
Retrospection: The First Hundred Years of North Carolina's Libraries ~1945~

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7his fourth in a series of articles about North Carolina's libraries begins after several years of rapid expansion and increasing interest in libraries. A bright future for libraries changed quickly in the 1930s when an economic crisis affected library funding. By the end of the decade, libraries had recovered somewhat and shared thousands of dollars in federal funding for public, school, and college libraries that paid for numerous projects such as building repairs, extended hours, and book mending.¹ Early in the 1940s, however, the country was involved in another war that had positive and negative effects on libraries. Citizens increasingly looked to libraries for information related to the war at a time when libraries were losing personnel to the war. In addition to 1,500 Work's Progress Administration (W.P.A.) employees who had worked in North Carolina libraries as book menders and as assistants in school and public libraries and reading rooms, many trained library staff left their jobs to work in military libraries.²

Public Libraries

The economic crisis had a tremendous impact on public libraries supported by the Library Commission budget, which was reduced from \$27,000 in 1927-1928 to \$9,288 in 1933-1934. Salaries were cut 30-50%, the *Library Bulletin* was not published for a while, and travel and book funds were cut. Larger public libraries in cities that were in economic crisis received less support than smaller libraries in communities where patrons were closer to their libraries.³

The 1933 General Assembly helped library development by passing legislation allowing counties to establish joint library systems that would share staff, books, and facilities.⁴ It also passed legislation requiring certification of public librarians.⁵ The Citizens' Library Movement, which had been started to "improve, strengthen and expand public library service,"⁶ supported regional libraries and developed a plan for requesting funds for libraries from the 1937 General Assembly.⁷ Unfortunately, legislation for State Aid for Public Libraries in both 1937 and 1939 did not include an appropriation.⁸ In 1939, the NCLA appointed Charles Whedbee of Hertford to the Library Commission Board, and it proved to be a good decision. His visits with every legislator during the fall of 1940 resulted in a 1941 bill for State Aid for Public Libraries that included a \$100,000 appropriation for both years of the 1941-1943 biennium.⁹ North Carolina was the first southeastern state to appropriate funds for expanded public library service. The 1943 appropriation was increased to \$125,000, allowing libraries to buy additional books that their readers wanted.¹⁰

In 1936, two-thirds of the 100 counties had public libraries, and Davidson, Durham, Granville, and Guilford counties had book trucks that made regular trips around the counties.¹¹ By 1940, 12 counties owned bookmobiles, several others had remodeled school buses as bookmobiles, and the W.P.A. had 12 demonstration bookmobiles.¹² In just a few years, bookmobiles became even more important when tires and gasoline were rationed during the war.¹³ Many new library buildings were completed and libraries were opened in various other places such as courthouses, city halls, remodeled church buildings, and other public buildings. Public libraries continued to increase in number during the 1940s as money was raised, funds were donated, and creative locations such as a partitioned section of a railroad station were used to shelve books for the reading public.¹⁴

The chart below shows the progress public libraries made during the decade of the 1930s.

North Carolina Public Libraries

	1930	1940
Population	3,170,276	3,561,990
With public library service	1,035,276	2,001,107

Without public libraries	2,134,959 (62%)	1,560,883 (43%)
Volumes in public libraries	435,142	940,877
Circulation	2,942,871	5,992,548
Income	\$ 199,104	\$ 328,344
Income per capita	\$.06	\$.09
Counties appropriating \$1,000 or more	10	29
County owned bookmobiles	3	12 ¹⁵

The Twelfth Report of the North Carolina Library Commission reported the following:

After bank failures of the early 1930s, the **Fayetteville** library changed from subscription to free and the **Sanford** library became free to children under the age of 14. Sheppard Memorial Library in **Greenville**, a gift of Harper G. Sheppard, opened October 17, 1930; **Gastonia** Public Library, a gift of the Young Men's Christian Association, opened March 27, 1931.¹⁶

The Thirteenth Report of the North Carolina Library Commission reported the following:

A free library opened at **Alta Pass** in Mitchell County. The **High Point** Library moved from the third floor of city hall to the old post office building. The **Ayden** branch of the Greenville Library was located in a remodeled filling station. The **Thomasville** branch of the Davidson County Library moved to a larger space on June 20, 1934.¹⁷ Combined community buildings and libraries opened in **Rutherfordton** and **Tarboro** on January 1, 1934. Combined city-county funding made it possible for subscription libraries in **Kinston**, **Sanford**, and **Lincolnton** to offer free service.¹⁸ New library buildings partially funded with federal funds were under construction in **Hillsboro** (a memorial to Confederate soldiers), **Rowland**, and **Warrenton** (designed to harmonize with the Courthouse and built on the Court House Square).¹⁹

The Fourteenth Report of the North Carolina Library Commission reported the following:

The **Morganton** library, a memorial to A.M. Kistler, opened on October 15, 1935. The **New Bern** Library Association purchased the Stanley home and opened a free public library. In **Elizabeth City**, the library in the Woman's Club was enlarged to include a children's room. Community building/library combinations were opened in **Scotland Neck**, **Clinton**, and **Mount Olive**. The Sondley Reference Library of 50,000 volumes was opened on the seventh floor of the **Asheville** city hall.²⁰ The Richard B. Harrison Library for Negroes in **Raleigh** and Wake County opened on November 12, 1935. **High Point** opened a branch library for Negroes on January 1, 1936. The **Davidson County** book truck loaded books from the Negro branch and served Negroes of the county. The Negro librarians met at **Winston-Salem Teachers College** for their third annual meeting April 3-4, 1936.²¹

During the 1940/1942 biennium public libraries contributed to the war effort by purchasing materials related to the world crisis.²² The redirection of W.P.A. library workers in 1942 from local public libraries to defense areas and war information centers made it necessary for an increase in local and county support to maintain public library service in many areas.²³ Library service was established at Fort Bragg and at Camp Davis, but there were not enough books to meet the demand. The American Library Association joined with the American Red Cross and the U.S.O. in organizing the Victory Book Campaign to collect 10 million books for the troops. North Carolinians donated 85,000 books to the cause.²⁴

School Libraries

The North Carolina General Assembly first recognized the school library program in 1901 with funding of \$2,500 for library books for free public schools. Three decades later new laws changed funding from a matching basis to minimum support for all schools. During the economic crisis of the early 1930s, however, expenditures for school libraries reached a low point only to recover by the middle of the decade and surpass previous highs. Even though the number of books in school libraries tripled between 1925 and 1935, 25% of children still did not have access to library books.²⁵

During this time the image of the library changed from just a collection of books to an organized resource often directed by a teacher-librarian who had completed at least two courses in library technique.²⁶ The increase in the number of teacher-librarians (from 24 in 1930 to 587 by 1940) meant that library collections were better organized and students were better able to find answers they needed.²⁷

By 1940, service had become the major component of school library programs and library personnel were expected to know students, books, teachers, and the curriculum, and be able to coordinate all of them into a successful library program.²⁸ The

number of books per student in school libraries (2.4) was still well below the recommended national minimum of five books per student.²⁹ With the increased use of libraries, the low number meant books were being used more and thus were quickly wearing out. An average cost of a library book of approximately \$1.25 meant that it took a large amount of money just to replace those books that were discarded every year. The Library Project of the W.P.A., which supplied labor for book mending, was a tremendous help in making worn-out volumes last for a few more circulations.³⁰

School libraries actively participated in the war effort by mounting displays, participating in the salvage effort, hosting first aid classes, and working with the Victory Campaign to collect good quality books for military personnel.³¹ An increase in school library book circulation during the early part of the war was attributed to students working with the war effort; listening to the radio, especially reports about the war; and more work at home for children. During 1943-1944, circulation in school libraries increased by almost one million books.³²

Many trained school library personnel left for better paying jobs in military libraries, causing a critical shortage by the end of the war.³³ Collections began to suffer because books had been hard to get and wartime paper and bindings were poor quality. When building supplies became available following the war, library space became a priority in both new construction and renovations.³⁴ Students reacted to these improvements in school libraries by increasing their use of books. Between 1931 and 1945, library collections and circulations increased as shown in the chart below:

School Library Collections and Circulations

	1931-1932	1945-1946
Library books owned	1,395,267	3,361,476
Volumes per pupil	1.6	4.3
Circulation	3,901,086	9,996,218
Average per pupil	6.5	14.08 ³⁵

University and College Libraries

University and college libraries were also affected by the economic crisis during the 1930s. The war had a greater influence on these libraries because decreased enrollments meant less funding.

-**Bennett College's** new library building opened April 16, 1939.³⁶

-The new **Davidson College** library, which opened in 1942, was a gift from James Parks Grey in honor of his parents.³⁷

-Friends of the Library groups had been formed at **Duke University**, the **University of North Carolina**, and **Wake Forest College**.³⁸

-**Elizabeth City State Teachers College** became a four-year degree-granting institution and a library was built in 1939 at a cost of \$88,181. It was named for G.R. Little in 1955.³⁹

-Fire destroyed part of the main building at **Greensboro College**, which housed the library, in 1941.⁴⁰

-In 1939, the **Meredith College** library had 22,313 books with a book budget of \$1,673 and a periodicals budget of \$461.⁴¹

-Four junior college libraries received Carnegie funds for books: **Peace Institute**, **Mars Hill College**, **Saint Mary's School and Junior College**, and **Lees-McRae College**.⁴²

-**Salem College** and **High Point College** opened new library buildings in 1937.⁴³

-**St. Mary's College**, which had a library book budget of \$300 in 1933, received four gifts during the 1930s – one of \$500 and a Carnegie Corporation gift of \$4,500 to purchase books and two gifts of books totaling nearly 2,000 volumes. By 1938, the library would only seat 13% of the students and the trustees wanted to build a new library with centennial

campaign funds. They were not able to collect enough money for a new building, so the remodeling project undertaken in 1939 doubled the size of the library and increased seating from 38 to 70.⁴⁴

-Universities and colleges also received significant budget cuts during the Great Depression. Federal programs such as the National Youth Administration (NYA) were very beneficial in helping libraries to continue operating. The **University of North Carolina** librarian reported that staffing in the General College Library was almost entirely students supported by the NYA.⁴⁵

-A report from 1937-1938 noted that the **University of North Carolina** library budget was just 21.9% of that in 1928-1929. Decreasing budgets resulted in plans for cooperation between universities. Inspired by funding of \$25,000 each from the General Education Board to strengthen their collections in several fields, **Duke and UNC** began a program of cooperative collection and a daily delivery system between the two libraries.⁴⁶

-The libraries at the **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill** and at **North Carolina College in Durham** were designated as War Information Centers for North Carolina and collected books on defense and the war.⁴⁷

-In 1941, the **Wake Forest College** library held more than 3,000 books and several thousand pamphlets.⁴⁸

-During the construction project of the 1930s at **Western Carolina University**, the second floor of the Joyner Building was remodeled as a library and served that purpose until the 1950s.⁴⁹

One of the most significant events related to North Carolina's libraries during this time was the publication of the first issue of *North Carolina Libraries (NCL)* in February 1942. It was to be a publication for all types of libraries. The North Carolina Library Commission publication, which had been heavily weighted with public library news, ceased when *NCL* began publication. Early issues of *NCL* featured special libraries, school libraries, and Negro libraries.⁵⁰ In 1943, libraries used *NCL* to plan their request to the 1945 General Assembly for an increase in State Aid for Public Libraries.⁵¹ During the next fifteen years, libraries changed as audiovisual materials became an important component of library services. The shortage of trained librarians to staff the growing number of libraries became more critical while the demand for more services continued to increase.

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- ⁵ *North Carolina Library Commission Fourteenth Report for the Biennium 1934/1936*, 9.
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