
Virginia Dare: Our First Librarian

Mark Schumacher

In the winter of 1989, a candidate for a library science faculty position at UNC-Greensboro spoke on the role of serendipity in biographical library research. Little did I realize at the time that serendipity would lead me to make a major discovery in the area of U.S. library history: that Virginia Dare, the first English child born in North America, was among the first librarians in the American colonies, and probably the first public librarian in North Carolina.

I came across the lucky clue which led to this startling revelation while filing away a stack of old issues of *Tar Heel Libraries* in my attic. The house has been in my family for generations, and a number of my forebears, including Louis Round Schumacher and Peter Francisco Schumacher, were librarians in North Carolina before me. The house is full of library memorabilia. In a dark corner of the attic, I came upon some tattered, badly deteriorated copies of what seemed to be a magazine called *American Colonies Libraries*. They were crumbling, and very fragile, but I could just make out the date of September 1615 on one of them. The cover, half-eaten by silverfish, proclaimed what at first seemed to be an exhortation to our profession, or perhaps the theme of the 1616 ACLA (American Colonies Library Association) midwinter conference—held, even in those days, in Chicago.¹ Instead, as I was to learn, it was announcing a simple, historic, and yet long-forgotten fact. It said

Dare to be a Librarian

Of course, it has long been assumed that the settlers of Roanoke Island, and among them Virginia Dare, perished mysteriously in the late 1580's. Although rumors and legends continue to this day concerning these first English colonists, no conclusive evidence has ever surfaced to explain their fate. Yet here was news, a quarter of a century after their disappearance, that Virginia Dare has decided to become a librarian! From the crumbling pages, I learned only that Virginia had

given up her study of medieval French literature and the semiotics of archaic Greek philosophy to pursue a career in librarianship. (The early 1600s, it appears, were as tough on folks in the humanities as the 1970s were.) No other details were provided in the ACL article, but excited by what I had discovered, I decided to devote as much energy as I could to uncovering more about Virginia's library work. In the months that followed, I tracked down every lead I could find. Unfortunately, due to arcane concerns over **National Security**, many sources and some of the existing information about Ms. Dare were not available to me. For example, it seems that the CBI (Colonial Bureau of Investigation) had a program for many years to monitor the reading patterns of all individuals known to be supportive of the so-called "Independence Movement." And although it is known that CBI agents of the "Library Alert Program" contacted Virginia in 1622 and again in the 1640's, no documents concerning these meetings are yet available to the public! Nevertheless, some elements of a tentative biography do emerge.

Education

In the days before information science, educational media, LANs and hypertext, library education was a far simpler proposition. In fact, the only ACLA-accredited library schools in North America in the early seventeenth century were at the branches of LP (Library of Parliament) in Boston and Annapolis. Students were recommended for admission by members of the House of Lords or by the colonial governors; the GREs were totally optional. Virginia attended classes in Annapolis, studying the standard library subjects of the day: preservation of incunabula, history of royal libraries, hand-press operation: graphic media for the library; and (a relatively new course), cataloging of non-manuscript materials. She specialized in rural librarianship, there being little else for librarians in North Carolina. Her academic record was excellent; her transcript shows that she received eleven grades of "passed" and only one "failed," which allowed her to be nominated and elected to Bee Eff Em, a library honor society

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founded in 1528 by Henry VIII to commemorate several of his wives, who had been librarians before they married. Her graduating class (1618) was, in fact, the last to operate as a thirty-six-hour program. The following year, all LP library schools throughout the empire adopted a two-year, forty-eight-hour curriculum, as mandated by King James I. As a report to the king stated, it was felt that

*"Beginning librarians shoulde be trained not only in the basicke concepts of the librarie arts, but in the application of these concepts as welle. They must be taughte the latest technologies: the booke catalogue, the printing presse, and mucche moore. A longer programme of study is there fore necessarie to mould these younge peple into the outstanding proffessionals we neede today."*²

Unfortunately, while the evolution of colonial library education is most fascinating, it must remain the subject of another study.

Early Career

Following the completion of her studies at LP, Virginia Dare returned to Edenton, North Carolina. She was forced to work for several months as a part-time semiotician, at minimum wage, before being appointed Adult Services Coordinator of the Edenton and the Surrounding Area Public Library. (North Carolina was much less administratively compartmentalized in 1619 than it is today.) It was in this position that Virginia developed a number of significant outreach programs. These were aimed both at minority groups, in particular white Europeans (with whom Virginia had, of course, a natural affinity) and, more importantly, to the large native American clientele of the region. Her writings on outreach, originally published in *ACL* and *Southeastern Colonies Librarian*, were gathered together in *How! We do it Right! A Guide to Library-Community Relations in the New World*.³ The only extant copy of this work was discovered in the basement of Tryon Palace in the 1940s (and immediately reprinted by Kraus in their "Classics of Colonial American Librarianship" series.) The title of this volume, in fact, with a slight change of punctuation, has spawned a whole *genre* of writing about the library profession.

After six years in Edenton, Virginia moved on to a branch of the Outer Banks Regional Library System, working in the now-defunct coastal vil-

lage of Goose, only a few miles north of her birthplace in Roanoke Island. As the only professional in a small and rather isolated library, she was in charge of all aspects of the unit's operation. It was here in Goose that she began her now legendary work in preservation of library materials.

Because of its location too near the shore, and inadequate colony funding to provide a more modern building elsewhere, the library in Goose suffered a great deal of weather-related damage.⁴ Storms and high tides caused by hurricanes battered the thin-walled building mercilessly. Following the back-to-back ravages, in 1630, of Hurricane 1 and Hurricane 2 (the current naming system not yet being in place), scores of volumes were badly damaged by sea water. Virginia and her colleagues realized that something had to be done immediately if any of the volumes were to be saved. Despite working with inadequate ACSI (American Colonial Standards Institute) guidelines for book preservation, she managed to devise a box into which the books could be placed, and which, by a process involving ionized, distilled water, greatly alleviated the damage caused by the corrosive salt in the sea water. Later the books were carefully dried, using techniques shown to her by her Native American coworkers. In fact, the contributions of one particular Indian, named Paskwo, were honored by Ms. Dare when she applied for a Royal Patent for her preservation device in 1634. She called it a Paskwo Tank, a term still found widely in northeastern North Carolina.

The Harvard Connection

Her work in various areas of librarianship brought her ever-growing attention from the profession. In fact, in the fall of 1638, she was invited by the governors of Harvard College to apply for the position of Head Librarian at the fledgling institution. Records which I recently discovered in the College archives indicate that the interview, lasting two days in November, went very well, (considering that it had taken Virginia over six weeks just to get to Cambridge). Her presentation to the search committee, "Resource Networking in the Multiversity: the Role of the Library," was truly visionary, if perhaps slightly inappropriate. However, she seemed to have all the qualifications that the college was looking for, and was certainly interested in the position. As she wrote to Paskwo, "There is mucche to be saide for this Yankee institution and its loftie goales of educating this lands younge men." However, when she was offered the post, she found that the salary was much inferior to that of the other faculty, all of whom were men.

She therefore turned down the offer, writing to Nathaniel Eaton in part, "I am much aggrieved that, despite the comparable value which I would bring to the College, you have found it reasonable to offer me a relative pittance, when contrasted to the salaries you give to your (male) professors. Under these circumstances, I can but refuse the position, and seek employment elsewhere."⁵ Thus Virginia Dare became one of the first to recognize the inherent inequities of salary which arise in predominately female professions.

Building Early Networks

The final chapter of Virginia Dare's professional career was spent at the University of the North Coast, at Castle Hayne (just north of Wilmington), a small private school which closed about 1710, following years of financial difficulties. UNC-CH, as it was known, was one of the earliest institutions of higher learning in Eastern North Carolina, and prided itself on the quality of its library. In her several years as "Dean" of Libraries there, Virginia introduced a number of important innovations, particularly in the areas of networking. Her work with the Tidewater Regional Library Network, amplifying earlier efforts with the Ocracoke-Croatan Library Clubs (OCLC), spearheaded multi-type library resource sharing in this part of the New World. And although it was not implemented during her tenure at UNC-CH (innumerable glitches kept cropping up), Dare worked with an Irish library consulting firm, based in Dublin, to develop a highly mechanized "integral system" to be known as LS/1700.

The Later Years

By this time Virginia, now almost sixty, was beginning to think about retirement. Her judicious investments in the Colonial Retired Educators Fund (CREF) assured her a fairly comfortable existence without financial worries. She decided to settle near Beaufort, where she opened one of the first bed and breakfast inns on the Carolina coast. Perched above the beach, it was appropriately named "Overdune." She died in Beaufort about 1660 (again some information remains sketchy), and although the location of her grave site remains highly classified, I did manage to obtain the text of her epitaph. This final note is in fact the most curious aspect of my entire Virginia Dare investigation. For in the brief inscription there appear eerie reference to the names of four future giants of the library world. I close with the simple text:

*"Do we know how life's travailles did cut her?
Few were as strong and wise as she. He who would
seek to best her, manages it not!"*⁶

References

1. Chicago: from the Algonquian, meaning "frigid winter meeting place."
2. Royal Academy for Library Study and Education (RALISE). *Annual Report*. London: The Academy (Distributed by HMSO), 1617.
3. Dare, Virginia. *HOW! We Do It Right! A Guide to Library-Community Relations in the New World*. New Bern, N.C.: Farland Publishing, 1650.
4. Ironically, construction of one of the last libraries to be funded by the Carnegie Corporation was in the final stages of completion when the killer hurricane of April 1924 destroyed most of Goose, causing the entire population to resettle in an area called Duck Estates North.
5. Dare Collection, Harvard College Archives. (1/2 linear foot).
6. Personal communication from the Deputy Assistant Director for Colonial Affairs, Federal Bureau of Investigation, May 14, 1989.



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