The story of Katherine Jackson French is one that I have been fairly obsessed with upon discovering her collection three years ago at Berea College. Katherine Jackson French was quite a striking figure: a woman in the early 1900’s who had done the same kind of ballad collecting as Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp, the patron saints of Appalachian balladry; the second woman from Kentucky to earn a PhD from any university; the second woman to earn a PhD from Columbia University (in English Literature) and the first from south of the Mason-Dixon line to do so. She also did post-doctoral studies at Yale, and taught at Mt. Holyoke and Bryn Mawr. She was a co-founder of the Women’s Department Club in Shreveport, where she lectured weekly, and a faculty member for 24 years at Centenary College, where she was revered. Yet few people in Kentucky knows her name, not even in London, the town where she grew up and summered until a few years before her death in 1958.
Katherine collected ballads in the hills of Kentucky in 1909. In 1910, she sought the help of Berea College, in the person of William Goodell Frost, to help her publish her collection, entitled *English-Scottish Ballads from the Hills of Kentucky*. Frost agreed, but due to a variety of reasons, did not see the publication through. Meanwhile, Cecil Sharp published *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* in 1917. This became the Bible of Appalachian balladry, and Katherine was denied her place in ballad history as the first person to publish a large, scholarly collection of Appalachian ballads.

My goals for my fellowship study were the following:

1. **Work towards publication of a biography of Katherine Jackson French.**

   I am working on a biography of Katherine Jackson French for University Press of Kentucky, tentatively titled *There Was a Fair Maid Dwelling*. The research I have done with the aid of this fellowship has gone a long way toward finding the missing parts of Katherine’s story. With the aid of information obtained during this period of study, I have now completed the chapter of my book which deals specifically with Katherine’s sometimes troubled relationship with Berea College. Collections utilized to do so from the Special Collections and Archives were those of Katherine Jackson.
French, William Goodell Frost, Eleanor Marsh Frost, Glady Jameson, and writings of Elizabeth Peck. I have also discovered a great deal of information concerning her early life, her teaching career, and her later years.

**Topics explored** include cultural stereotypes and depictions, and the role of women in balladry. On this last, Katherine spells out in no uncertain terms that it was the women who were keeping balladry alive in the mountains, whereas Sharp ignored this fact entirely. In fact, Sharp refers to the singers universally as “he,” thus creating the lasting impression of ballad singing as the province of Appalachian men. This was not the case. The concept of women as the keepers of the ballad tradition would have come to the fore much earlier had Katherine’s collection been published.

**The Ballads:** A discussion of Katherine’s ballads will occupy an entire chapter of my book. I am examining how the crucial and lasting first Big Bang impression of Appalachian balladry might have been different if Katherine’s collection had been published in 1910, seven years prior to Sharp’s. I am conducting a detailed lyrical and musical analysis of Katherine’s ballads and the mostly North Carolina ballads from the 1917
Sharp collection. The question arises: If Katherine’s book had been published in 1910, what if ballad collectors had descended on Kentucky rather than North Carolina during those important years of 1910-1932? What would they have found? What differences are there between early unpublished Kentucky ballads as a whole and the North Carolina ballads that became the gold standard of “Appalachian ballads”?

It is easy to get a good sense from Sharp’s collection of whatever may be at the heart and soul of North Carolina ballads, because his 1917 publication contains so many of them. 117 of his 184 ballads and variants, or 66%, were from North Carolina. Only 10, or 5%, were from Kentucky. Jackson’s extent collection is much smaller because many were lost over the years. Less than 30 of Jackson’s original 50-plus ballads and variants survive. Therefore, in order to get a larger sampling of early Kentucky ballads, I also analyzed ballads collected not only by Jackson but by other early Kentuckians as well.

This involved diving into archival recordings at the Hutchins Library Sound Archives, including those of

- Bradley Kincaid
• Addie Graham
• Mary Lozier
• Opsa Guthrie
• Wash Nelson
• Celebration of Traditional Music Recordings from 1974, 75, 76, and 77, which contained recordings of singers with long Kentucky family ballad traditions: Jim Gage (a wonderful version of Dog and Gun from CTM 1977!), Edna Ritchie, and Jean Ritchie (and indeed, the whole Ritchie clan at times).

I also utilized material in the written collections in the Berea College Hutchins Library Special Collections and Archives, including the collections of

• Katherine Jackson French
• James Watt Raine
• John F. Smith
• Josiah Combs
• Katherine Petit
• Talitha Powell McClure
• Mary Wheeler
• G.R. Combs
• Gladys Jameson
• The Eastern Kentucky Federal Project
• The D.W. Wilgus Collection

Trips to examine the work of other collectors including trips to
• The John C. Campbell School in Brasstown, NC
• The Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, KY

I also included versions from other early publications including those of
• Josephine McGill
• Lorraine Wyman and Howard Brockway
• Cecil Sharp’s 1932 version of *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. This version contains ballads collected by Sharp during his 1917 collecting trip to Kentucky.
2. **Publish, at long last, her collection of ballads.** I have completed six transcriptions of her ballads already, and look either to include the ballads in my book or to publish them as a separate collection, depending on what my publisher will agree to.

3. **Build upon the biographical information and correspondence in the Katherine Jackson French Collection at Berea, and others, using external sources to reconstruct Katherine’s life.** I discovered a mountain of information that has allowed me to fill in the holes in what we knew to be Katherine’s story. I found a good deal about Katherine’s early life with the help of the Laurel County Historical Society, and about her family and the town of London, KY, where she grew up. At the Filson Historical Society in Louisville, I was able to access her records and grades at Science Hill Academy for Females, as well as learn about the school, which possessed a
curriculum that rivaled any boys’ prep school at that time. The Ohio-Wesleyan University Archives were extremely helpful in finding information about Katherine that shed light on her personality, brilliance, drive, writing talent, and interpersonal skills. The Columbia University Archives were also quite helpful in fleshing out her doctoral years, 1904-1906. Several letters hiding in Berea College’s Hutchins Library Archives (not in the Katherine Jackson French Collection, but in the Gladys Jameson, W.G. Frost, Eleanor Marsh Frost, and D.W. Wilgus Collections) also gave insights into difficulties Katherine encountered while trying to get Berea to help publish her collection. (In short, Katherine had been told, or believed she had been told, that her ballads had gone in for publication by April of 1912, and like even earlier. This led her to prematurely disseminate her work, weakening her authority on her own material, and souring her relationship with Frost.) Centenary College’s Archives had records of her professional career, following her move to Shreveport in the late 1910’s.

4. **Contribute the interviews with Kay Tolbert Buckland, Katherine’s granddaughter, to the Berea College Sound Archives.** Thanks to the grant, I was able to travel to South Carolina in November, and spend three days with Kay. I left with 72 hours of recorded interviews. That was more
than I had hoped for. To my amazement and delight, however, Kay had rooms of Katherine’s belongings: photographs, journals, lesson plans, college notebooks, letters, newspaper articles, certificates, books, an unpublished play based on Katherine’s ballad-collecting trip, and personal items that had been Katherine’s. I took over 2700 photos of these materials. Kay also gave me the five letters from Elizabeth Peck and Gladys Jameson to Katherine that tell the story of the beginning of the Katherine Jackson French Collection at Berea. Here again, we had only an incomplete picture, which these letters complete. With Kay’s permission, I handed these letters, along with discs containing the interviews and the 2700 photos, to the Archives on December, 11, 2014. Kay is also considering willing the rest of Katherine’s papers and some of her belongings to Berea College.

5. Lectures. I also hoped that I could utilize some of the Archive’s materials and my research in lectures. I gave a presentation of ballads at the 2015 Appalachian Studies Association Conference at Eastern Tennessee University in March. My presentation consisted of a performance and comparison of Katherine’s ballads to the same ballads from the 1917 Cecil Sharp/Olive Dame Campbell “English Folk Songs from the Southern
Appalachians,” an examination of how publication by Katherine in 1910 might have affected early perceptions of Appalachian balladry, and a brief exploration of reasons why the collection was not published.

I want to thank the Archives very much for their support of this project. I look forward to completing the book, and to its publication. I am grateful that this grant has allowed me to proceed toward my goal of restoring Katherine Jackson French to her rightful place in the history of Appalachian balladry.