John C. Campbell Folk School Fain Archives

Clay Spencer Papers (2023.31)

Overview of the Collection

Creator:	Clay Spencer
Title:	Clay Spencer Papers
Inclusive Dates:	1987-2019; n.d.
Abstract:	The Clay Spencer Papers contain documents related to Spencer's activities at the John C. Campbell Folk School from 1987 through the 2010s, including classes (as both instructor and student), Blacksmith Auctions, and Blacksmith Work Weeks.
Accession Number:	2023.31
Quantity:	1 7" document box (0.58 linear feet)
Language(s):	English
Repository:	Fain Archives, John C. Campbell Folk School 1 Folk School Rd. Brasstown, NC 28902
Preferred Citation:	[description of item], Collection Name (Accession Number), Box # Folder Number #, John C. Campbell Folk School Fain Archives, Brasstown, NC.

Historical Note

Renowned blacksmith instructor Clay Spencer (b. 1931), a native of Alabama, has had an engineering mind from a young age. As a youth, he designed and constructed his own lawnmowers to make his regular chores easier. Spencer graduated from Auburn University in 1954 with a degree in agricultural engineering. He attended Auburn again on the GI Bill to earn a degree in mechanical engineering so he could get a position at NASA's Redstone Arsenal field center. Spencer set up a metalwork shop at his home, starting with his grandfather's anvil. In 1987, he began taking classes with Jim Batson (1936-2026) and was soon attending classes at the John C. Campbell Folk School (JCCFS).

Spencer was instrumental in the blacksmith program at JCCFS for the next several decades. He assisted with improving the Francis Whitaker Blacksmith Shop, in part through starting the tradition of Blacksmith Work Weeks at the school alongside Bert Smith (1929-2009). He became an assistant instructor to Francis Whitaker (1906-1999). When Whitaker retired from teaching

and from the JCCFS Board of Directors, Spencer took his place with both. The timber-frame blacksmith shop constructed at JCCFS in 2009 is named in honor of Clay Spencer. He officially retired from teaching in 2025, having taught over 100 classes at JCCFS alone.

Jackie Rice Spencer (1942-2022), Clay's second wife, was also much involved with JCCFS, especially in the basketry, enameling, and stained glass programs. For several years she was the Resident Artist in enameling at the Folk School.

Scope and Contents

The Clay Spencer Papers cover Spencer's activities at JCCFS from 1987 through the 2010s. Class registration lists, auction materials, and donation records have been placed in chronological order within folders. Other materials retain original order, including the folder labeled "beginner class" (the title of the original folder in which these materials were found), and sets of correspondence and diagrams from students in the Advanced Blacksmithing classes that Spencer taught.

The *Blacksmith Auctions* folder contains announcements and lists of auction items from the JCCFS Blacksmith Auction. There are also some financial records related to the Blacksmith Fund to which the auction originally contributed.

The *Blacksmith Shop improvements* folder contains notes, diagrams/drawings, correspondence, and instructor comments related to updates to the Francis Whitaker Blacksmith Shop equipment and studio space.

The *Blacksmith Work Week* series, organized by year, includes correspondence, participant lists, project lists, and diagrams related to the annual Blacksmith Work Weeks at JCCFS. Notably, it includes documentation of the 1991-1992 projects for the Olive Dame Campbell Dining Hall chandeliers and the 1995 railing project.

The *Classes* series contains two general folders – "beginner class notes" and a folder of undated material – and is then organized chronologically by year. While some folders contain only class registration lists, others also include correspondence, instructor contracts, participant certificates, and, most notably, diagrams of students' proposed projects for Advanced Blacksmithing classes.

The *donation records* folder contains correspondence and receipts related to Clay and Jackie Spencer's donations of handcrafted items, blacksmith equipment, and money to JCCFS, including to the Blacksmith Auctions.

The *miscellaneous* folder contains certificates from JCCFS recognizing Spencer on Veterans Day; the undated document "Responsibilities of the Education Committee"; and an extended quote from Joshua ben Sira about craftspeople, printed by JCCFS.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 1 box:

Box 1. Folders 1-38

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Open to all users.

Restrictions on Use

None.

Index Terms

This record series is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms:

Persons

Whitaker, Francis

Subjects

Auctions
Blacksmiths
Blacksmithing
Ironwork
John C. Campbell Folk School
Teaching

Document Types

Auction catalogs
Contracts
Correspondence
Engineering drawings
Photographs

Related Material

2018.6.56	spoon made by Clay Spencer
2018.6.72	table made by Clay Spencer
2018.8.131	spoon made by Clay Spencer
2018.8.157	chandelier hanger made by Clay Spencer
2021.11.1	poker made by Clay Spencer

2022.2.254	oral history interview with Clay Spencer, 2003
2022.47.1	candlestand made by Clay Spencer
2022.47.2	ABANA quill prototype made by Clay Spencer
2024.13.1	enameling book made by Jackie Spencer, 1998
2025.21.1	“Mr. Stinky” toilet paper holder made by Clay Spencer
various accessions	assorted images across Fain Archives photograph collections

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Provenance information for this collection is unknown, although it was likely donated by Clay Spencer. A record for the collection, originally titled “Work Week Papers,” was created in the JCCFS Fain Archives’ PastPerfect software in December 2022.

Accession #(s): 2023.31

Accruals

No future accruals are expected.

Processing Information

Processing and finding aid: Susanna Pyatt, July 2026

Container List

BOX 1

Folder 1. Blacksmith Auctions, 1988-2006

Folder 2. Blacksmith Shop improvements, 1989-1999, n.d.

Folder 3. Blacksmith Work Week - 1991-1992

Folder 4. Blacksmith Work Week - 1995

Folder 5. Blacksmith Work Week - 1996

Folder 6. Blacksmith Work Week - 1997

Folder 7. Blacksmith Work Week - 1998

Folder 8. Blacksmith Work Week - 2000

Folder 9. Blacksmith Work Week - 2001

Folder 10. Blacksmith Work Week - 2002

Folder 11. Blacksmith Work Week - 2005

Folder 12. Blacksmith Work Week - 2007

Folder 13. classes - beginner class notes, 1990, n.d.

Folder 14. classes - general, n.d.

Folder 15. classes - 1987

Folder 16. classes - 1988

Folder 17. classes - 1989

Folder 18. classes - 1990

Folder 19. classes - 1991

Folder 20. classes - 1992

Folder 21. classes - 1993

Folder 22. classes - 1994

Folder 23. classes - 1995

Folder 24. classes - 1996

Folder 25. classes - 1997

Folder 26. classes - 1998

Folder 27. classes - 1999

Folder 28. classes - 2000

Folder 29. classes - 2001

Folder 30. classes - 2002

Folder 31. classes - 2003

Folder 32. classes - 2004

Folder 33. classes - 2005

Folder 34. classes - 2006

Folder 35. classes - 2007

Folder 36. classes - 2019

Folder 37. donation records, 1988-1995

Folder 38. miscellaneous, 1987-1988, n.d.

References/Further Reading

Perrone, Anthony. 2025. *By My Plans: The Clay Spencer Story*. Documentary, 00:39:58. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0A9cJVcnW8

Townson, Verna. October 30, 2025. “The Last Forge: Clay Spencer’s Legacy At The Folk School.” JCCFS website. https://www.folkschool.org/2025/10/30/the-last-forge-clay-spencers-legacy-at-the-folk-school/