

**"The heyday of a woman's life is the shady side of fifty"**

**--or is it?**

**Twentieth Century Women and the Experience of Aging**

**An Address by Melissa Walker, Ph.D. for the annual meeting of the Southern Association for Women Historians at the Southern Historical Association, Charlotte, NC**

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At her seventieth birthday celebration in 1885, suffrage activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressed friends on "The Pleasures of Aging." Stanton said, "Fifty, not fifteen, is the heyday of woman's life, when the forces hitherto finding an outlet in flirtations, courtship, conjugal and maternal love, are garnered in the brain to find expression in intellectual achievements, in spiritual friendships and beautiful thoughts, in music, poetry, and art." In June 1892, she reiterated the point to another audience there, declaring, "The heyday of a woman's life is the shady side of fifty."<sup>1</sup>

I read those documents in 2007. At the time, I was a younger member of the Baby Boom cohort, staring 50 in the face. Then and now, popular culture was flooded with messages that Baby Boomers were remaking the last decades of life in new and positive ways. And yet, the larger culture told binary stories about aging—either relentlessly positive like that Clairol commercial for Loving Care hair color that assured me that "You're not getting older. You're getting better"—or depressing tales of decline and dependence like the commercial featuring a white-haired woman on the floor yelling "I've fallen, and I can't get up." I wondered: Was the heyday of a woman's life really the shady side of fifty? And were Baby Boomers re-inventing the experience of aging as so much of contemporary popular culture suggests?

As a historian, I've always looked for the answers to questions like these in the lives of previous generations. Digging into the scholarly literature, I found that the historians of aging,

including Andrew Achenbaum, David Hackett Fischer, Carole Haber, and others, had focused largely on medicalization of old age, shifting attitudes about aging in the culture at large, and the development of formalized retirement and government and institutional supports for the elderly. Gerontologists, psychologists, and sociologists were writing about contemporary aging with a particular focus on the Baby Boom, occasionally with a gendered lens. But few historians had considered women in the third chapter of life—to borrow sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's term for people over 50. Fewer still had examined women's lived experiences of aging in the twentieth century. How did they understand and give meaning to the process of growing older? What factors contributed to vitality and engagement in the third chapter? How did women navigate the pleasures and challenges of daily life? How did class, race, region, sexual orientation, and changing institutional supports for older Americans shape their lives? My questions led me to the archives.<sup>2</sup>

Finding the voices of aging women was an act of detective work. I combed the finding aids, tracking women's ages and searching for keywords that suggested the sources might contain reflections on growing older. It was challenging to develop something resembling a representative sample. Archival collections skew educated, white, and middle to upper class.<sup>3</sup> However imperfect the sample, I ended up with a study includes 235 America women from the four generations before the Baby Boom, women who reached their 50s and passed into old age amid the dizzying changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sample includes rural and urban women, educated and uneducated women, Jews, Christians, and atheists, heterosexual and lesbian women, affluent, middle and working class, from all regions of the country. Eighteen or 7.6%

were African American and a handful were Asian, Latinx, or Native American, but the overwhelming majority, 87% were white. Ten women identified as lesbian.<sup>4</sup>

I found sources created for a variety of purposes and audiences ranging from published memoirs carefully shaped for public consumption to diaries and journals not intended to be read by others, from oral histories, a co-creation of the interviewer and interviewee, to letters which addressed topics specific to the relationship between the correspondents.<sup>5</sup> Some women reflected at length on growing older, but most addressed aging briefly or obliquely, if at all. Nonetheless, I found I could gain a good sense of how women experienced aging by tracking the ways they spent their days and how the shape of those days shifted as they aged.

My interpretations have been shaped by the life course theorists working in history, psychology, and sociology in the 1980s and 1990s. These scholars posited that individuals navigate each stage of life in the context of social, cultural, and historical forces that they respond to in selective ways and that each stage in an individual's life must be considered as part of the continuum of an entire life. I find this approach helpful because it approaches adult development in a nonlinear and multidimensional way.<sup>6</sup>

These methodological and interpretative challenges have translated into a project that has seduced and frustrated me for the better part of two decades. A dozen times, I closed the files for months or even years. I struggled to wrap my head around the complexities I found in women's stories. But I kept returning to the question I posed at the outset: did the years beyond 50 constitute the heyday of a woman's life? I am not sure whether the women in my sample would describe their third chapters as heydays—as peaks of success and happiness—but

most of them remained vitally engaged in living. A few explicitly reveled in the freedom and independence they found in this final stage of life.

Among the key elements that shaped late life vitality and engagement were first, the presence of a few strong, healthy relationships with partners, family, or friends--a theme which echoes the findings of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, the longest-running scientific study of happiness.<sup>7</sup> Second was sustained involvement in purposeful activities--in professions, voluntary associations, creative pursuits, or housekeeping—that gave intention and shape to their days, made them feel useful, and generated some sense of identity. A third element of vitality in the third chapter was a resilient approach to change. A fourth element was preserving some level of autonomy and control over their lives. In my remaining time today, I'm going to offer you examples of three middle class Southern women, two white and one black, from three different generations. Their experiences illustrate some of the satisfactions and challenges women found in the last third of their lives.

Lucy Cobb was the tenth of twelve children. Born in 1877 in Lilesville, North Carolina to a white Baptist minister and his wife, she was educated at Peace Institute and St. Mary's School in Raleigh.<sup>8</sup> Lucy never married, and she supported herself with a variety of jobs. She taught school, worked as a home demonstration agent and for the WPA Federal Writers Project, and edited a newspaper. Cobb spent summers earning credits toward her college degree, finally earning an A.B. in English from the University of North Carolina in 1921 at age 44. She went on to earn an M.A. at Chapel Hill. In her fifties, she settled in Raleigh where she taught and did freelance writing and genealogical research.

Well into her eighties, Lucy Cobb maintained relationships with a wide network of friends, genealogical clients, and family members. She was particularly close to her niece Mary Louise “Mamie” Cobb and nephew Collier Cobb, Jr., both children of her elder brother. Many of her relationships are documented in her voluminous correspondence, now archived at the Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill. Lucy kept the letters she received, and she also preserved carbon copies of most of the letters she sent, giving us a more complete picture than we usually obtain from archived letters.

This correspondence reveals an intelligent, forthright, and creative woman who approached the last three decades of her life with zest and commitment. Cobb reported on frequent visits to and from friends and family. She attended DAR meetings, Baptist women’s groups, and activities of the Raleigh Women’s Club. She spent many days conducting genealogical research in the state archives in Raleigh. Cobb engaged in frequent contact with creative collaborators, publishing a folklore collection, a play, and a collection of short stories in her 70s and 80s. In her final decade, she doggedly but unsuccessfully pursued contacts in the entertainment industry who might produce an operetta for which she had written the libretto.<sup>9</sup>

Even as the letters convey Lucy’s vitality and eager engagement with life in her third chapter, they also offer a window into the complexities of aging for single professional woman in the middle of the twentieth century. She was plagued by chronic health problems, and in these days before Medicare, she accumulated medical bills. A lifetime of low wages and periods of ill-health throughout her adulthood meant that she had little savings and no pension or other assets to sustain her in her later years. She subsisted on a meager Social Security check and the generosity of her niece and nephew who each sent a monthly check. Her financial challenges

were compounded by the dearth of infrastructure to support the elderly in mid-century North Carolina. There were few social service programs for seniors. Retirement homes offered little in the way of privacy, amenities, or assistance with maintaining some semblance of autonomy.

Lucy clung to that autonomy. By the late 1950s, Mamie and Collier's letters, which up to that point had focused on exchanging personal and family news, began to express concern for Lucy's well-being. They repeatedly urged their octogenarian aunt to move into a more sheltered living environment. Lucy refused, defending her independence and her need to focus on her work.

The letters also illuminate the burden that caregiving placed on family members. Mamie and Collier's concerns about their aunt's health were legitimate, and they were not insensitive to her psychological needs. Nor was Lucy their only elderly relative needing attention. In addition to working full-time, Mamie, age 56, lived with her ailing 82-year-old stepmother. She also looked after septuagenarian single aunt in Greensboro. Collier, age 64, still worked as a civil engineer, and he had his own family. Concerns about Lucy were an emotional and financial responsibility that weighed on them.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, debates about Lucy's living arrangements dominated the correspondence with her niece and nephew. On August 31, 1958, Mamie wrote, "You keep telling us not to worry, that you are doing fine and have friends to check on you, etc., etc. That is true at present, but a sudden illness could come to you, as it can to any of us, and we must be prepared for it." Mamie asked Lucy to apply for a spot at the Baptist Home in Winston-Salem. Having toured the home on behalf of her other aunt, Mamie detailed the well-appointed facilities and pleasant atmosphere and relayed the positive experiences of a mutual

acquaintance who lived there. She described a craft room and twice-weekly buses into downtown Winston.

Lucy was indignant at the demand that she apply to the Winston-Salem nursing home; she had applied to St. Luke's Home in Raleigh, she reminded Mamie, but a bed was not available there. Lucy's September 14, 1958, letter to Mamie is worth quoting at some length because it illuminates her frustration at her dependence on her family, the sense of purpose that her work gave her, and her determination to maintain her autonomy. She wrote,

"I cannot go to Winston-Salem. [W]hen you take the means whereby I live, you take my life. I am not the kind to take up new crafts, to sit and crochet and gossip, to care whether or not I go to Winston on those twice weekly buses. . . . There I cannot have someone call me up at night and have a long conversation about some new Caswell [family tree] material he has found. . . . Dr. Royster said that the home in Winston-Salem was not the place for me, and he added to the St. Luke's [application] that 'Miss Lucy Cobb was both mentally and physically several years younger than her chronological age.' . . . I would far rather live a shorter time and even though it would hurt my pride more than I can say, go on relief than leave Raleigh. Whether or not what I do here is of financial benefit it is my life and I cannot cut it short until I am disabled."

A week later, in another letter to Mamie, Lucy wrote,

"[D]id I not make a cent either writing or 'ancestoring', Raleigh is the place for me. . . . I must be left with something other than food and clothes about which I care little. . . . I do have to have some life of my own."

The heart of Cobb's resistance to a retirement home was rooted in the idea of leaving Raleigh--a place where she possessed established networks and an identity as a respected creative and genealogist, a place where she knew the public transit system. In Winston-Salem, no one knew her and she would be unmoored from a life of her own making. Indeed for several more years, Lucy maintained that "life of my own" in spite of worsening health.<sup>11</sup> Eventually her correspondence became spotty, and several letters referenced hospital stays. On September 3, 1964, Lucy wrote to someone named Ruth apologizing for taking so long to respond, explaining, "Sometimes I can't use my hand well enough to write." It was the last letter preserved in her papers. In 1966, Lucy finally moved into Pine Ridge Nursing Home in Southern Pines, North Carolina. There is no record in the files about her years there. She died in July 1969 in Chapel Hill at the age of 92.

In spite of health problems and financial insecurity, Lucy Cobb enjoyed an active and engaged life until her health broke down completely in her late eighties. She found meaning in her work and her relationships. Her insistence on staying in Raleigh did not grow out of her refusal to adapt to change, but out of her deep desire to maintain her autonomy and her identity.<sup>12</sup>

Born into privilege in 1900, a generation later than Lucy Cobb, Nell Upshaw Gannon was the only child of a leading white citizen of Social Circle, Georgia. She earned a B.A. and M.A in history at the University of Georgia where she met her husband, Arthur Gannon.<sup>13</sup> They married in 1924 and both did graduate study at Berkeley. Arthur earned a master's in agricultural



science, and Nell earned a Ph.D. in history.<sup>14</sup> In 1933, Nell and Arthur returned to Athens where he became a professor at UGA and a poultry researcher in the Cooperative Extension Service. The couple built a house in a faculty enclave. Although Nell occasionally taught history at the university in the early years of their marriage, Arthur's career took primacy. In 1940, the couple adopted a six-year-old daughter named Eleanor.<sup>15</sup>

Nell began keeping a diary in 1937. Archived at the University of Georgia, the diaries preserve a rich record of Nell's daily activities and occasional commentary on her emotional state.<sup>16</sup>

Like Lucy Cobb, Nell struggled with a variety of health issues throughout the last third of her life. Nonetheless, until her late 60s, she continued to garden. Also like Cobb, she enjoyed an active social life. She reported attending social events or entertaining guests most days. She belonged to a book club and recorded almost weekly trips to the library. She regularly spoke at garden clubs in small towns throughout middle Georgia. Gannon inherited considerable assets and frequently recorded time spent managing her financial affairs.<sup>17</sup>

Relationships with friends were important to Nell, and many of the same names appeared repeatedly. More important, Arthur and Nell were close, spending a great deal of time together. They went to movies, had dinner with friends, wrote Christmas cards together and worked side-by-side in the garden. After his retirement in the mid-1960s, the two also volunteered regularly at a hospital. They traveled together for extended periods. For example, in 1961, when Arthur consulted on an international development project in Cambodia, Nell met him in Cambodia, and they traveled in Southeast Asia, Turkey, and Europe. In ensuing years, the couple traveled extensively in Europe most summers. Arthur was the center of her world, and

most of her rare emotional reflections were about their relationship. For example, on May 29, 1971, she wrote, “We were married 47 years ago today. Arthur is wonderful.”<sup>18</sup>

Relationships with Arthur and her friends sustained Nell, but other relationships proved taxing. She and Arthur were caregivers for Arthur’s older brother Allan in his last years, both in their own home and then in a nursing home.<sup>19</sup> The couple’s daughter also required caregiving well into adulthood due to episodes of anxiety and depression that led to hospitalization and to Eleanor’s general inability to perform many of the tasks of “adulthood” even after her marriage.<sup>20</sup> Nell’s diary entries about Eleanor were terse, but the tension is clear. For example, on September 10, 1958, Nell wrote, “Eleanor called & as usual wanted us to do an errand for her. [The call] was ‘collect.’” Even after Eleanor married in December 1960, settling with her husband in Greenville, South Carolina, Nell and Arthur managed crises large and small for their daughter. The arrival of grandchildren only exacerbated the tensions between Nell and Eleanor, apparently due to disagreements about how to discipline the children.<sup>21</sup>

Nell’s main references to aging in the diary were comments on her declining health, but periodically, she reflected more broadly. On December 9, 1958, her 58<sup>th</sup> birthday, she concluded her diary entry with “This was my birthday. I felt old & tired and rather lost in a changing world.” On her 66<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1966, she wrote, “This is my 66 birthday [sic], and I am feeling my age.” On her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, she mused, “Already I have lived longer than either of my parents.”

The illnesses and deaths of friends brought grief and reminders of her own mortality. As time went on, she reported attending the funerals of friends more frequently. In August 1967, she learned that her good friend Ernest had suffered a heart attack and had little hope of

recovery while Ernest's wife, Bertha, had just undergone a mastectomy. "It was all very alarming to me," she wrote. "All of this has depressed us."

By late 1972, it was clear in the diaries that age and illness had finally curtailed Nell's active social life and her engagement with the world outside her home. Errands such as trips to the bank, the beauty parlor, and the grocery store were her most frequent outings. Although she continued to record a social event or two a week, she often commented that she "stayed in." On December 9, 1972, she wrote, "Today is my 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday. I feel no different from usual although [sic] I know, of course, that I am old and time is running out."

As her health continued to decline in 1973, with an almost continual string of ailments, Gannon noted her waning energy. On March 14, 1973, she wrote, "I dressed but stayed in. Wrote several notes, did a few chores but did not accomplish much. AG was very active. My semi-invalidism frustrates me." She was diagnosed with diverticulitis, and an X-ray revealed a lump on one of her kidneys. She lost sixteen pounds in a ten-month period without dieting. On November 24, 1973, Nell wrote, "Weighed this AM. 95 pounds. It will be a relief to get in the hospital and get my troubles over one way or the other. Arthur has been wonderful." That was the last entry in the diary. She died on February 20, 1974.

Nell Gannon's diary entries indicate that she found purpose and meaning until the end of her life in the daily tasks of maintaining relationships, caring for her home and garden, and her voluntary activities. Her privilege, provided both by her inherited wealth, Medicare to cover medical bills, and a healthy husband to care for her during illness gave her stability and autonomy that Lucy Cobb only dreamed of, but her privilege could not insulate her from physical decline or from the wave of losses as one friend after another died.

Margaret Kennedy Goodwin was born in Columbus County, North Carolina in 1918. Her story is preserved in a series of three oral history interviews conducted by historian Angela Hornsby in 1997, archived in the Southern Oral History Project at Chapel Hill. The eldest of three children, Margaret grew up in Durham where her maternal grandfather, Charles Clinton Spaulding, Sr., was president of the oldest and largest Black-owned life insurance company in the country, North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company. Her father, William Kennedy, Jr., worked for the company and would himself rise to the position of president. Durham's thriving African-American business community was sometimes called the black Wall Street, and Margaret's parents were active in African-American service organizations.<sup>22</sup>

Margaret graduated from Talladega College in Alabama in 1938 with a degree in chemistry. She went on to earn a degree in medical technology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1940. She worked as a medical technologist in Norfolk for a year before her 1941 marriage to Lewis Goodwin, a man she met when both were students at Talladega. They settled in Washington, D.C. where they worked for federal agencies.

Margaret and Lewis had lived together about eighteen months when he was drafted into the Army in 1942.<sup>23</sup> She gave birth to daughter Marsha in 1943, and Lewis saw the baby only three times before he died in 1944. Margaret and the baby moved to her parents' home in Durham. Margaret went to work as an X-ray technician at Durham's African-American hospital, Lincoln Hospital. She worked at Lincoln Hospital for 35 years, rising to the position of Chief of Radiology and Laboratory Services.<sup>24</sup>

Racial discrimination limited Goodwin's career opportunities. She applied to medical school in the 1950s, but as a black woman, she was denied admission.<sup>25</sup> The North Carolina

Society of Radiologists—which despite the name, was an organization for technicians not physicians—initially denied her membership, but after she was elected to an office in the American Society of X-Ray Technicians, the first black woman to hold office in that organization, the North Carolina organization reconsidered. Goodwin eventually became the first Black president of North Carolina Society of Radiologists.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout her career, Goodwin balanced her work with raising her daughter and active engagement in her community. At age 67, Goodwin retired to care for her ailing parents. She explained, “By that time my father had had two strokes and was completely incapacitated. His mind was keen, clear. But his body simply did not answer him. . . . And mama was, you know, up and at 'em and able, but after all she was . . . 88 and he was 90 and they needed me here, which was fine with me.” She saw herself as especially well-suited to caring for aging parents because of her health care background. Her father died a few months after Margaret’s retirement, in July 1985, and her mother died in January 1986.

After her parents’ deaths, Goodwin reveled in retirement. She told the interviewer:

When I was working, I had to be where I needed to be when somebody else said

I needed to be there. . . . Retirement was just like somebody had given me wings.

I could do something one day and something else the next day. I could play

bridge. I could go to the rest homes and sing with the patients. I could be on the

board of . . . the John Avery Boys Club.

Margaret was active in church work and the service projects of Delta Sigma Theta, the prestigious Black sorority to which she belonged. Goodwin also served on the advisory board of the local visiting nurses service. She volunteered for Senior PharmAssist, a Durham organization

that assisted older people in obtaining and managing their medications.<sup>27</sup> She drove people to the polls on election days. She told the interviewer, "Freedom from going to work everyday from nine to five gave me the opportunity to do some things I wanted to do and never had the time. . . ."

In her final decades, Goodwin lived with her daughter, an employee of North Carolina Central University, in the home she had shared with her parents. Goodwin told the interviewer that her faith would continue to be a force in her life until the day she died. She cited the example set by her parents for her service work in retirement: "Until they were 85, 90 years old. They were still moving in the community, still very active in whatever was going on." She added, "I'm not afraid of dying. I've met death on too many occasions. And when it comes I'll know the Lord is ready for me. And that I would have accomplished what He wanted me to do on this earth and that's all I ask." Indeed, Goodwin continued her service work until the final months of her life. She died in 2010 and was buried near her parents in Durham.

Race had limited Margaret Goodwin's opportunities, and in retirement, her devotion to uplifting her race and her desire to help other aging people shaped her commitment to service. Like the other women in my study, Goodwin's relationships were the central focus of her life and the source of much of satisfaction in her third chapter. She was able to remain active and largely autonomous, and thanks to her own career, Medicare and to the home she inherited from her parents, like Nell Gannon, she was not plagued by financial insecurity.

All three women lived vital and engaged lives well into their 70s and 80s. Engrossed in creative pursuits, community service, and relationships with family and friends, they enjoyed

rich lives imbued with a sense of purpose and identity. They also faced difficulty and loss: caregiving, financial insecurity, illness, and fears of losing autonomy.

There is much more to unpack about what the lives of these women and others in my sample can tell us about how women experienced growing older. Aging is a process, and it is not a linear one with a fixed timeline. While the shape of women's third chapters varied, the variety could not always be predicted by class, race, region, or generation. I continue to explore rural/urban differences as well as whether the experiences of lesbian women differed significantly from those of heterosexual women. Some women's lives were transformed by larger historical events, but many were largely silent about these events. Some women approached old age reflectively and intentionally while others simply took the changes as they came. Examining women's experiences of aging in their own words can help us understand how they adapted to change—personal and societal—in their third chapters. This study also provides insights into the ways that changes in technology, gender roles, racial norms, and institutional and governmental supports for the elderly are constantly transforming the experience of growing older. The circumstances that have shaped aging, including advances in healthcare and increased financial and infrastructural support for older people, have changed the aging experience, but there is as much continuity as change.

Stanton noted that, "The pleasures of age depend on what constitute the threads of our lives and how they are woven together." This was true of the women in my study. Considering the lives of Cobb, Gannon, and Goodwin, we see that their final decades were marked by continuity with their patterns of a lifetime even as failing bodies created new challenges. Growing older was a complex dance shaped by women's attitudes, relationships, and sense of

autonomy, purpose, and identity. Their stories challenge the notion that Baby Boomers are forging a fresh approach to vitality and engagement in life's third chapter. Indeed, most women of earlier generations who were blessed with long lives embraced active Third Chapters.

I'll end on a personal note. Most of the time when I tell people about my research they are intrigued, but occasionally a listener recoils and says "Oh, my, that sounds depressing." It's true that most women face challenges in old age. Most humans face challenges at every age. It's also true that all of our stories will end the same way: with dying. But I have found my research to be reassuring rather than depressing. The shady side of 50 will include heyday moments and difficult moments, but for most of us, it will be a rich and full life.

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "The Pleasures of Age," November 12, 1885, Library of Congress Public Domain Archive, <https://loc.getarchive.net/media/elizabeth-cady-stanton-papers-speeches-and-writings-1848-1902-speeches-1885-349616> and Stanton, "On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of class of 1832," in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary, and Reminiscences*, vol. one, edited by Theodore Stanton and Harriot Stanton Blatch, pp. 344-345, digitized by Brigham Young University Library, Provo, Utah, [https://archive.org/stream/elizabethcadysta01stan/elizabethcadysta01stan\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/elizabethcadysta01stan/elizabethcadysta01stan_djvu.txt).

<sup>2</sup>A partial list of historians studying aging in the United States includes W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience Since 1790*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and *Shades of Gray: Old Age, American Values, and Federal Policies Since 1920* Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1983); Howard P. Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); David Hackett Fisher, *Growing Old in America: The Bland-Lee Lectures at Clark University*, expanded edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Carole Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and the essays in Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, eds., *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

A partial list of work by sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and gerontologists includes Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk and Adventure in the 25 Years After 50* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009); Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989) and *Composing a Further Life: The Age of Active Wisdom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010); Bernice L. Neugarten, ed., *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Eva J. Salber, *Don't Bring Me Flowers When I'm Dead: Voices of Rural*



*Elderly* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1983); Gregory Wood, *Retiring Men: Manhood, Labor, and Growing Old in America, 1900-1960* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2012); Belle Boone Beard, *Centenarians: The New Generation* ed. By Nera K. Wilson and Albert J.E. Wilson, III (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Robert N. Butler, *Why Survive: Being Old in America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002 edition originally published in 1975); Audrey Borenstein, *Chimes of Change and Hours: Views of Older Women in Twentieth-Century America* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983); Joyce Horner, *That Time of Year: A Chronicle of Life in a Nursing Home* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982); Susan Jacoby, *Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011); John A. Krout, *The Aged in Rural America* (New York: Greenwood, 1986); Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991 [1989]); Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982); Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version with New Chapters on the Ninth Stage of Development with Joan M. Erikson* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997); Erik H. Erikson, Joan M. Erikson, Helen Q. Kivnick, *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986).

Physician John W. Rowe and psychologist Robert L. Kahn posited that successful aging lay at the intersection of avoiding disease and disability, maintaining a high level of cognitive and physical function, and remaining engaged with life. See “Successful Aging,” *The Gerontologist*, Volume 37, Issue 4, August 1997, Pages 433–440. The most prominent psychological theories of successful aging include selective optimization theory by P.B. Baltes and M.M. Baltes, “Psychological Perspectives on Successful Aging: the Model of Selective Optimization with Compensation,” *Successful Aging: Perspectives from the Behavioral Sciences*, 1990, pp. 1-34; socio-emotional selectivity theory by Laura Carstensen, *A Long Bright Future: An Action Plan for a Lifetime of Happiness, Health, and Financial Security* (New York: Broadway Books, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Privileged women were more likely to have time to write reflectively about their own lives and women who were prominent in communities, professions, or social reform movements were more likely to have their papers preserved.

<sup>4</sup> The so-called “missionary generation,” born between 1860 and 1882; the “lost generation” born between 1883 and 1900; the G.I. generation—popularly known as the “Greatest Generation”—born between 1901 and 1924; and the “silent generation” born between 1925 and 1945. These generational frameworks were developed by historians William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America’s Future: 1584-2069* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.) They have been refined by a number of scholars. In the larger study, I engage with the work of Strauss and Howe as well as refinements in their theory from psychologist Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America’s Future* (New York: Atria Books, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Archived personal papers often contained other kinds of sources such as dream diaries, fragments of reflections on aging whose intended audience was unclear, and assorted other writings. One woman published a guide to growing older based on her own experiences. I also found two collections of personal narrative collected by scholars studying aging. One was a set of oral interviews with rural North Carolina women collected by Duke gerontologist Eve Salber, and the other was a set of surveys and assorted personal narratives of centenarians collected by Sweet Briar College sociologist Belle Boone Beard. See Eva Salber Papers. Rare Books, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University; Eva J. Salber, *Don’t Bring Me Flowers When I’m Dead: Voices of Rural Elderly* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1983); Belle Boone Beard Papers, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia; Belle Boone Beard, *Centenarians: The New Generation* ed. By Nera K. Wilson And Albert J.E. Wilson, III (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence-Lightfoot, p. 44. For examples of scholarship employing life course perspective theory, see Tamara K. Hareven and Kathleen J. Adams, eds. *Aging and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1982; Howard P. Chudacoff and Tamara K. Hareven, “From the Empty Nest to Family Dissolution: Life Course Transitions into Old Age,” *Journal of Family History* (Spring 1979): 69-83; Bernice L. Neugarten, ed., *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology* (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1968); Daniel J. Levinson and Judy D. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023). Many of my case studies also reveal and the deleterious effects of troubled relationships.

<sup>8</sup> Biographical material comes from the online finding aid for the Lucy Maria Cobb Papers and from the papers themselves, and from additional genealogical records found on Ancestry.com. See [http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/c/Cobb,Lucy\\_M.html](http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/c/Cobb,Lucy_M.html) and Lucy M. Cobb Papers, #4019, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All letters are in the Lucy M. Cobb papers. Cobb did additional study at Peabody College and at Columbia University.

<sup>9</sup> Her operetta and play were based on a legendary romance between the pirate Blackbeard and the daughter of North Carolina's colonial governor. The folklore collection was published by E.P. Dutton & Company. Her short story collection was published by a vanity press. Like many vulnerable older people then and now, Lucy Cobb was susceptible to exploitation, particularly in her eagerness to publish her creative work. In 1963, she used \$800 of her meager savings to pay Exposition Press to publish a collection of short stories and poetry. Unfortunately, Exposition Press was a so-called vanity press which published works provided the author's footed all of the costs. The company was the target of more than one lawsuit, and the Federal Trade Commission successfully sued the company to cease and desist from deceptive advertising practices. One judge noted that "Less than 10% of its authors recoup their investments and derive actual profit from their writing." Copies of the book, *The Preacher's Three: Stories of a North Carolina Childhood from Another Day* are still available in a number of university and public libraries in and near North Carolina, and it is available in the HathiTrust database. There is no indication in the file that Lucy had mentioned this publishing deal to any family members, but according to the financial records in her papers, she used money from her passbook saving account to pay at least two of three installment payments to Exposition. Not until May 14, 1963, does she mention the book in a letter to Mamie. It was apparent that she had first told Mamie about the book in person. Neither Mamie nor Collier comment on the book in future correspondence, and it is not clear what efforts Lucy made to distribute the book and whether she ever recouped any royalties.

<sup>10</sup> From other comments in the letters, I believe that Mamie worked for the Cooperative Extension Service in an office based in Chapel Hill. She apparently retired in 1959. In a December 10, 1959, letter, Mamie reported that her colleagues gave her a retirement party at the Carolina Inn.

<sup>11</sup> After early 1961, there are no cc's of Lucy's letters in the file until October 1962. This may have been because Lucy was ill and was not typing her letters. An April 28, 1961, letter from Mamie indicated that Lucy was being treated at Rex Hospital. Mamie wrote again on May 5 offering to assist with Lucy's hospital bills and lamenting that the treatments had been less effective than they had hoped. Rex Hospital in Raleigh was founded in 1894 with a bequest from local tanner John T. Rex. Today it is part of the UNC Health System.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the ways that aging affected identity, see Sharon R. Kaufman, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Harry R. Moody, *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2006); Sarah H. Matthews, *The Social World of Old Women: Management of Self-Identity* (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1979).

<sup>13</sup> Compiled from birth, census, and death records, "Historical News and Notes," *Journal of Southern History*, 10:4 (1944), 502, and from Athens-Clarke County Local Historic designation report for 540 Milledge Circle, <https://www.accgov.com/DocumentCenter/View/63789/540-MC-Designation-Report-Draft>. Gannon was one of only two women to earn a master's degree at UGA in 1923.

<sup>14</sup> Her dissertation was a biography of Howell Cobb, a Georgia governor and representative to the U.S. House who was also one of the founders of the Confederacy.

<sup>15</sup> Many of the details about the couple's infertility struggles and subsequent adoption of a child can be found in a letter that Nell wrote to her daughter detailing her intent that Eleanor was to inherit grandfather John Upshaw's farmlands upon Nell's death. At the time of Upshaw's death in 1937, Georgia law did not recognize adopted children as entitled to inheritance. Upshaw's will had indicated that if Nell died without children, her share of his farmlands was to pass to the "Social Circle Schools, for the benefit of the white children of the

Social Circle Militia District.” Nell’s last will and testament was clear: half of her estate would pass to Arthur and half to Eleanor. However, the trustees of the Social Circle Schools contested the estate, contending that an adopted granddaughter was not entitled to inherit Nell’s share of Upshaw’s estate under the laws of Georgia at the time of Upshaw’s death. Eleanor won the case in the Georgia Supreme Court in 1977. See Nell Upshaw Gannon letter to Eleanor Gannon Smyth, Feb. 1, 1972, copy in the Nell Upshaw diaries and 232 S.E.2d 835 238 Ga. 343 Eleanor Gannon SMYTH et al. v. Bennie Ray ANDERSON et al. No. 31803., Supreme Court of Georgia. Feb. 9, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Most entries were only a paragraph or two long, but unless she was traveling, she recorded something almost every day.

<sup>17</sup> Gannon’s father died in 1937 and her mother in 1948.

<sup>18</sup> In 1965, she and Arthur traveled to Europe for three weeks, and the next year, they spent 8 weeks traveling in Scandinavia. In 1968, they spent three months traveling in Spain and Portugal.

<sup>19</sup> In 1970 when 81-year-old brother Allan, who lived in Mississippi, developed a serious illness, they moved him to an Athens hospital and then into their own home for a few weeks until they were able to find him a nursing home bed. They had to empty his apartment and dispose of his belongings as well. They visited Allan at the nursing home most days for over two years—until his death in January 1973. She rarely reflected on the toll that caring for Allan might have taken on her or her husband, but the sheer amount of time they spent doing it suggested that it was a heavy load.

<sup>20</sup> In 1956, Eleanor suffered a mental health crisis. Descriptions in the diary suggest that she suffered from anxiety and depression. Nell and Arthur consulted various psychiatrists who offered conflicting opinions about the best course of treatment. Ultimately, they had Eleanor admitted to Sheppard-Pratt Hospital in Towson, Maryland. When treatments there proved ineffective, they moved her to Highland Hospital, a psychiatric facility in Asheville. Nell and Arthur travel back and forth to these distant hospitals a number of times, and worry about Eleanor is a pervasive theme in the diary in these years.

<sup>21</sup>Based on birthdates, it’s evident that Eleanor became pregnant shortly after the wedding, but Nell made no mention the pregnancy in the diary. In September, she announced the birth of a granddaughter, Martha. James arrived a couple of years later. Nell and Arthur frequently hosted the grandchildren in Athens, but James seemed to be poorly behaved, and disagreements over how he should be disciplined generated new conflict. In 1971, after James had been staying with his grandparents for several days, Nell reported that “[Eleanor and her husband] came before dinner & and in 10 minutes James had been spanked and the fights began. All day long & until bed time.”

<sup>22</sup> Biographical information compiled from census and genealogical records and from Oral History Interviews with Margaret Kennedy Goodwin by Angela Hornsby, September 26, 1997, Interview R-0113; November 6, 1997, Interview R-0114. November 13, 1997, Interview R-0115. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, available online at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/>. All quotations are drawn from the interviews. For more on the history of North Carolina Mutual Insurance, see William Jesse Kennedy, Jr., *The North Carolina Mutual Story: A Symbol of Progress, 1898-1970* (1970).

<sup>23</sup> Lewis Marshall Goodwin World War II draft card,

<https://www.ancestry.com/sharing/5944864?mark=7b22746f6b656e223a226d726c714330586c466b7a336c6a634b58562b2f3543646341366b446e30634e63304b4d77486d4d36576b3d222c22746f6b656e5f76657273696f6e223a225632227d>; Margaret identified Lewis’s employer as the Department of Commerce in her September 1997 oral history interview; however, his enlistment record identified his occupation as insurance sales.

<sup>24</sup>September 26, 1997 interview. Margaret did not specify her husband’s cause of death, but death records indicate that he died in Chicago. Lincoln Hospital merged with Watts Hospital to become Durham County General Hospital in 1976. Margaret would continue working at the hospital when it became Durham General and in its subsequent incarnation, Durham Regional. In 2013, after Margaret’s death, the hospital became known as Duke Regional Hospital. See Duke Regional Hospital History, <https://corporate.dukehealth.org/duke-regional-hospital-history>.

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret had spent time in her youth shadowing her uncle, a physician, sparking her interest in a medical career. In the early 1950s, Goodwin repeatedly applied to medical school at Duke, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and some out of state institutions. Most did not reject her outright, but indicated there were no openings at the time and her application would be kept on file. Beginning in 1938 with *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* which invalidated state laws that required African-American students to attend out-of-state graduate schools to avoid admitting them to their states' all-white facilities or building separate graduate schools for them, several U.S. Supreme Court decisions had been opening the doors of southern graduate institutions to African-American men. Eventually, Dr. A Hollis Edens, president of Duke University and an acquaintance of her father's, met with her and told her off the record that as a black woman she was unlikely to be admitted to medical school. Asked whether she was frustrated by the rejection, Goodwin indicated that she was grateful to Dr. Edens for telling her the truth. "Our generation just accepted what was going on." She said, "I will be grateful [to Dr. Edens] because I went on then, I gave up the business of trying to get into somewhere, you know, batting your head against a stone wall, and went on and fully prepared myself for the work I was doing." The oral history interviews do not date her medical school applications, but the reference to Dr. Edens suggests this was in the early 1950s. He became president of Duke University in 1950.

<sup>26</sup> Description of Margaret Kennedy Goodwin Award for Service at Senior PharmAssist:

[https://www.ancestry.com/mediaui-](https://www.ancestry.com/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/113769048/person/262406863237/media/31b3a2e0-4c24-4d35-8e7f-5374d3dcd25f?_phsrc=Sjl76&usePUBJs=true&galleryindex=2&sort=-created)

[viewer/collection/1030/tree/113769048/person/262406863237/media/31b3a2e0-4c24-4d35-8e7f-5374d3dcd25f?\\_phsrc=Sjl76&usePUBJs=true&galleryindex=2&sort=-created](https://www.ancestry.com/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/113769048/person/262406863237/media/31b3a2e0-4c24-4d35-8e7f-5374d3dcd25f?_phsrc=Sjl76&usePUBJs=true&galleryindex=2&sort=-created)

Although she blazed trails for black women in North Carolina healthcare, Margaret did not characterize herself as an activist. She expressed admiration for younger generations, including her daughter, who engaged in civil rights protest, but she preferred to advance herself quietly. She said that she simply sat in on training programs offered at Duke and other nearby hospitals, and that no one objected because "I was no threat to them. I was going to work at Lincoln, the black hospital. . . . There was no place for the black patients to go. They didn't want them at Duke, they didn't want them at Watts. They made sure that they trained me well [Laugh]. That sounds bitter, but I'm not bitter about it at all. . . . [I]t's where God needed me to be at that time."

<sup>27</sup>Senior PharmAssist website: <https://www.seniorpharmassist.org/>