Regional, National and International Research and Scholarship Thrive at the Nabb Research Center

By Dr. G. Ray Thompson, Director and Co-Founder of the Nabb Research Center

Delmarva holds the most complete span of original records anywhere in British-speaking Colonial America. After the establishment of Jamestown in 1607, the Eastern Shore was one of the earliest settlements in Virginia. As settlement on the peninsula grew, the Eastern Shore was divided into three separate units: Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. Salisbury University’s Nabb Research Center holds more than 1,700 maps that reflect the changing views of Delmarva’s physical landscape, and it is unique in that it traces this tri-state area’s history from the earliest surviving documents preserved on microfilm, in transcribed publications and in scholarly research.

From File Cabinet to Center

For the past 30 years, students and community members have benefitted from the wealth of historical resources of the Nabb Research Center, yet few know how it grew from a single filing cabinet to its present identity as the Edward H. Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture.

The seeds of the Nabb Research Center were planted in the late 1970s at what was then Salisbury State College. Concerned that a lack of awareness of the career possibilities afforded by a history degree was leaving many students reluctant to enter the discipline, SU introduced several new courses in local history, museum studies and material culture, which were designed to teach students to locate, analyze and interpret a multitude of primary source materials. The success of the new courses made apparent the value of establishing a research center. Despite the historical and cultural richness of the region, students still struggled to locate materials, as there was no central facility dedicated to the collection and preservation of original records from Delaware and the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia at the time. The Nabb Center was created to fill this void.

By 1988, the Delmarva Historical Archives had outgrown the file cabinet as well as the offices in which it had initially been housed. Additional space in Holloway Hall was allocated for the archives, but the blossoming repository soon outgrew even this space, as historians and community members joined students in regular use of these valuable materials. In 1992, the collection was moved to the East Campus Complex of the Salisbury University campus, where it continued to grow. In 1997, Dorchester County attorney and philanthropist Edward H. Nabb endowed the research center with $500,000, allowing it to expand to the 13,000 square feet of operational space that it currently encompasses. The facility was renamed the Edward H. Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture in honor of this generous gift.

Today the center’s holdings include archival material, artifacts, family histories, photographs, manuscripts, maps, newspaper clippings, obituaries, rare books and reference stacks, with more than 8,000 monographs and serials relating to United States history, the Delmarva Peninsula and the greater Chesapeake region. An extensive microfilm collection, consisting of more than 4,000 reels of primary research material, includes court records and other public and private records.

Regional Archives Inspire International Scholarship

The Nabb Research Center houses materials of scholarly interest to students in nearly all disciplines, and it continues to embrace the primary mission of promoting and facilitating academic scholarship relating to the history and culture of the Delmarva Peninsula. Students from various programs of study at SU and our neighboring school the University of Maryland Eastern Shore – including history, English, anthropology, cultural geography and environmental studies – utilize its resources.

The manuscripts and artifacts housed at the Nabb Research Center capture, record and preserve historical time and place. The Nabb Research Center’s collections tell the story of the history and culture of the Eastern Shore. Scholars, both national and international, utilize the center’s vast and rich collections for dissertations and publications.

One such scholar is SU graduate student and recent Fulbright Student Fellowship recipient Charles Overholt. This fall, he will travel overseas to study and conduct research at the 485-year old Philipps-Universität in Marburg, Germany. Overholt, who is currently pursuing a master’s degree with a concentration in European and world history, will explore the role of the Hessian soldiers during the American Revolution.

Overholt will work under the mentorship of Drs. Holger Gräf and Christoph Kampmann, two leading scholars who have been editing, translating and publishing the letters of Hessian soldiers stationed in America and the diary of well-connected Hessian officer and landowner Baron Gilsa. Overholt will assist with the ongoing project and use the primary documents to explore his own questions about the Hessians.

The inspiration for Overholt’s research stemmed from his experiences at the Nabb Research Center. As a graduate assistant employed at the center, Overholt wrote historical narratives about local subjects, based on his analysis of original documents. One of his first tasks was to transcribe the faded handwritten pages in an early 19th century German bible.

Overholt’s work at the Nabb Research Center fueled his existing desire to understand the multi-layered nature of Germany history. He studied German language, culture and literature, which added a new dimension to his understanding of what has made Germans “tick.” He learned how to read not only modern German scripts, but also the more traditional scripts, which he knew he would have to read if he were to advance to the Ph.D. level. On his own, Overholt learned to write deutsche Kurrentschrift, an old form of German language handwriting based on late medieval cursive writing, and Sütterlin, the last widely used form of Kurrent, the old German blackletter handwriting.

Overholt spent countless hours at the Nabb Research Center pouring over many pages, and he began transcribing the handwritten sentences, making them understandable to a population who has long been unable to read such script. It was this knowledge of arcane German handwriting as well as his knowledge of the language that caught the attention of Gräf and Kampmann.
The contributions of the Hessians in America during and after the American Revolution are a topic not widely studied at American universities, primarily due to the lack of original sources. Overholt’s work will result in an invaluable addition to American historical scholarship. “The story of these auxiliary forces combines my interest in German culture and trans-Atlantic history with my fascination with American independence and my own heritage,” Overholt said. He hopes that his work will enlighten the American public on the true story of the Hessian soldiers who helped America fight for its independence.

In addition to his work at the Nabb Research Center, Overholt was also inspired by his grandfather’s stories of his travels to Italy and southern France while serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, and he credits his father’s advice to “make a living with your mind, not your back” for motivating him to continue his studies. Over the years, Overholt has worked alongside his dad, a waterman, crabbing and net fishing in the Chincoteague Bay and other tributaries. Combining interests, he recently was instrumental in creating a Nabb Research Center exhibit on the Shore’s shanty boats and bygone gunning clubs, which opens this fall at the center.

A Look at Early Medical Practices

Medical records of Eastern Shore doctors, dating from 1632-1900, provide a remarkable insight into the tools used during this era. Estate inventories of early physicians also help in the understanding of the daily lives of those who lived on the Eastern Shore. Contained within the early records of Somerset County (1680s) are administrative accounts that tell about family health, medicines prescribed and detailed information such as the precise technical names of certain medicines.

On the Nabb Research Center’s Reading Room shelves are a number of monographs relating to historic health issues. For example, The Medical Annals of Maryland from 1799-1899, compiled for the Centennial of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty in Baltimore, includes a detailed account of many Eastern Shore doctors from the 19th century onward. Public Health Papers and Reports of the American Public Health Association, published in 1900, provides a detailed account of the yellow fever epidemic and changing practices of the health care profession. Epidemics in Colonial America by John Duffy deals with smallpox, diphtheria, scarlet fever, as well as respiratory diseases and childhood illnesses. The Nabb Research Center holds a valuable collection of doctors’ valises and medical equipment that would have been used daily by the country doctors on the Shore.

Among the gallery exhibits curated at the Nabb Research Center is “The Native Americans on Delmarva at First Contact, 1600-1700,” an exhibit that illustrated in graphic detail the horrible deaths of Native Americans who had not been “seasoned” to European illnesses and diseases. “Life on the Eastern Shore, 1607-1907” was another popular exhibit with a component on local medical history and practices. “Main Street Salisbury, 1886-1936” currently showcases items used by rural physicians and medical supplies found in a typical drugstore from 1886-1936. Past lectures at the center have included an in-depth look at Civil War medical practices and an upcoming fall 2012 presentation on DNA, especially as it relates to women’s health and their understanding of themselves and their ancestors.