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The Forest Theatre, Expressive Landscape, and the New Deal at UNC Chapel Hill:

A Bibliographic Essay

Introduction: The Forest Theatre Structure

The Forest Theatre is a stone amphitheater that edges the eastern side of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) campus. Built in 1918 and renovated in 1940 with funds provided by the Work Projects Administration (WPA), the theatrical structure has long maintained an iconic status in its relationship to the UNC-CH campus landscape. The Forest Theatre, as a site of theatrical production, also holds an important place in the broader history of both university and community-based theatre practice. This bibliographic essay explores the historical and contemporary significance of the Forest Theatre structure in its relationship to the history of the UNC-CH campus and its people, the history of the New Deal, and the history of theatrical innovation in the United States. The archival documents and scholarly sources compiled here are beginnings and as such, are organized into thematic clusters that suggest possibilities for additional research.

According to documents from the National Register of Historical Places for the Town of Chapel Hill, the Forest Theatre was first constructed in 1918 as the vision of Professor Frederick H. Koch, founder of UNC-CH's student theatre troupe, the Carolina Playmakers, who had a national reputation for developing an innovative form of "outdoor theatre" (*National Register* 7). In designing the original structure, Koch collaborated with UNC-CH botanist William Chambers Coker, and together they transformed a "natural bowl in the landscape" in a campus park into a fully functional performance space (Moore 4). Archival ephemera found in the North Carolina Collection of Photographic Archives, including a postcard from a 1937 performance, depict the original structure. In the postcard we see a simple dirt playing space, round, surrounded by a short

stone wall that separates performers from spectators who watch the action from a sloped hillside, seated directly on the ground (*Fig. 1*).

In 1940 the Forest Theatre structure was renovated and remodeled with \$20,000 provided by the WPA (*National Register* 7). Recent research published by a university historian, Cecilia Moore, suggests that the funds granted by the WPA were used to construct a formal stonework structure with a full elevated stage, tiered stone benches to accommodate audiences, as well as a number of stone towers, archways, and rooms (Moore 4, 12). The transcription of Moore's 2014 Gladys Hall Coates University History Lecture includes an original photograph (presumably from UNC-CH archives) of the 1940 renovation in the midst of the construction process (*Fig. 2*). Three years after its renovation it was dedicated in formal ceremony to Prof. Koch as the "Koch Memorial Forest Theatre" (*Fig. 3*). Additional renovations (minor) to the structure were made in 1948 and the structure still stands in tact to date, overseen by the North Carolina Botanical Garden at UNC-CH ("Forest Theatre," NCBG.unc.edu).

The sections to follow comprise narrative framings of the archival materials and scholarly sources compiled here as they relate to the Forest Theatre structure: a site that brought together key figures who, in their works, made connections between UNC-CH students and faculty, Carolina residents, and the wider infrastructures and artistic cultures of New Deal agencies including the WPA and the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Grouped into thematic areas of interest, the following source lists are blueprints for further research and development: (1) The Development of Native Drama: Local and National Impacts and (2) A Shared Purpose: The Forest Theatre and the WPA. These areas of interest track, loosely, the temporal and spatial development of the Forest Theatre as a site. Together, these areas suggest ways that the landscape and structure of the Forest Theatre is intimately tied together with the works and lives of many people dedicated to the arts

and public education, and also that as a site the Forest Theatre contributed to the production of a historical context that enabled and sustained innovative theatrical practice as part and parcel of university education, community life, and public culture.



Figure 1: "Forest Theater" 1937



Figure 2: A Model for Folk Theatre: The Carolina Playmakers 1940



Figure 3: Koch Memorial Forest Theater, 1943

The Development of "Native Drama": Local and National Impacts

The Forest Theatre and its "native drama" productions were the brain child of Frederick H. Koch, a professor at the University of North Carolina. His vision included the development of

a writing curriculum, a Theatre Department, and the generation of the Playmakers Repertory Company. The Carolina Playmakers was comprised of paid, amateur, and student actors performing professional works and “native dramas,” written by local people – often the students in “Proff” Koch’s classes (Koch xii-xiv). These plays were recorded by Koch in five volumes of *Carolina Folk Plays*. Frederick Koch describes “native drama” as a folk phenomenon in the introduction to one of these volumes, *Carolina Folk Plays*, saying:

The materials were drawn by each writer from scenes familiar and near, often from remembered adventures of his youth, from folk tales and the common tradition, and from present-day life in North Carolina. They are plays of native expressiveness, of considerable range and variety, presenting scenes from the remote coves of the Great Smoky Mountains to the dangerous shoals of Cape Hatteras (xiii)

Many of Koch’s students in these early years, and Carolina Dramatic Arts students through the mid-century, became famous writers and performers on a national (and even global) scale. Thus Koch’s local focus made impacts at a national (and global) level during the period preceding, and also the period following, the Great Depression.

This folk arts framework that situated the careful observation and depiction of local experience may lead us, as Koch suggested, to a reckoning with the universal bonds that hold humanity together across difference (Koch xii). It also met the needs and desires of the then University President Edward Kidder Graham, who wanted to develop extension programs at UNC. Koch’s work had captured Graham’s attention: “[h]e liked Koch’s ideas and thought that folk drama could use the state’s people and their heritage to promote unity across class lines and demonstrate to a national audience that the State was a progressive enlightened place with culture” (Moore 6).

One particularly notable tendency in Koch’s work at UNC, particularly his work with student Paul Green, was the inclusion of and collaboration with women and artists of color in writing and theatrical projects. Significant events include a 1931 visit by Langston Hughes at the request

of Paul Green (among others). This visit was highly contentious, inciting many letters to the President of UNC at the time. In addition, women took courses with “Proff” Koch, in the summer school extension courses that were so important to President Graham. Bernice Harris Kelly, one of Koch’s earlier summer students was “inspired by the fervor for folk play” and returned to her home in Seaboard, North Carolina to become a teacher of writing and play-making for the women who lived in the town (Walser). Kelly went on to become a writer and prolific collector of folk stories; some of her sketch work was included in Federal Writers Project materials (Walser). Women also worked with Koch more directly as collaborators. Betty Smith, the author perhaps best known for her book *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, was also a prolific playwright who met Frederick Koch during her work at the Federal Theater (Glover). Smith eventually stayed at UNC Chapel Hill, working closely with Koch coediting collections of plays and even occasionally teaching his classes when he could not (Glover).

After twenty-three years of developing these ideas, Koch’s framework for arts education and production caught the eye of another person who would integrate Koch’s ideals into a project of national scope: Hallie Flanagan, the newly appointed director of the Federal Theater Project, who “looked to the Carolina Playmakers as a model for cultural expression” (Moore 9). Flanagan worked with Koch to develop a model particularly suited to the rural southern regions which lacked large cities and arts infrastructures. The model that was eventually developed, a particular kind of “community theatre” model, originated in North Carolina as a development of the collaboration between Flanagan and Koch, along with the support offered by the University for experimenting with new forms of theatre production.

A Shared Purpose: The Forest Theatre and the WPA

Prior to the 1940 reconstruction of the Forest Theatre, Prof. Koch was appointed by Hallie Flanagan, director of the WPA Federal Theatre Project (FTP), as an FTP representative for the southern region of the United States. According to one source, Flanagan was eager to work with Koch and “build on the work of the Playmakers” as an opportunity to develop community theatre models that could be sustained in southern and rural areas where opposition to the FTP was more pronounced than in larger cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago (Moore 9-10). While the FTP, sponsored by the Works Progress Administration, was only funded for four years (1935-1939) it seems likely that Koch’s existing connection to a WPA project contributed to the successful funding of the Forest Theatre reconstruction in 1940.

Sources also suggest that the Federal Theatre Project funded the development of works by Carolina resident playwrights (students of Koch), including Paul Green’s *The Lost Colony* which premiered on Roanoke Island in 1937 (Moore 10). Green’s play was written and developed in conjunction with his work as a student of Koch, in the original Forest Theatre structure. One source suggests that the costumes for Green’s *The Lost Colony*, an inaugural production for the history of “outdoor drama,” were built in a “WPA sewing room” (“Great Depression,” [NCPedia.org](https://www.ncpedia.org)). The model of outdoor drama invented at UNC-CH by Koch and his students in the specific space of the Forest Theatre became a model for regional and community theatre work across the nation, and led to the establishment of a number of arts initiatives on the UNC-CH campus including the Institute of Outdoor Drama in 1963 (King 372).

Concluding Statement

The archival materials and scholarly texts accumulated here suggest the breadth of research that is possible with the Forest Theatre, as one site that stands in relation to the broad spectrum of

New Deal activities, and as one part of the project of elucidating the legacy of the New Deal at large. Most significant of all, perhaps, is the opportunity these resources provide for making sense of the effects that public and federally supported arts infrastructure had on the development of local and national arts projects, and the relationship of those projects to localized communities of U.S. peoples. In the United States, the theatrical arts have never (not before nor after) received the kind of federal support that was provided during the New Deal period, especially with the (short-lived) Federal Theatre Project. As a case study, we hope that the story of the Forest Theatre provokes some consideration of the state of federal support for the arts in our country, and perhaps helps us imagine an alternative future for the public arts.

The New Deal, Creative Expression, and Landscape at UNC Chapel Hill:
An Annotated Bibliography

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- "Contempo and Langston Hughes." *A Right to Speak and to Hear: Academic Freedom and Expression at UNC*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d. Web. 11 Oct. 2016. <http://exhibits.lib.unc.edu/exhibits/show/academic_freedom/between-wars/contempo>. This page includes information on Langston Hughes visit to UNC in 1931, a Southern Historical Collection archive photo of Hughes, a digital copy of the Contempo issue with the poem, "Christ in Alabama" that Hughes included for his talk alongside a drawing, "Black Christ" by Zell Ingram, and a recording of an Oral History related to the event from the Southern Oral History Collection. Additional Web Resources for this event include: http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/shc/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/3826_contempo.jpg and <http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/shc/index.php/2008/08/29/langston-hughes-in-chapel-hill-december-1931/> <http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncm/index.php/2007/01/22/langston-hughes-in-chapel-hill/>
- Dumoulin, Christine. "The Lost Colony - Play." *NCpedia*. Tar Heel Junior Historian Association and the North Carolina Museum of History, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/culture/performing-arts/lost-colony-play>>. This entry is from the publication "The Tarheel Junior Historian" from the Tarheel Junior Historian Association by the NC Museum of History. This entry outlines the history and connections of the play to UNC-CH, the Forest Theater, the Playmakers Company, and to F.H. Koch. It also outlines the performance of this play at the Forest Theater in the 1930s.
- Federal Writers Project. *The WPA Guide to North Carolina: The Old North State*. San Antonio: Trinity UP, 2013. Print. This book is a (re)printing of one of the WPA Writers Project guides to the state of North Carolina and includes history and detail about the entire state including the University, the Playmakers Theater, and the Forest Theater. Sections of this book can also be found online at googlebooks.com.

Forest Theater. Digital image. *North Carolina Collection in Wilson Library*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1937. Web. 08 Oct. 2016. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/nc_post/id/11045>. This is a color post card with an image of a performance at the Forest Theater in 1937. The post card was sold at the student store.

"Forest Theatre." *North Carolina Botanical Garden / Gardens And Natural Areas /*. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncbg.unc.edu/forest-theatre/>>. This image shows the Forest Theater as it stands today.

Glover, Erma Williams. "Smith, Betty." *NCpedia Home Page*. University of North Carolina Press, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/biography/smith-betty>>. This article is from the Dictionary of North Carolina Biography. The entry details the life of Betty Smith and her work alongside F. Koch at UNC-CH. Smith is perhaps best known as the author of the book, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," but was also a prolific play write and radio drama writer. Smith met Koch when she was a worker at the Federal Theater in New York where they collaborated on WPA projects at UNC-CH. Smith decided to remain in Chapel Hill and build a life writing, performing, and occasionally teaching at the university. The entry includes a photo of Smith and is cross linked to other relevant NCpedia articles.

Koch, Frederick H. *Carolina Folk-plays, First, Second, and Third Series*. New York: H. Holt, 1941. Print. F.H. Koch wrote this book to capture plays written and performed at UNC Campus. The introduction includes Koch's history and philosophy of "native drama" theater production.

Koch Memorial Forest Theater. Digital image. *Facility Rental*. North Carolina Botanical Gardens, n.d. Web. 08 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncbg.unc.edu/pages/21/%3E>>. This is an image of the Forest Theater after its dedication as the Koch Memorial Forest Theater in 1943. This photo shows the theater after the 1940 WPA renovation project completion.

Lantern Slide 0216: Koch, Fredrick H., circa 1890s-1920s: Scan 1. Digital image. *Digital North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/dig_nccpa/id/534>. Image of F.H. Koch with text "Founder and Director of the Carolina Playmakers

Mitchell, Ted, Cecelia Moore, and Ansley Herring Wegner. "Dramatic Arts." - *Part 2: Early Productions and Important Playwrights*. University of North Carolina Press, n.d. Web.

10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/dramatic-arts-part-2-early>>. This entry in NCpedia comes from the printed Encyclopedia of North Carolina (2006). It includes a brief history of important dramatic arts figures and moments in NC from 1759 - 1975. This includes a section on Frederick Koch with cross linking to other materials.

Moore, Cecelia. *A Model for Folk Theater: The Carolina Playmakers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014. PDF. This is an overview and history given as the 2014 Gladys Hall Coates University History Lecture on April 8, 2014. Moore goes over the history of the Carolina Playmakers including F.H. Koch's history with the University, his accomplishments and methods as well as the University positions toward drama education and Koch's connections to the Federal Theater Project and WPA program. The document includes the text of the lecture, archival photos of buildings (including the Forest Theater renovation project through the WPA), of people involved in the history, as well as digital copies of related documents from the UNC-CH special collections libraries.

Moore, Cecelia, Ronnie W. Faulkner, Ron Holland, and Richard L. Zuber. "Outdoor Dramas." *NCpedia Home Page*. University of North Carolina Press, n.d. Web. 11 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/outdoor-dramas>>. This is an encyclopedia entry from the printed version of the Encyclopedia of North Carolina (2006). It traces the history of outdoor drama performed in North Carolina and is cross linked to other related articles, plays, and includes photographs.

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet. Chapel Hill: Town of Chapel Hill, 2014. PDF. <http://www.townofchapelhill.org/home/showdocument?id=26205>. This is a federal document, a request for updates to historic status. It was completed by the Town of Chapel Hill in 2014. It lists various sites of interest as historic places in Chapel Hill, NC and includes references and source material listings that support the claims for site status. The Forest Theater is one of the many inclusions in the document along with photographs and technical details for all sites.

Opdycke, Sandra. *The WPA: Creating Jobs and Hope in the Great Depression*. New York: Routledge, 2016. *Google Books*. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <https://books.google.com/books?id=V4z7CwAAQBAJ&pg=PT128&lpg=PT128&dq=Little+Theater+Charlotte+NC+%2B+WPA&source=bl&ots=-XE29_xQY-&sig=eoUalv-

8qsfrN9jqEZRb0izrEX4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi714SuutHPA-hUGbz4KHeYhDjYQ6AEILzAD#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Pennington, Nancy. "Folk Plays." *NCpedia Home Page*. Tar Heel Junior Historian Association and the North Carolina Museum of History, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/culture/performing-arts/folk-plays>>. This selection comes from the publication "Tar Heel Junior Historian" from the Tar Heel Junior Historian Association by the North Carolina Museum of History. This entry covers the history of folk plays in North Carolina - a history linked to and rooted in the Playmakers Company at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill under the direction of Frederick Koch. Cross linked to related articles and includes photographs.

Powell, William S. "Green, Paul Eliot." *NCpedia Home Page*. University of North Carolina Press, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/biography/green-paul-eliot>>. This article comes from the Dictionary of North Carolina Biography. The entry outlines the life and career of Paul Eliot Green, a student of F.H. Koch. Green became a Pulitzer Prize winning play write and the Dramatist Laureate of North Carolina. Green wrote the play "The Lost Colony" an outdoor, symphonic drama, intended to be executed in a theater like the Forest Theater that he had learned to write/produce while at UNC. "The Lost Colony" was performed at UNC's Forest Theater in the 1930s, just prior to the formal connections between the FTP, the WPA, and Koch. Along with the two high honors listed above, Green received many other honors including awards, honorary doctorates (from many UNC system schools), and he was a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters as well as being on the US National Commission for UNESCO. Green was a strong proponent of human rights. The entry includes, archival photos and digital copies of documents and is cross linked to other relevant NCpedia articles.

Selden, Samuel. "Koch, Frederick Henry." *NCpedia Home Page*. University of North Carolina Press, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/biography/koch-frederick-henry>>. This page on F. H. Koch is from the Dictionary of North Carolina Biography. The entry details Koch's life and work in North Carolina and for the Federal Theater Project - WPA. It includes images from the UNC Special Collections Archives. It is cross linked with other related NCpedia articles.

Sneider, William D. "University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill." *NCpedia*. Government & Heritage Library at the State Library of North Carolina, a Part of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/>>. This is an online encyclopedia article about the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. It is cross-linked to other related articles on the NCpedia.org site.

Snider, William D. *Light on the Hill: A History of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1992. Print. This is a summary of the history, particularly of buildings and key administrators at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from its founding until the time of publication. It includes information on WPA projects for renovating buildings, information about the Carolina Playmakers, as well as F.H. Koch, his successful students, and the corresponding administrators with many photographs. Portions can be found online at googlebooks.com as well.

Steelman, Joseph F. "Great Depression and the New Deal." *Great Depression*. Government & Heritage Library at the State Library of North Carolina, a Part of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/history/20th-Century/great-depression>>. This is an online encyclopedia article on North Carolina during the Great Depression and the New Deal in NC. The site is cross linked to other articles on the NCpedia site and includes photographs from NC archival collections.

"University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Dept. of Dramatic Art Photographs and Related Materials, 1911-1970s." *North Carolina Collection*. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://search.lib.unc.edu/search?R=UNCb3284710>>. The collection spans the time period from 1911 through the 1970s and includes photographs and related material documenting theatrical productions, personnel, tours, programs, events, and other activities of the Department of Dramatic Art. Images primarily document the Carolina Playmakers (1918-1975), and often depict Caucasian actors portraying African American, Native American, and Asian characters. Many of these early play images were taken and produced by the photographer Bayard Wootten or by Wootten-Moulton Studios. Productions and activities of the PlayMakers Reperatory Company, the North Dakota Playmakers (founded by Frederick Henry Koch in 1905 before he came to the University of North

Carolina), and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theatre Project are also depicted. The collection consists primarily of photographic material (prints, negatives, and 35mm slides), but also contains programs from productions, notes on tour dates, reviews, and other materials.

Walser, Richard. "Harris, Bernice (Christiana) Kelly." *NCpedia Home Page*. University of North Carolina Press, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. <<http://ncpedia.org/biography/harris-ber-nice>>. This article comes from the Dictionary of North Carolina Biography. The entry includes the history of Bernice Harris Kelly who was a summer school student of F.H. Koch and who became a prolific writer and teacher in her own right. Kelly took what she learned back to her community of Seaboard, NC and began teaching other women how to write plays and narratives. Four of her sketches are included in a Federal Writers Project text - a link between two WPA programs at UNC (the FWP and the FTP). The entry details her works and life, includes archival photos, and is cross linked with other related NCpedia articles.

Materials for "The Development of "Native Drama": Local and National Impacts"

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<i>Materials for "A Shared Purpose: The Forest Theatre and the WPA"</i>
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