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**Michael Ann Williams**

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## Michael Ann Williams

Interview by Michael J. Chiarappa and Gabrielle A. Berlinger

Introduction by Michael J. Chiarappa

### Introduction

Michael Ann Williams is University Distinguished Professor of Folk Studies and Anthropology Emeritus at Western Kentucky University where she taught for over thirty years. She earned her doctorate in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania, and her dissertation focused on the use of oral history in the study of vernacular architecture. The revised version, published as *Homeplace: The Social Use and Meaning of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina* (1991), won the Vernacular Architecture Forum's Abbott Lowell Cummings Award. Most notable among Dr. Williams' contributions to vernacular architecture study has been her constant commitment to keep the folklife studies approach central in her work. She is among the few folklorists who consistently, and very consciously, remind us of how Don Yoder's vision for the study of built environments remains as relevant today as it did when he first charted it in the 1960s under the banner of "The Folklife Studies Movement." Williams' skill as a fieldworker—bringing past and present together through oral history, ethnography, community engagement, social and cultural history, and building documentation—underscore her stance that folklife studies is critical to ensuring diverse approaches to the study of vernacular architecture and the interpretation that arises from it. Echoing Yoder, but charting her own

hopes for the continuing place of vernacular architecture within folkloristics, she stated in her 2015 Presidential Address to the American Folklore Society:

My intent in reclaiming the vision of folklife studies for the revolution [the new folkloristics of the 1960s and 1970s] is not to promote the term or any specific approach of its practitioners. Rather it is to see our collective discipline as holistic, potentially incorporating historical and ethnographic approaches, and embracing not only the verbal, but also, as Don Yoder would have it, the spiritual and material dimensions of human culture. (Williams 2017: 136)

The folkloristic energy behind Williams' mix of history, ethnography, and artifact-centred/artifact-driven analysis has contributed to the range of questions and revisions scholars might ask when investigating American vernacular architecture either in past or present contexts. Furthermore, as someone committed to public folklore, she has offered compelling insight, and set an example for how folkloristic approaches to vernacular architecture can clarify significance in historic preservation, deepen the practice of cultural conservation, and sharpen insight into how cultural landscapes factor into some of society's most pressing environmental issues.

MC/GB: Why did you decide that you wanted to study vernacular architecture? How did you first get involved in the study of buildings? Can you describe your first involvement, mentors, inspirations?

MW: My interest in architecture really began to develop in college. I majored in anthropology but, along the way, took some art history classes. A class taught by Kenneth Ames on American design covered a lot of architecture and I later took a class in American architecture. The latter wasn't really about vernacular architecture, but we looked intensely at a small number of buildings. After college I worked as a curator at the Pennsylvania Farm Museum, which has a great collection of vernacular structures. I also drove to Penn State Capital Campus (now Harrisburg) to take a course in the American Studies program in architecture. For my term paper, I wrote about an early 19th-century stone bank barn on a farm adjacent to where I was living. That pretty much sold me. Ultimately architecture led me to folklore, not vice versa.

MC/GB: Who were the major thinkers that influenced your study of vernacular architecture? Are there particular texts or people who inspired you?

MW: In the mid-1970s, when I began graduate school, the literature was still relatively sparse. The Vernacular Architecture Forum had yet to be formed and there wasn't as much dialogue across disciplinary lines. *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (1975) had just come out and I took Vernacular Architecture from Henry Glassie and later served as a TA for the course. So Glassie's ideas shaped my worldview and were the notions that I bounced my observations off of when I did fieldwork. I think some people thought that my intent was to be critical, but that was not at all the case. *Folk Housing* was my known universe.

When I first started using oral history as a method to study vernacular architecture, I couldn't find any models. Soon after I started my dissertation research, George McDaniel's *Hearth and Home* (1982) came out. A year or so later, a folklorist who had studied at Indiana told me about Charles Martin's dissertation and that was influential, especially since it dealt with Appalachia. *Hollybush* (1984) was published



**Fig. 1**  
Michael Ann Williams  
conducting fieldwork  
with Tim Ballard at  
Davidson Cemetery in  
Transylvania County,  
North Carolina.  
Photograph courtesy  
Michael Ann Williams.

while I was writing my dissertation and Chip Martin was kind enough to serve as an outside reader, even though we had never met.

MC/GB: Which people did you work with personally that helped shape your interpretations and field techniques? How would you characterize your approach to architectural study? Where did it come from?

MW: I have to admit that I felt distinctly mentorless in graduate school. When others of my generation rhapsodize about the glory days, when teams of folklorists went out in the field, arm in arm, to measure buildings, I just can't relate. I would have found it hard to find someone to hold the other end of the tape measure! During that time at Penn, there were just not that many of us who identified as vernacular architecture scholars. Bob St. George started a year or so after me and we were about it when I was doing my classwork. That's not to say that my classmates weren't interested or supportive. I wouldn't have made it through grad school without their constant encouragement.

The study of vernacular architecture in folklore during that era was relentlessly male. I can't think of a single female folklorist I met

**Fig. 2**  
*Michael Ann Williams*  
conducting fieldwork  
with Ann Stone  
Cleveland, Cedar  
Mountain, North  
Carolina. Photograph  
by Sydney Varajon.



while I was in graduate school who identified as a vernacular architecture scholar. Even in the early 1980s, during the first half-decade or so of the VAF, there were virtually no other women folklorists active in the organization. VAF didn't lack important female leaders; they just weren't folklorists.

Ultimately the people who shaped my approach were the individuals I met doing fieldwork. I believe I was the first folklorist to be hired by the Historic American Buildings Survey and my role was not to draw but to research and to listen. I think it's significant that my first professional experience (the summer after my first year of graduate school) was on an impact study. These people who were losing their homes were not yet "lost to history," but they sure were about to be. They needed to be listened to. When I returned back to the classroom, I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to do with what I learned. I took a course in historical archaeology in another department and I floundered about trying to decide on a topic for my term paper. I met with the professor and started to describe what I learned working on the Tenn-Tom project.<sup>1</sup> His reaction was so encouraging; basically he said, "this is great stuff, just write it up." So my course was set.

I think I was exceptionally lucky to find work doing architectural survey in North Carolina after completing my graduate classwork. They were so enthused about vernacular architecture and were great people to work for. Michael Southern, my first supervisor, offered a lot of support and Catherine Bishir played a key role at several steps of my developing career—though maybe less as a mentor and more as a fairy godmother.

MC/GB: Where/how did you learn your field methodology? Where/how did you learn to draw? Who were your teachers? What did your first drawings look like? How did you evolve?

MW: I was dismayed when I started graduate school to find we were expected to know how to draw, but we weren't taught how. I did ultimately take a drafting course at a technical school, but frankly, I never really used it. As I discovered working for HABS, the architecture students could do a far finer job than I ever could and I wasn't hired to draw anyway. During survey work, there simply wasn't time to draw anything more than rough field sketches. Then I started to focus on oral history and the field methodology that were important to me were skills on how to listen.

MC/GB: What role did the professional study of folklore have in your research? Did a background in folklore studies help or hinder your study of buildings? What can a folklorist offer the field?

MW: Perhaps unlike some of my contemporaries, I am a folklorist first and foremost. My training in ethnography, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, is at the foundation of my work and the discipline has been exceptionally kind to me. I never dreamed that I would head a department for over a dozen years, become president of the American Folklore Society, or receive a lifetime achievement award from AFS for academic leadership. I realize that I have been ridiculously lucky; the right job opened up just as I was finishing my degree and I discovered that I loved teaching and mentoring students.

If folklore seems less central to vernacular architecture studies than it once was, maybe it's a sign of our success, not our failure. We helped invent the field. While we successfully convinced a critical number of scholars in preservation,



architectural history and other fields of the significance of studying the vernacular, we also became outnumbered. Perhaps at that point we should have played to our strengths. What skills do folklorists uniquely bring to the study of buildings?

MC/GB: Why does vernacular architecture research now have only a minimal role in contemporary folklore studies? What can be done to make such studies relevant again to folklorists?

MW: These were questions that I considered to some extent in my 2015 AFS presidential speech (see Williams 2017). I think in the 1970s material culture scholars considered themselves part of the revolution that vastly widened the scope of folklore studies and we felt that we were also a part of an important movement to democratize history. However, at some point, some within our field began to think that historical approaches smacked of antiquarianism. That being said, however, I think vernacular architecture specialists bear some responsibility for not continuing to make our study relevant to the field of folklore. And, the simple fact is that AFS is full of people toiling away in sub-specialties that are not considered particularly *au courant* among the theorists. I don't think vernacular architecture scholars were particularly singled out for shunning.

While I do think that folklorists in vernacular architecture should play to our strengths, I certainly don't want to create new orthodoxies. If scholars want to use our ethnographic perspectives or our skills as a "listening" discipline, that's great. But there are other ways to bring our expertise and training to historical perspectives as well. We need to embrace our common interests and respect each other's work. For instance, in the past few years we have had at least three major works by folklorists that bring together vernacular architecture study with a folkloristic understanding of belief (see Carter 2015; Sciorra 2015; Berlinger 2017). It makes me sad that some

of my generation don't want to see ethnographic studies as real vernacular architecture scholarship. I think we could also do a better job of making common cause with folklorists involved in applied work, especially in preservation and cultural impact studies. Folklorist Tina Bucuvalas (2019) has had a major impact in creating one of the first non-Native American National Register districts listed as a traditional cultural place. Marjorie Hunt's film documentation of architectural craftsmanship also should be considered a major contribution to folkloristic study of architecture (see Hunt and Wagner 1984; 2018).

I think the biggest challenge right now is that a number of retiring vernacular architecture scholars in folklore programs have not been replaced by individuals with expertise in vernacular architecture. There are simply fewer opportunities for students to learn about vernacular architecture within the context of folklore programs. However, in the thirty-some years I taught at Western Kentucky University (WKU), I never saw a decline in student interest in architecture. Of course, we had a historic preservation track within the Folk Studies M.A., so that brought in students already interested in buildings. But I always saw students who had come to WKU to study some completely different area of folklore become excited by architectural study. That never changed or dwindled. Many of those who studied architecture found good careers in historic preservation. However, for those who wanted to go on for a PhD, there were increasingly fewer doctoral programs where combining folklore and vernacular architecture study was a viable choice.

So I would like to see those of us trained in folklore who study architecture to find common cause with each other, celebrate our work, and mentor folklore students who are struggling to find their way in our discipline. I don't think it's too late to invigorate the folkloristic study of vernacular architecture.

## Notes

1. The Tennessee–Tombigbee Waterway, known as the Tenn-Tom, is a man-made U.S. commercial waterway linking the Tennessee and Tombigbee Rivers. A controversial development project due to its environmental and cultural impacts (it displaced and flooded communities in Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi), the initiative was completed in 1984. For a discussion of folklorist's lack of involvement in assessing the cultural impacts of the project, see Bulger 2003: 384-88.

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