

“Breaking a Code: Charleston and Slavery in the Life and Narrative of Samuel Williams”

Dr. Susanna Ashton

Monday, Sept 9, 5:30 PM Addlestone Library, Room 227

Public Lecture & Reception. [Register via Eventbrite](#)

Co-sponsored by Department of English, Friends of the Library and the Lowcountry Digital History Initiative

*After editing the little-known narrative by Samuel Aleckson, *Before the War and After the Union*, I felt dissatisfied about my conclusions or, rather, about the very few conclusions I could make about the author or the motivations for his narrative. Fortunately, a Post and Courier profile of my 2010 project inspired a descendant of the author “Samuel Aleckson” to contact me and reveal that the actual name of the author was Samuel Williams. I was able to revisit the narrative and see more clues, reconstructing a far stranger, bolder and richer life than his seemingly unmoored short narrative had initially indicated.*

In this presentation I discuss how I unmasked faked names and locations and traced his life and career for almost three decades after his narrative was published, discovering facts about his life and the lives of his enslavers in Charleston. My presentation will also ask why his family, upon emancipation, was able to escape the destitution so many others faced. And from the perspective of a literary scholar, I will consider why now, upon leaving Charleston, he was uniquely poised to build a new life which he then felt empowered to witness with his words. My talk will also discuss how I curated a [Lowcountry Digital History Initiative exhibit on Samuel Williams](#) in partnership with the Avery Research Center. The exhibit offers a new mapping of Charleston, both literal and figurative. Williams’ story intersects with a broader American story. His Charleston childhood, spent in bondage, had coded and framed his understanding of his world.

-Dr. Susanna Ashton, Professor of English, Clemson University