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Gary Wilson, Director, ESCN Database Reports

Katina Strauch

Against the Grain, strauchk@cofc.edu

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Gary Wilson and his father John Wilson of ESCN Database Reports in Summerville, SC.

ATG: *What is ESCN Database Reports? Where are you located?*

GW: ESCN Database Reports is an ongoing series of reference books that provide quick reference indexing of local news articles, public notices, shipping reports, and advertisements found in the early South Carolina newspapers. It is also the name of our company. In fact, the ESCN acronym used in our name stands for **Early South Carolina Newspapers**.

We are located at 311 N. Magnolia Street #1, Summerville, SC 29483 and our phone number is 843-871-7892. Our email address is escn_database_reports@compuserve.com.

ATG: *What are these early South Carolina newspapers?*

GW: The early South Carolina newspapers are generally considered to be those newspapers that were published in Charleston, South Carolina from 1732 through 1782. They were the first newspapers published in the state and represent an important source of colonial and revolutionary era genealogical and historical data.

There were a total of eight newspapers published in Charleston during this time period. However, the first and longest running newspaper published during this time was the **South Carolina Gazette** and that particular newspaper has been the focus of our research work thus far. It was published on a continual basis in Charleston from 1732 through 1775.

ATG: *You mentioned your research of the South Carolina Gazette. How far along are you?*

GW: We currently have researched the **Gazette** through the year 1763 and now have 32 books in our series as a result of our research. There is one **ESCN Database Reports** book published for each year of a newspaper's publication. Since this particular newspaper was published through the year 1775, we anticipate it will take another two years of research to complete our work on this newspaper. After that, we plan to move on to the other seven early South Carolina newspapers published during this period and index those as well.

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ATG Interviews Gary Wilson

Director — ESCN Database Reports
<escn_database_reports@compuserve.com>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <strauchk@cofc.edu>

I had lunch with Gary Wilson a while back because I was intrigued by the publications that he and his father produce. He is the epitome of a dedicated small businessman! —KS

ATG: *What kind of information is found in your books? Who would be interested in the contents?*

GW: Each of our ESCN Database Reports books is divided into four major sections. These four sections, each considered a separate database report, provide detailed publication references on Individual Names, Organizational Names, Shipping & Maritime News, and Slavery Related Articles & Advertisements. Also, beginning with year 1760, we added two more sections to our books that cover Name References and Blind Advertisements found in the newspaper as well.

Record listings presented in these six book sections provide the reader with important quick reference publication data regarding the person, organization, ship, slave article, name reference, or blind advertisement published in the paper. This data includes, among other things, the article type, specific publication date, and at least one and up to three subjects that the article or advertisement dealt with. Each of our books also contains a glossary of Old English words and is fully indexed by both occupation and article subject.

The information contained in our books is used by researchers to quickly locate ar-

ticles or advertisements of interest in microfilm archives of the newspaper and these archives are found in nearly 200 library locations across the entire United States.

And I guess that begins to explain who would be interested in the contents of our books. The answer to that question is basically anyone who has a need or desire to research particular names, organizations, ships, slavery, occupations, or subjects in the early South Carolina newspapers. This body of researchers would include amateur and professional genealogists, college and university faculty and students, historians and sociologists pursuing grant based research, etc., etc.

ATG: *How do you go about researching the information found in your books?*

GW: We use standard microfilm archives of the newspaper for our research work and literally read each edition of the newspaper, one page at a time, article by article and advertisement by advertisement, to glean out the data that we present in our books.

Researched data is then input into a fully relational computer database that we designed for the accumulation and management of the newspaper publication data and at the end of

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our research for a particular newspaper publication year, that data is then manipulated and sorted in a variety of different ways to produce the six database reports now found in our books. These six separate database reports, or book sections, are then combined together, are further indexed by occupation and article subject, and the final combined result is published as the overall **ESCN Database Reports** book for that particular newspaper for that given publication year.

ATG: Your research work sounds pretty time consuming. Is this true?

GW: Absolutely! Our research is very time consuming. It would definitely be considered as highly labor intensive work. It can be hard on the eyes at times too. But because of these facts—because it is so labor intensive and so time consuming—is exactly why our research is of such value to others.

Normally, attempting to research information in early newspapers on microfilm takes many months and frequently years to complete. And most researchers simply can't afford to spend that kind of time trying to find information in early newspapers that might be of interest to them. But now our research and published indexes perform that labor intensive searching work for them, saving researchers of these early newspapers huge amounts of time. And that is the true value of our work and publications.

ATG: I can see how such time savings would be of value. How large is your database now?

GW: With the completion of our year 1763 research, we now have over 194,000 records in the database. These records provide newspaper publication references for over 8,500 unique surnames found published in the newspaper during this time period. There are also over 2,450 ship names referenced in the database through this date. And so on. Obviously, all of these numbers continue to grow as our research progresses over time.

ATG: How did you get started in this business? And what is your educational background?

GW: My father, **John Wilson**, was a collector of antique tools for many years. When he retired and returned to the Charleston area in early 1992, he began researching the early SC newspapers looking for early toolmakers for the **Early American Industries Association (EAIA)**, an organization that he was a member of at the time that was preparing to publish a national directory of early toolmakers.

After completing that research and realizing how difficult and time consuming it was to find information of specific interest in these newspapers, Pop indicated to me that he would like to try and develop some sort of body of quick reference information to help other

researchers find subjects more easily. He believed that compiling an index of information like this would be of great value to others.

I agreed with him completely, but suggested that a computer database would be the most effective way to accumulate and manage such data. Since I had a business and computer background, that is the point when I became involved and the two of us formed a small company and began our research and publishing work in early 1995. I run the business, manage the database, and conduct newspaper research too, but Pop is still the Head Researcher in this endeavor. He understandably has become quite an authority on these early newspapers.

In terms of my educational background, I have a MBA from **Arizona State University** and a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from **Central Washington State College**. Neither Pop nor myself are formally trained historians, but we both have a natural love for the subject and he is, without a doubt, the most avid reader I have ever known. The number of books that he has read over the course of his life would probably fill a small to medium sized college library. And I'm not exaggerating!

ATG: That's a lot of books! Are your customers largely libraries? You also mentioned genealogists.

GW: Yes. Our book customers are primarily university libraries, along with a number of public libraries and several historical societies. However, we also offer a surname search service through the Internet that is mainly used by genealogists who are doing research on a particular family history. By using our search service, these individuals can focus in on particular surnames and related spelling variations that were published in the early newspapers and can do so on a very cost effective basis. Our web site address is http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/escn_database_reports.

ATG: Since you mentioned cost, how are your books and search service priced?

GW: Our ongoing series of books are priced from \$24.50 to \$44.50 for softcover versions, depending upon the size and amount of data contained within the individual books. As our research of the newspaper has progressed over time, we've seen the amount of data contained within the newspapers increase over time as well. That's why our books are priced in this manner. We also offer library bound hardcover versions for an additional \$15.00 per book. And discounts for standing orders. And all of our books are printed on acid-free paper to insure a high level of archival quality.


Our surname search service uses a bracketed pricing structure based upon the total number of records found in our database that match the search criteria submitted. For example, a search result consisting of 40 records

would have a search fee of \$11; where a search result having 180 records in the result would have a search fee of \$17. And so on. The complete pricing structure is explained at our Web site. I should mention, however, that currently the search itself is not conducted online. Information about the service is provided online, along with an online listing of all surnames in our database with their associated record counts, but the actual search is still performed at our company offices and search requests and search results are still processed through the mail.

ATG: Do you have plans to go digital or fulltext?

GW: Yes and no. We do plan to put a modified version of the database online for use with our surname search service that would allow search customers to perform their searches completely online with electronic search payments made online as well. We hope to have this digital resource online sometime towards the end of this year. However, we probably won't offer the complete database in digital format, say on compact disc for example, at least until we complete our research on the **South Carolina Gazette** newspaper. And even then, we will only do so if we see a sufficient demand for the digital product first. We have had several customers express interest in such a product, but it's still a little early to say definitely one way or the other.

Fulltext is a bigger problem. Obviously, we would love to digitize the entire newspaper, but OCR programs don't lend themselves well to scanning these early newspapers. This is primarily because of the Old English type used in a variety of different styles in these papers, the frequent use of very worn typefaces by the printer, and the often very poor copy quality of the individual newspaper pages themselves. We've experimented with the idea to some degree, but we've found that the text errors that result when trying to scan these early newspapers with an OCR program are quite significant. The data just isn't retrieved very easily or accurately using OCR technology on these papers. At least that's been our experience to date.

Later newspapers, like those from the Civil War period for example, would probably lend themselves more effectively to OCR scanning. But these early colonial and revolutionary period newspapers are quite another story. So for now at least, we will continue to pursue the indexing route for the early South Carolina newspapers rather than attempting to go to a fulltext format. We simply believe it to give more accurate results. 

Hmmm ... Interesting comments! Do you reckon that some day in the future, people will complain that late twentieth century records are in a font type that is difficult to read and that the poor quality of digital products produced during that time makes it hard to retrieve data accurately? —KS

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