

*Maryland*

# HUMANITIES



Aging and Society



*Dr. Lois Green Carr.*

# An Interview with Dr. Lois Green Carr

By Barbara Wells Sarudy



Dr. Lois Green Carr.

In this issue of *Maryland Humanities*, which focuses on aging, we feature one of the nation's most important colonial historians, Dr. Lois Green Carr. Dr. Carr received her undergraduate degree from Swarthmore and her PhD from Harvard. Dr. Carr is seventy-one and works daily at the Maryland State Archives as Historian for Historic St. Mary's City and for the State of Maryland. She travels throughout the United States and Europe, presenting papers on the people and the economy of the colonial Chesapeake, and writes award-winning books and articles. Generations of scholars throughout the country cite Lois Carr as their mentor and friend.

*How early did you realize that you were interested in history?*

Age three. My mother was a historian, my grandfather was a historian. My mother's very dear friend was a world famous woman medieval scholar. I remember being fascinated by their conversations. When I was a child, I was made to go to bed at six o'clock until I was about eight years old. One day in an attempt to delay my bedtime as my mother was heading down the stairs, I called her back to my room and asked her to explain the feudal system to me. From very early on, I simply took it for granted that I when I grew up I was going to study history.

*How does studying colonial life affect your day-to-day life in Annapolis?*

Well, one day back in the 1960s, I decided to see how difficult it was to raise all the fruits and vegetables that a family would need throughout the year. I thought if they could do it in the 17th and 18th centuries, we could do it in the 20th century. So I stopped buying most of them at the grocery, and we have raised and stored most of the produce our family uses since then.

*What is the most exciting thing you've learned studying the colonial Chesapeake?*

A whole combination of things began falling into place for me in the 1970s. The Saint Mary's City Commission got a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to try to look at some basic questions on how the Chesapeake was settled. We began to look for quantitative evidence to tell us about the people who settled here. As we accumulated more and more data, the demography showed more than we had ever imagined it could. For example, we could show that the true life expectancy for the 17th-century immigrant was very short. Establishing life expectancy for immigration had never been done before. The whole demographic picture of the time and its people began to unfold. We were creating a real society, real 17th-century Marylanders emerged from those records. At the same time many scholars began to use Maryland records, and we all worked together to examine various aspects of colonial Chesapeake society. I think that entire experience was such a thrilling moment. We had so many people to discuss all the ideas with. The camaraderie created an absolutely basic and deeply satisfying professional experience that I will remember for years to come. Those scholars are scattered across the country now, but we still feel the bond from those years of working together so very closely and still all work together across the miles when we can, but we don't have the same intensity of that experience anymore.

*Is any part of your job boring?*

Of course, any quantitative history is full of boredom. Spending hours and hours and weeks and weeks collecting and counting data is boring. If you do

It efficiently, you don't even have time to be amused by it. You have to do it to get the results you want. That's all there is to it. It is the discipline of boredom that you have to accept if you are going to do this kind of work. But history is a subject in the humanities, so counting isn't everything. The problem was how to tell the world what the 17th-century Chesapeake was like. We had to know what the underlying structures were, so we had to count first.

*Why has Maryland been so rich for historians?*

Many colonial records are still preserved in this state. Partly because Maryland was a small colony, the records collected in central agencies. Particularly probate records and land patent records remained concentrated and relatively safe from the ravages of fire and war that often befell local county court houses. In the 1940s, Maryland's state archivist started collecting local records and county court records and got legislation passed to protect Maryland's colonial records in a central location. That made access to the records easier for family historians and scholars.

*Who inspired you to become a historian?*

There isn't any one person, but my grandfather and my mother would be at the top of the list. Even when you are in your seventies, relationships with one's mother are so complicated to sort out, and I usually don't even think of her in professional terms. But she was the deepest and earliest influence in my life. She focused on the industrial revolution. Both she and my grandfather won Pulitzer Prizes in history. I never will. I do all team work. Nobody gets a prize for a team project.

*That's the thing that historians throughout the country say about you—that you are always willing to share. Many scholars are extremely territorial about their primary sources and their research. You are not. Why?*

I couldn't do my work if other people weren't eager to share with me. And I had that intense, open experience with other scholars. It impressed on me the value of collaborating that I can never forget. I think it is immoral not to share as much as possible. Of course, I don't work within the university system, where you must publish a monograph to assure tenure, job security. It is ironic that humanities is the one area where this is particularly true. The humanities scholarly tradition dictates that rewards do not go to people who share, people who work together. But I hope that we are creating a different climate.

*Why don't you teach in a university?*

I do teach. I teach through the Historic St. Mary's City museum—through its exhibits and its interpretation for visitors. I reach many more people than I would in a traditional classroom. It is simply thrilling work that I am eager to do every day. When I came in 1967, I more or less made up my own job as I went along, and I am very grateful to the people who have allowed me to do that throughout all these years.

*And you are seventy-one.*

Yes, I am. I probably will retire from being paid in a few years. The energy level does drop, but I just keep on writing. I told them that they have to tell me when to retire. I don't want to outlast my usefulness for them. It seems like I have to put in a lot more time to get the same amount of work done, but I still really enjoy what I do.

*Can studying the humanities give us insight into growing older?*

I have never thought about that. I just think studying the humanities is interesting, even exciting. I really don't try to justify it in terms of what it teaches me. There are some humanities issues that studying early Maryland forces us to think about. The ultimate failure of religious toleration was because the political policy did not allow Maryland Catholics to talk about their religion. Rather than allowing people to talk and come to understand and tolerate their differences, the government imposed restrictions, and toleration failed. The humanities encourage us to talk about our differences, about various points of view. The humanities encourage toleration on all levels.

*Perhaps the humanities just help us grow more tolerant as we age.*

Maybe, but it is not ever fun to lose any mental or physical powers that you have been accustomed to relying on. You just simply must adjust to aging and go on having a happy and very productive and creative life. But having to adjust at all is awful, and I get mad about it. I think that being mad helps keep one vigorous. You don't want to give up. Be mad. Accept what you have to accept but don't accept anything you don't have to. And don't get lazy. I fear getting lazy. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether a great deal of diminishing activity or resignation is just intelligently accepting the inevitability of aging or simply getting lazy. I surely don't want to get lazy.