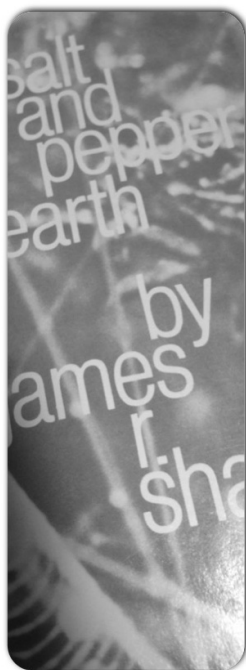


Collecting South Jersey

A Local Bibliography



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Stephanie Allen

Collecting “South Jersey”

As a geographical location, South Jersey has an identity and reputation all its own. A summertime Mecca, its small, coastal towns are flooded from May through September with tourists from all over the tri-state area looking to spend a relaxing vacation “down the shore.” Whether it’s the ocean or the Pines, the beach sand or the sugar sand, the region is undeniably appealing — it is well known and profoundly attractive on a number of levels.

Recent television shows such as *The Jersey Shore* and *Boardwalk Empire* have highlighted south Jersey’s natural assets and increased its visibility greatly; so did the incessant news coverage of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Sandy. And while this national fascination focused on several aspects of the area and its culture, it by no means covered them all. The truth is that there is much more to South Jersey than what is shown on television, reality or otherwise.

Capturing that essence is challenging because there are many different things that help define a place. Some go without saying, like its landscape, the goods it produces, its history, and its people. But some are not quite so obvious, and as a student of Literature I believe there is something as fundamentally important as any of the more obvious things: its writing.

The writing of an area, and its poetry in particular, offers both varied perspective and deep insight, because poems are snapshots of life. They allow their readers to experience the Atlantic through the eyes of a visitor who has never before seen the ocean or understand what the locals mean when they call the trees of the Pine Barrens home. That experience and that understanding are what make a place real, what bring a place meaning, even for someone reading the words from half a world away.

At the start of this project, the goal was to find as many writers, poetry collections, and poems with connections to South Jersey as possible and to bring them together in one easily searchable finding aid. That task, that one simple task, would turn out to be anything but. The undertaking was so daunting largely because the works that needed to be brought together were strewn across the entire bottom half of the state and beyond.

The scattered nature inherent to these writings is precisely what made a project like this so important. A quick Google search for New Jersey poetry produces results that are dubious, at best, and a search for South Jersey poetry produces none. Without a user-friendly way to find this significant poetic sub-category, anyone searching for these works faces an uphill battle. They will uncover the Walt Whitmans and the Stephen Dunns, surely, but the Margaret Denny

Elshs and the Charles Goldsteins might never see the light of day.

Attempting to prevent that worst-case scenario from turning into a reality requires careful, hands-on research. Figuring out where to start that research proved to be one of the hardest parts of this project, mainly because it involved defining “South Jersey” in absolute terms — not an easy job. In the past, the state had been divided almost diagonally, but that old east/west distinction seemed about as arbitrary as it was outdated. There had to be something better.

Working horizontally seemed like the most obvious way to make the separation, but there are only so many options for slicing up and labeling the Garden State; once you have North, Central, and South, what else is there? The answer: not much. No, the difficulty would not lie in what to call the different regions but in where to draw the line between them. Because as it turns out, where “South Jersey” begins is open to interpretation.

Taking that ambiguity into consideration, I designated eight “southern” New Jersey counties strictly for the purposes of compiling this bibliography: Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Ocean, and Salem. And while the location I’ve chosen to draw the line is by no means definitive, it was necessary to draw it somewhere. To some, the inclusion of Ocean County in this list might seem questionable; however, as the home of Seaside Heights and Long

Beach Island, two of the state's most quintessential shore towns, its inclusion was integral to maintaining both the spirit and integrity of the project.

Once that distinction had been made, it became necessary to develop the criteria for what constituted a South Jersey poet. Was it place of birth? Long-time residency? The place they published their work? The subject matter of the poetry being written? Eventually, I came to the conclusion that it meant more than simply being born in one of those eight counties. As a result, anyone writing from or about the area would also be included.

With those basic parameters in place, the focus quickly shifted from "What am I looking for?" to "Where will I find it?" Stockton's Rare Books and Archives seemed like a logical answer and convenient starting point. Thanks to David C. Munn's most recent and generous gift, the College had an unexpectedly large number of pieces that just so happened to contain New Jersey poetry. As a result of his donation, there were over two hundred and fifty books and anthologies to sort through. Some were new, some were very, very old; some were written by famous, experienced poets, others by unheard of amateurs; some were beautifully bound, some were typed up on a word processor and run off at the local copy shop; some were spectacular, others spectacularly awful; yet, all were examples of writing from the lower half of the Garden State.

After spending some time with the collection and distinguishing the “South Jersey” from the rest, it became clear that there were many more poets and writing societies connected to the region than might be expected given the lack of accessibility through online search engines. With that realization came another, fast on its heels: what was housed in Stockton’s Special Collections was a mere fraction of what was waiting to be discovered.

Luckily, there were plenty of other resources to mine. Between the writing faculty at Stockton, local historical societies, poetry groups, clubs, and collectives, and other colleges and universities, there was no shortage of places to turn and people to turn to in search of information. I also discovered that the beginning of my hunt coincided with Peter Murphy’s 20th annual Winter Poetry and Prose Getaway, a four day weekend where New Jersey writers gather at the Seaview Hotel in Galloway, NJ to work on their craft.

Having identified the majority of possible sources, the next phase of the project consisted of writing letters, making phone calls, sending e-mails — and waiting. Taking into consideration the type of information I was inquiring about, some delay in response was to be expected. It would require time for those contacted to consider my request, determine if they had anything that fit the criteria, and reply accordingly. Unfortunately, knowing that didn’t make the waiting any easier.

Overwhelmed by my excitement over the task at hand, I admit to making a slight miscalculation, something that can best be described as a beginner's mistake: assuming everyone I reached out to would be equally as excited as I was. In a perfect world, that would be the case, but this is not a perfect world. When the responses finally started coming in, many were marked with confusion about what a bibliography actually was, ambivalence about whether bringing South Jersey poetry together was important, or disinterest in the notion altogether. In the end, the number of replies received turned out to be unexpectedly low.

Take the historical societies. Out of the fifty-two that were sent requests, only fourteen responded, which works out to be a little better than one-quarter. And that is the highest percentage of all the groups contacted. Of the sixteen colleges and universities other than Stockton operating in the eight southern counties, I heard back from a whopping two. The poetry groups, collectives, websites, and online clubs fared even worse, with only one out of twelve expressing any interest at all.

But perhaps the most surprising turn out came from the Winter Poetry and Prose Getaway. Despite founder and organizer Peter Murphy's excitement about the idea — he submitted a complete list of his own work to be included in the bibliography — the response from the participants was far from enthusiastic. Each of the two hundred

and twenty welcome packets provided at check-in included an explanation card giving details of the project and calling for participation; two of those two hundred and twenty people e-mailed their information for inclusion.

Thankfully, the historical societies and organizations that were interested in being included in the bibliography were not only very interested but involved, helpful, and happy to be so. They seemed to understand that having local writers included would, hopefully, open their poetry to a wider audience. The workers and volunteers knew where the hidden gems were, and their practical approach to helping made the process of sifting and sorting through over a century of writing smooth and enjoyable.

In anticipation of my arrival, the volunteers at the Atlantic Heritage Society searched their holdings and pulled handwritten manuscripts. The Salem Historical Society made sure to mention not only the poetry of Anne W. Maylin but the drinking trough that was given to the Salem County Clerk's Office in her memory, as well. They also encouraged me to see it for myself, a simple task since it currently sits in the garden behind their building. The curator of the Egg Harbor City Historical Society, also known as the Roundhouse Museum, assisted throughout my entire visit, making suggestions, pointing me in the right direction and providing a guided tour when I was through.

The lone poetry group that expressed interest in being included in the project, South Jersey Poet's Collective, was as helpful as the historical societies. Coordinator Aubrey Gerhardt not only provided the requested information, she invited me to attend their World Above open mic night at Dante Hall Theater in Atlantic City where I would have the opportunity to speak to an entire room of South Jersey writers in person and encourage them to get involved.

Taking full advantage of the chance, I stood before the eclectic audience which consisted of published and unpublished writers, Stockton faculty, and, as luck would have it, Richard Russell — advisor for *Rewrites*, the literary magazine of Atlantic Cape Community College. The experience was invaluable; apart from the contacts made and contributions garnered, I also got to hear firsthand some of the writing I had spent so much time and energy searching for.

With the help of the historical societies, colleges, and poetry collective, the list of writers and works continued to grow. Along with it, the list of challenges grew, too. When it came to the handwritten poetry books, particularly those with no stated author, the main issue was determining whether the place it was found was actually the place it was written. Being largely unpublished, they did not contain even the most basic of bibliographic information: no printing house, no

location, no date. Often times the society volunteers were able to dig up some information on the book or poem in question, but not always.

In many cases, the content or title made it obvious that the piece or collection pertained to South Jersey, but there were just as many instances when context clues provided little to no help. Occasionally, the author's connection to the area was anything but clear. Were they born there? Did they live there at some point in their lives? Or were their belongings simply passed down from generation to generation only to end up at the local historical society? Some of these questions were eventually able to be answered. Some were not.

A similar situation arose while searching out pieces by writers already known to be connected to South Jersey. For those who were strictly poets, the process was straightforward; however, for writers who dabbled in more than one genre, the path was a bit trickier. Looking through bibliographies and other lists of their work, most of which only included titles, it was difficult to establish which were poetry and which were prose. Each circumstance was taken individually, and when no authentication could be found or determination made, the work was omitted from the bibliography with the hope of only including works that could truly be called "South Jersey Poetry."

It took six months of research, nine historical societies, one poet's collective, three libraries, two archives, four colleges, countless miles, and nearly four hundred entries, but the first incarnation of the South Jersey poetry bibliography has finally been completed. Yet, that doesn't mean that the project is complete. A bibliography that focuses on the writing of a particular area is a living, growing thing. It will always be a work in progress.

There are undoubtedly poets who belong on this list that have been overlooked, misidentified, or even undiscovered, and it is my sincere hope that every person who notices those oversights understands how and why they occurred. With a topic as broad as South Jersey poetry, there will inevitably be places left unchecked, questions left unasked, and angles left unpursued. I did not find every relevant piece of poetry in existence, but then I didn't really expect to.

What I expected was to start a project which would bring the local poetry of a region together in one place so it might be more easily accessible, and that goal has been accomplished. It is not definitive; it is not comprehensive; it is not meant to be. It's a first step, a starting point and nothing more, but it is one I look forward to seeing develop further. Over time it will change as current writers continue their literary efforts and expand as new writers emerge. It must. Because I believe in a place like South Jersey, there is a poet born every day.

If you notice an oversight while looking through this bibliography, please feel free to send the information on either author or collection to sjpoetrybibliography@gmail.com; I will be happy to include it in the next edition.

Thank you.

Stephanie Allen

Key:

NA – No Author

ND – No Date

NL – No Location

NP – No Publication

HW – Handwritten

NPH – No Publishing House

LHS – Linwood Historical Society

VHS – Vineland Historical Society

SHS – Salem Historical Society

HHS – Township of Hamilton Historical Society

HSC – Haverford College Special Collections

RSC – Richard Stockton College

THS – Tuckerton Historical Society

ACHS – Atlantic County Historical Society

BTHS – Brick Township Historical Society

SECC – Seabrook Educational and Cultural
Center

SFHL – Swarthmore College Friends Historical
Library

RSC-SC – Richard Stockton College Special
Collections

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