

Bringing Boston Books to the Carolina Mountains:

Charles Hallet Wing and the Good-Will Free Library at Ledger

by Robert G. Anthony, Jr.

The name of Charles Hallet Wing appears on no library building in North Carolina. His portrait hangs in no library foyer, conference room, or auditorium. No local or state library association presents an award in his memory. Indeed, only a handful of North Carolina librarians recognize his name today. Yet, few Tar Heels have ever demonstrated a stronger belief in the value of public libraries and the importance of providing them in every community, no matter how small or remote.

Wing was born on August 5, 1836, in Boston, Massachusetts. He attended the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1870. Later that year, he was appointed a professor of chemistry at Cornell University. He remained there until 1874, when he accepted a professorship teaching analytical chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the Boston suburb of Cambridge.¹

Wing quickly distinguished himself in the academic world. As early as 1870, he had begun publishing on scientific topics. In that year, his article "On Certain Double Sulfates of the Cerium Group" appeared in the highly respected *American Journal of Science*.² In November 1874, the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences elected him a fellow. In 1881 he published *Notes on Quantitative Analysis as Used at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. Administrators at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology turned to him to plan and direct construction of the Kidder Chemical Laboratories, which would become recog-

nized as model facilities.³ For a decade, Wing led an active life of research and teaching.

In 1885, however, Wing's life suddenly changed. He quit academia and, in a dramatic move, relocated from cosmopolitan Boston to the small community of Ledger in Mitchell County, North Carolina, one of the most isolated areas in Southern Appalachia. It is not known for certain what prompted Wing's decision to leave Massachusetts. He had visited western North Carolina with friends to study the emerging mica mining industry there and had been immediately captivated by the beauty of the mountains. He may have decided to settle in Ledger and oversee his friends' mining interests, or exhaustion and other health concerns may have led to his move. When New York writer/photographer Margaret Morley, who shared Wing's fascination with Southern Appalachia, visited his Ledger home and described it in her book *The Carolina Mountains*, she explained his move as the result of a need "to escape the turmoil of the outer world."⁴

Regardless of the reason or reasons for his move, Wing quietly and easily settled into the Ledger community. It was a world quite different from Boston and the academic one he had left behind. Mitchell County, lightly populated with 9,435 people scattered over 220 square miles, was a land of small farmers. Nearly all of his new neighbors struggled to make a living from the crops of corn, oats, wheat, tobacco, and Irish potatoes they planted on the mountain ridges and in the more fertile valleys. More than 95% of them had

been born in North Carolina, and nearly all the rest came from nearby parts of Tennessee, which bordered Mitchell to the northwest. Most had never traveled far from their homes. Only eight individuals in the county were foreign born.⁵

Many of the adults Wing encountered in his new community were illiterate. Although the county operated a system of small public schools, its efforts to provide a quality education for its children were limited severely by a lack of funding. In the late nineteenth century, no North Carolina county spent much on its public schools when compared to most non-Southern counties, especially those in New England and the Northeast. Yet Mitchell ranked poorly even if compared only to Tar Heel counties. During the school year that ended November 30, 1886, for example, only three of the state's 96 counties spent less on its schools, even though Mitchell ranked seventy-second in population.⁶ The impact of such poorly funded schools would continue to plague the county for years to come. When the U.S. Census for 1910 compiled statistics on illiteracy in North Carolina, it revealed that 24.1% of the White voters in Mitchell could not so much as sign their names, the third highest rate among the state's one hundred counties.⁷

Despite the great difference between Wing's educational and cultural background and that of his neighbors, the retired professor won quick acceptance in his new community. He bought several tracts of land and began developing a model farm. He hired Stephen Willis, as his overseer, a local

man, paying him the very generous wage of fifty cents per day. The people of Ledger watched with great interest as Wing began construction of a two-story, six-room log cabin, which contained no interior stairs, but rather two exterior stairways leading from the front porch to the upper floor.⁸

Although he put much energy into developing his mountain homestead, a greater passion soon seized Wing. Greatly concerned by the high illiteracy rate and poor schools around him, he resolved to improve educational opportunities in the area. He recognized that in order to encourage a love of learning and education he needed to make good books more readily available in the community. The retired professor, accustomed as he had been to fine libraries in the Boston area, determined to build one in Ledger that would be free and open to all.

On several acres of land he had recently purchased, Wing began construction of an impressive two-story building. He designed the first floor as a library; the second, he reserved as a community assembly hall, where civic and social gatherings could be held. He personally financed the \$2,500 project and named the facility the Good-Will Free Library. Nearby, he built a small cottage to house a librarian.⁹

The new library, of course, needed books, which were not all that easy to acquire in the western North Carolina mountains. Wing eagerly donated many of his own, and he appealed to Northern friends to contribute volumes. But a large number, apparently most, he acquired from the Boston Public Library, where they were being withdrawn from the collection and discarded. Wing arranged for them to be shipped to Ledger.¹⁰

The new library opened in 1887, and the community welcomed it enthusiastically. Many people living nearby made immediate use of it, but, for those living farther away in the county, travel to Ledger could be difficult, often over rough and muddy roads. To make books more accessible, Wing organized several small traveling libraries, each with about seventy-five books. These collections could be picked up by interested individuals and placed in general stores or homes distant from Ledger for use in those neighborhoods. Every three months or so, a collection was to be returned to the Good-Will library and exchanged for a new one. Unfortunately, neither a list of books in the library nor formal circulation records exist for Good-

Will's earliest years. But when Margaret Morley visited Ledger several years later, she was informed that "at the end of the first year not a book was missing, none had been kept out overtime, while less than six per cent of those taken had been fiction!"¹¹

Many of the books donated to Good-Will had been damaged or worn during earlier use, so Wing secured the necessary tools and supplies to repair and rebind them. He trained Avery Willis, son of his overseer Stephen, to perform these tasks.¹² For several years, the younger Willis also served as librarian. In 1917, his wife appears to have assumed that duty.¹³

When the newly established North Carolina Library Commission published its *First Biennial Report* in 1910, it made available for the first time detailed statistics on the growing number of libraries in the Tar Heel state. The report also illustrated just how remarkable Charles Hallet Wing's accomplishment at Ledger was. At the end of 1910, North Carolina had 82 libraries, a figure that included college, special, and public libraries. Sixty-two of the state's 92 counties had no public library. Yet in the tiny community of Ledger, population 52, located in a remote, impoverished area, Wing had built the state's largest library intended for public use. Indeed, only six Tar Heel libraries — those at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davidson College, Trinity College, Wake Forest College, the North Carolina State Library, and the North Carolina Supreme Court Library — exceeded in collection size the 12,000-volume Good-Will Free Library.¹⁴

The state Library Commission's first

eight biennial reports, covering 1909 through 1924, reveal other impressive facts about the Good-Will Free Library. In 1911-1912, for example, it was one of only 15 public libraries in North Carolina to receive financial assistance from its host town or county. Good-Will received \$105 from Mitchell County that biennium. In 1913-1914, the biennial appropriation grew to \$150, a figure that remained constant through 1919-1920.

Book circulation totals at Good-Will appear to have varied considerably over the years, however. In 1909-1910, the library reported that 50 borrowers used 800 volumes. A circulation of 5,000 books to 100 borrowers was reported for both the 1913-1914 and 1917-1918 bienniums. For the 1919-1920 and December 1920-1922 periods, circulation totals of 590 and 1,600 were reported, respectively. Borrowers numbered 93 and 200. The Library Commission reports, however, do not explain why such variations in circulation totals occurred. But it is likely that circulation increased whenever new books arrived from donors or when traveling library collections were replaced around the county, making new titles available to borrowers.

After opening his library, Wing turned to a new project, construction of a school nearby. As with the library, he personally financed the building, which was large enough to accommodate 125 students. The two teachers he hired taught the standard "three Rs" — reading, writing, and arithmetic. The retired professor directed a manual training department in the building's basement. There boys could learn carpentry, woodworking, and other skills



Good-Will Free Library at Ledger. Photo courtesy of North Carolina Collection, University of N.C. Library at Chapel Hill.

useful to a small farmer. Girls could learn sewing and other domestic crafts.¹⁵

For 20 years after his arrival at Ledger in 1885, Wing had dedicated himself to improving the lives of the people in his adopted community. He had built a remarkably large and much-appreciated library, open to all who wished to use it. He had even arranged for small collections of books to be deposited around the area so that people unable to travel to his library would have access to good reading material. In addition, he had financed and taught at a free school for his neighbors' children, providing them an alternative to the poorly funded and inadequate skeletal public school system the county was attempting to operate. But as the first decade of the twentieth century passed, Wing began to look back toward Boston.

Wing's health had begun to worsen, and he and his wife made the difficult decision to return to Massachusetts for their final years. After arriving in Boston, however, he continued to think about the library and school he had left behind in the Carolina mountains. He decided to donate the library to the county, with the condition that county officials continue to operate it. The minutes of the May 3, 1909, meeting of the county board of commissioners stoically record Wing's gift—a "Certain library and building land and so forth Situated at Ledger...."¹⁶ The deed of conveyance, registered a few weeks later, detailed the gift more fully. Wing had given the people he had grown to love and admire during 20 years among them "... the buildings thereon known as the 'Good-will Free Library' and librarians house, together with books and library materials therein contained." The deed also recorded the commissioners' agreement to operate the library for at least eight more years.¹⁷ Two years later, local citizens successfully petitioned the county board of education to purchase the Wing school and adjacent teacher's house from the retired professor for \$770, half of which the citizens agreed to raise privately.¹⁸

During the next several years, however, without Wing to promote it, the Good-Will Free Library declined in significance to the people of Ledger and the surrounding area. One problem was that it added few new books. Its holdings never exceeded in size the estimated 12,000 volumes that it had when it opened in 1887. Indeed, at the end of 1924, the library's holdings had

dropped to 10,025, probably the result of discarding irreparable volumes.¹⁹ Another factor lessening the library's importance was that in 1919-1920 the North Carolina Library Commission began depositing its own traveling libraries around Mitchell County, all but eliminating the demand for ones from Good-Will.²⁰

Recognizing that these changes reduced the need for Good-Will and, apparently unwilling or unable to finance the improvement and expansion of its book collection and operations, the county commissioners decided to close the library. They already had operated it longer than the eight years agreed upon when Wing had deeded it to them. Since Wing's departure, the county's public school system had grown in size and quality and could easily absorb the Good-Will books. Also, because the county had acquired Wing's former school, there was no longer a private school at Ledger dependent on Good-Will. In 1926, when the state Library Commission released its report for the preceding two years, the Good-Will Free Library was not included. The monument to Charles Hallet Wing's belief in the importance of free libraries was no more. Although the Good-Will Free Library no longer existed, most of the books that had once made it the largest library intended for public use in North Carolina were now serving duty in nearby schools.²¹

After his return to Boston, Wing never visited Ledger again. His health continued to decline, and on September 13, 1915, he died. The library he had built in a small, isolated community in the western North Carolina mountains would continue for another decade; then it too would pass from the scene, all but forgotten today. But to North Carolina librarians seeking an example of the belief in public libraries, no finer example exists than Charles Hallet Wing and his Good-Will Free Library.

References

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- ² *American Journal of Science*, 2nd series, 49 (1870): 354-361.
- ³ *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, pp. 928-929.
- ⁴ Margaret W. Morley, *The Carolina Mountains* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913), 326-328.
- ⁵ *Compendium of the Tenth Census* (June 1, 1880), Part I (Washington:

Government Printing Office, 1883), 365, 523, 802-803.

⁶ *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of North Carolina for the School Years 1885 and 1886* (Raleigh: P. M. Hale, State Printer and Binder, 1887), 130-132.

⁷ *Adult Illiteracy in North Carolina and Plans for Its Elimination* (Raleigh: State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1915), 15.

⁸ Lorene P. G. Willis, "Stephen Morgan Willis," in *The Heritage of the Toe River Valley* (Durham, N.C.: Lloyd Richard Bailey, Sr., 1994), 448; Ashton Chapman, "Unique Landmark Moved and Rebuilt," in *The State* 38 (15 February 1971): 11-12.

⁹ Mary B. Palmer, "Charles Hallet Wing, Founder of the Good-Will Free Library," in *North Carolina Library Bulletin* 2 (September 1915): 126-127.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Morley, *The Carolina Mountains*, p. 327.

¹² Lorne P. G. Willis, "Stephen Morgan Willis," p. 448.

¹³ *Second Biennial Report of the North Carolina Library Commission, 1911-1912*, p. 24; *Fifth Biennial Report of the North Carolina Library Commission, 1917-1918*, p. 23. Actually, the report lists "Mrs. H. W. Willis" as librarian, apparently a misprint. The next biennial report, the *Sixth*, corrects the error.

¹⁴ *First Biennial Report of the North Carolina Library Commission, 1909-1910*, pp. 25-27. Although this report does not include collection size for the library at Wake Forest College, the report for the next biennium revealed that its collection was larger than that of Good-Will.

¹⁵ Morley, *The Carolina Mountains*, p. 326; Lorene P. G. Willis, "Stephen Morgan Willis," p. 448; Mary E. Palmer, "Charles Hallet Wlng, Founder of the Good-Will Free Library," p. 127.

¹⁶ Minutes, Mitchell County Board of Commissioners, Vol. 1, 1908-1914, p. 73.

¹⁷ Mitchell County Deeds, Book 61, p. 479.

¹⁸ Minutes, Mitchell County Board of Education, 7 August 1911.

¹⁹ *Eighth Report of the North Carolina Library Commission, July 1, 1922-June 30, 1924*, p. 18.

²⁰ *Sixth Biennial Report of the North Carolina Library Commission, 1919-1920*, p. 13.

²¹ Wendell W. Smiley, *Library Development in North Carolina before 1930* (Greenville, N.C.: Library, East Carolina University, 1971), 81; Thornton W. Mitchell, *The State Library and Library Development in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of State Library, 1983), 3.