and highly general. They were big tents and loose organizations designed to contain the sophomoric enthusiasms of their members. What other type of magazine could hold Frank Daniels' student-written essay titled "The New South," or William Rand Kenan, Jr.'s "Is Petroleum the Coming Fuel?" or William L. Poteat's "The Groundless Quarrel," which was published in the *Wake Forest Student* and showed that the good professor and president of the college was already aware of some rumblings regarding his take on evolution?

The editor in chief of the *Guilford Collegian* in 1891 hoped that his publication would be "the word picture of college life." It and its sister publications came close. As the author of Wake Forest's history commented on a publication he once student edited, "The forty-seven volumes of the *Wake Forest Student* preserve in its true colors and aspects the life and thought of the college . . . They are the best monument of the work of the literary societies in those days before they lost their power."

This foray into college literary magazines led me to pull out a box the other night. In it were copies of a slim little magazine on cheap paper that a few of my friends tried to re-establish in the late eighties when we were members of the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies here. On its pages were sentimental poetry, bad fiction, a hefty dose of history, and corny, inside jokes. But oh, the sophomoric enthusiasm that went into it!

What do you say to that Mrs. Spencer?