Every day in a library is a good day.

That became my motto when given the opportunity to spend a few weeks at the South Caroliniana Library.

Journalists are familiar with documents; we often request from officials the paper to prove a point or deepen an investigation. But most often we deal directly with the living, with what they have to say, and we favor speech in the present moment.

Then we move on to the next new thing.

We interview people on the phone, by e-mail and in person, individually and in groups, in restaurants and meeting places.

We journalists talk, talk, talk. Then we listen.

But South Caroliniana is quiet. Occasionally, a pencil is sharpened, and everyone looks up. Once in a while, a cell phone rings, and everyone glares at the offender, who scurries out. South Caroliniana is beautiful: big library tables for all your papers, handsome portraits watching your work, glass cases of artifacts to wander by, the green of the Horseshoe in front, a fountain behind.

And South Caroliniana is inhabited by kind and helpful people. No one seems to mind saying for the umpty-umph time that notes must be taken in pencil. Best of all, everyone shares your excitement. Find a document that gives you a thrill, and they’re bound to offer you another just as wonderful.

Which means every day in the library could easily extend – I wish – to every year.

Journalists supposedly offer the first draft of history. That can be, as everyone has likely noticed, rather sloppy.

But South Caroliniana has the records, the actual version.

I wanted to learn more about Briggs v. Elliott. A lawsuit brought by parents in Summerton, it evolved into one of the suits comprising Brown v. Board of Education. That 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision ended “separate but equal” and began the desegregation of America’s public schools.

Four journalists from The State – Carolyn Click, John Monk, Roddie Burris and I – are writing a book on the civil rights movement in South Carolina.
I’m writing about education, and I wanted to learn far more than is usually written at Brown anniversaries.

South Caroliniana was the place to do that. The library possesses the papers of the Rev. J.A. DeLaine, a minister who advised and encouraged the parents brave enough to sue. South Caroliniana also has the papers of the state attorney who opposed those parents, Robert McC. Figg, who later became a dean of the law school at USC.

Black parents living near Summerton in rural Clarendon County helped change the way children go to school across the nation.

Like a good journalist, I talked to people who remembered the lawsuit, the few remaining who participated or knew the participants. Then I talked to their children, even their children’s children.

But memory is mutable. And 50 years ago was long ago, especially for recalling events so painful they seemed best forgotten.

South Caroliniana comes to the rescue, with the letters and the legal papers, the photographs and the pamphlets and the speeches. And, in those documents reside the personalities of the prime movers.

What a sorrow to read a plea for help to the FBI! What a thrill to read a letter by Thurgood Marshall!

Libraries enchanted me from the start. A bookish child, I would check out the maximum, walking home from an Air Force base’s barracks or Quonset hut with a stack of stories. But the pleasure of ancient letters and diaries and maps, of firsthand information from long ago, that was new to me.

And because the story changes as it changes hands – I can testify that Briggs v. Elliott seems told more often wrong in the details than right – seeing the original document is invaluable to truth-telling.

I’m a convert.

Have any papers to donate? I’m ready to read them at one of those beautiful tables.

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