I lost my mom in September 2017, but before she left us, I had the opportunity to do something very special for my family, and she was my inspiration. I was proud to place two volumes of family history into her hands, both of them encompassing seven or eight generations. What I love most about these volumes is that both are peppered with pictures and stories of her life, our lives. As I look back through my life for impacts and experiences, I have no doubt that my most memorable literary experience started forty-one years ago with a little piece of paper that I couldn't throw away.

The exact year escapes me now, but somewhere in the vicinity of 2008-2009, my mom was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. At first, there was a flurry of doctor appointments to confirm the diagnosis and determine the stage of her disease. We then learned what progression of the disease looked like, what expected changes to look for, and how to handle her medications; finally getting her car keys away signaled the end of a really busy year. When things settled down and as our new normal stabilized, I realized that someday we would lose her. She would lose herself in the gathering darkness, and all her stories would vanish.

The only way I could think to preserve what I knew of her life was to write down the stories she had told me ever since my childhood. The story of meeting my dad and his "courting" her back in 1943 and how they ran away to South Carolina to get married was my favorite. She was just fourteen years old and wearing a borrowed dress when she stood before that magistrate to take her vows; they lasted fifty-two years. Another story that she often told happened while living and working on a neighbor's dairy farm. My brother was a toddler, and he had put his
chubby finger through a space between the floorboards of their cabin and a chicken that was walking underneath pecked at it, probably thinking it was a worm. He went running to her saying, "momma, momma, chi chi bite me!" It was during the writing of these stories that my effort took a new direction.

One warm afternoon in April 2011 while spring cleaning, I was rummaging through a plastic storage tub and I found a file that held some odds and ends that I’d collected through the years. What stuck out most was a small piece of paper that had yellowed with age. On it underneath a golden-brown thumbprint stain, in my mother's handwriting, was six-generations of her lineage starting with my nephew and ending with her great grandmother. I'd first found this piece of paper in 1977 when I was seventeen years old, and not wanting to lose it, I had put it away for safe keeping. Through the years, whenever I'd find the file I would sometimes add a list of my own. I started with my family - mom, dad, my siblings (there were seven of us), and their children. Eventually, I listed all my aunts and uncles and their children. Usually though, I'd just add whatever scraps of information I had doodled to the collection and put the file away. The file I had amassed wasn't extremely large, but considering all the bits and pieces I'd accumulated over thirty years, it was a good start. I honestly had no idea what I was doing when I began to slowly insert the people lists that detailed where folks belonged into my efforts to preserve the family memories.

Daily, I would put aside my research activities and sit on the front porch with mom for a few hours. During spring, summer, and fall, her life and laughter centered on the front porch and the people who would stop by and visit. As the cars and time continually passed by, I listened to her new stories or more accurately, old stories that had somehow evolved as the people or events within them changed. During the heat of the day, I'd usher mom inside and as we'd leave that
sunny porch which held such freedom and happiness for her, and a renewed sense of sadness would urge me to swiftly preserve her legacy. The changes she was experiencing, though expected, made me afraid I would run out of time.

In 2015, I began adding photos to the tree so that people were identifiable and not just a name that left me to wonder if I knew this person. I scoured my neighborhood of cousins, collecting photographic evidence of the earlier versions of ourselves. I then raided every family member's Facebook page for photos. I spent many nights hunkered down in the glow of the computer screen researching names in my chosen family search app. I was checking and rechecking the connections that were being made by verifying them with my older siblings, then adding my newly found treasures to what I was calling "the book." In October 2016, I found a branch of family which had been lost since the death of its patriarch in 1986, and I continued to go still further into our past.

Finally, in April 2017, with the Slave Schedule of 1850 and the census of 1870 in my hand, I found that my earliest identifiable relative was named Thomas Brown, born in 1829 in Chatham County. His wife, Louisa, was born in 1830 also in Chatham County. They had three children, Madison, Lucy and Adelaide (born in 1865). In May 2017, I found out that, as a young girl, my cousin V. had sat on her grandma Adelaide's lap; she had heard Adelaide's voice while being instructed, verbally corrected and/or chastised. More than that, V. possessed my holy grail, a photograph of Adelaide. I had to wait for a few months while V. recovered from surgery, but in August I drove to V's home to pick up the copy she'd had made for me; my whole body was shaking. As I saw Adelaide's face for the first time, I looked for resemblances to my own. The eyes looking back at me were gentler, but inside, it felt like her direct gaze had pinned my feet to one spot. Her chocolate skin was smooth and evenly toned over the white ruffled collar of her
blouse. The short, tidy afro she wore was parted on the left, very much like I used to wear mine and I immediately recognized that her nose, lips, and cheekbones were mine. I stood there, overwhelmed with gratitude for both of these ladies: my cousin first for giving me Adelaide, and then towards Adelaide herself for making my life and this incredible journey possible. My tears flowed freely and my cousin thought I was nuts, but I couldn’t help it and I couldn’t explain it either. Plainly speaking, my heart was full.

I find it amazing that what started out so innocent and simple in my heart turned into something so large and at times completely overwhelming. Once I started to find my family and to reconnect with missing branches, I made the commitment to find every family member. Whether living or dead, I want to make sure to acknowledge their existence as well as their connection to the family. My most memorable literacy experience has resulted in three family history books, as I have also written a third volume for my paternal grandmother. The acknowledgements page for each volume is the same, detailing the journey of one little slip of paper and sharing its photo like a proud family portrait. My loving homage to my mom’s memory continues to grow with the addition of stories and photographs as does the legacy she left our family.