

From the President

Plummer Alston Jones, Jr., President

Editor's Note: Each biennium North Carolina Libraries uses the President's column to introduce the Association's new president to the membership. This is basically an unedited interview between Jones and editor Frances Bradburn.

How did you decide to become a librarian? Did you have a previous profession?

In many ways I feel that my whole life has been a preparation for teaching and librarianship. My earliest role models included two librarians in my hometown, "The Original Washington," Pauline Worthy at Washington High School, and Ursula Loy at the George H. and Laura E. Brown Library. Both encouraged my curiosity about books and my juvenile attempts at research. The possibility of pursuing an undergraduate degree in library science never entered my thinking at this point. During high school my initial interest was in Latin (of all subjects), nurtured by my distinguished teacher, Harriet Harris; and my ultimate interest was in music, nurtured by my first true mentor, band director James V. Larkin. I wanted to be a music teacher just as wonderful and well liked by students as he was.

After finishing my undergraduate degree in music education at East Carolina University in 1970, where I gained valuable experience in performance on the oboe, flute, and violin, I taught stringed instruments and string orchestra in the Norfolk (VA) City Schools for four years. You'll notice that I had changed my mind about teaching band, knowing what a raucous crew we had been for Mr. Larkin. I convinced myself, and I do think it's true, that students who study the stringed instruments are usually more mature and have the stamina to make it through years of sounding like Jack Benny on a bad day. That fact notwithstanding, teaching stringed instruments in an inner city school system was perhaps too much of a challenge for an inexperienced teacher.

Although I enjoyed teaching immensely, there were so many distractions required of public school music teachers that had nothing to do with teaching. I remember that one of my first tasks as a teacher was transferring stringed instruments from schools formerly offering string classes to fifth and sixth graders to other schools where string classes had never been taught. This was my initiation into the effects of court-ordered busing on the life of the itinerant string teacher. I'll never forget transporting a string bass in a 1970 Toyota Corolla (much smaller than the same model today) across Norfolk to the string repair shop! After four years, I decided there had to be a better way to earn my living. In May 1972, in the middle of my four-year tenure with the Norfolk City Schools, my mother, Elva, died at the tender age of 46. In retrospect, I'm certain that her death was a turning point in my life. I saw how short life can be and was determined to spend the rest of my career in a situation that I found more stimulating and hopefully less hectic than public school teaching.

In 1974, I began my tenure as a library school student at Drexel University in Philadelphia. While pursuing my degree, I got my first library experience working full-time as a bibliographic assistant at Temple University and part-time as evening and weekend reference librarian at the School of Social Work Library at the University of Pennsylvania. I went to Drexel with the goal of becoming a music librarian since music was (and remains) my first love. I found out quite quickly that it was not a good idea to put all of my eggs into one basket, so I began to prepare myself for a career in academic librarianship. I was fortunate to have library greats like Tom Childers, John Hall, Guy Garrison, Brigitte Kenney, Ann Painter, and Dorothy Bendix as my teachers and mentors. I completed my master's degree in library science during the summer of 1976 and received my degree formally in the spring of 1977.

My mentor at Temple University, Pamela Thaxter, was determined to help me land my first professional position. When I told her that I was applying for the position of Head Librarian at North Carolina Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount and needed a letter of reference from her, she gladly complied with my request. I blush still when I remember the glorious letter of reference she wrote! With her help, I was very lucky to land my first professional position as the chief administrator of a college library in the late summer of 1976. I've been a proud North Carolina librarian since then—twenty-four exciting years!

Currently you are Director of Library Services at Catawba College. What positions have you held before?

After serving from 1976 to 1982 as Head Librarian at North Carolina Wesleyan, I applied for an opening at Elon College, where I could try my hand at administration of a medium-sized college library. From 1982 to 1995, I served as Head Librarian/Director of Learning Resources at Elon College in the town of Elon College. While at Elon College, I began in 1983 the doctoral program in information and library science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In April 1987, one of the happiest days of my life, when I passed my

written and oral examinations for the doctorate, was followed two days later by the death of my father of a heart attack at age 66. What I had hoped would be a wonderful surprise for him, he was never to know. About four years later, in 1991, I received the doctorate degree to the cheers of my stepmother, Maggie, my brother Scott and sister Elva Ann and their spouses, my nephews, Dewey and Todd Hales, and my dear friends, Gayle Fishel, Billy Alligood, and Ken Thornton. At Chapel Hill, my mentors were Edward G. Holley, former dean and now Kenan Professor Emeritus; Marilyn Miller, who later moved to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to chair the Department of Library and Information Studies; Barbara Moran, who later became dean at Chapel Hill; and Susan Steinfirst, whose untimely death has left the library world diminished. My emphases were academic libraries and library history. My dissertation was "American Public Library Service to the Immigrant Community, 1876-1948."

Continuing my pattern of private college librarianship, I began my tenure at Catawba College in Salisbury as Director of Library Services in 1995. Ironically, the enrollment at Catawba College places it somewhere between the enrollments of North Carolina Wesleyan and Elon. I must say that I was delighted to get back into a smaller college library where the chance of getting to know the students was easier and where I was not required to scale unnecessary levels of academic administrative hierarchy to gain access to decision makers. Catawba College was not automated when I arrived in February 1995, so my first task was library automation. Now, approximately five years later, I look out everyday on a fully automated library, where every item is barcoded and accessible electronically through our online public access catalog. I can truly say that I'm content at Catawba, but still see lots of improvements that need to be made and many weaknesses that need to be strengthened.

You seem to write a great deal. You are a columnist for *North Carolina Libraries* and you've just recently published a book. Why do you write and how do you see it fitting into your "day job"?

In January 1999, Greenwood Press published my book *Libraries, Immigrants, and the American Experience*, based on a major revision of my dissertation. My interest in genealogy and family history has blossomed while at Catawba. In November 1998, I received the award for Outstanding Contribution to Family History of the North Carolina Genealogical Society for my 1997 genealogy of the Jones family of Blounts Creek, Beaufort County. I have since published in 1998 a genealogy of the Pridgen family of Edgecombe, Nash, and Wilson Counties and am working on a genealogy of the Mason and Wright families of Hyde and Beaufort Counties, which I hope to have done for Christmas presents for my brother, Scott, and his children, Sarah and Gregory Jones, and my sister, Elva Ann, and her grown young sons, Dewey and Todd Hales, as well as for my extended network of cousins.

I have been a member of the Editorial Board of *North Carolina Libraries* since 1990, beginning as representative for the College and University Section, and continuing now as we prepare the Conference Issue. I literally could not bear to leave the Editorial Board when my term expired in 1992, so I convinced Frances Bradburn to let me edit the Lagniappe column as its first compiler. This group has been my sounding board and support group since 1990. What a wonderful bunch of intelligent, hard-working people with such incredible senses of humor!

Fitting all of this into my "day job" is not easy. I usually spend a couple of hours every night and sometimes on Saturdays and Sundays working on my writing projects, all in various stages of completion. Actually I feel out of sorts when I don't have at least one writing project going on.

I would be amiss if I did not express my thanks for the support and encouragement I received from Elon College while pursuing the doctorate and from Catawba College while preparing my manuscript for publishing. Although "publish or perish" is not the rule of the day at Catawba, the administration there views having a Director of Library Services with a doctorate as a tremendous boon. Having the doctorate places me in a position of parity with my teaching faculty colleagues, and makes it possible for me to draw attention to the accomplishments of the other librarians on my staff and to work for their advancement within the academic ranks.

I teach a freshman orientation class at Catawba as I had previously done for several years at Elon. Due to the invitation of my mentor, Marilyn Miller, I have been a part-time instructor in the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Department of Library and Information Studies in the areas of reference and management since the summer of 1995, right after coming to Catawba. In the spring of 2000 I will teach a course in library administration for Appalachian State University's library science program at a satellite location in the Rowan Public Library in Salisbury. Also, in the spring of 2000, I will teach a course I've designed on the American immigration experience for the Lifelong Learning Program, the undergraduate evening program at Catawba College.

Obviously your life is filled with work in various forms. What do you do when you're not working?

There have been times in my life that I could have been characterized as the classic workaholic. But, with the help of Paxil, a wonderful family, and caring friends, I'm making a conscious effort to have a life outside work. I enjoy all the fine arts, especially opera and ballet, and consider myself the ultimate culture vulture. I collect everything from the books of Vita Sackville-West and her husband Sir Harold Nicolson to the recorded works of Giacomo Meyerbeer and Camille Saint-Saens. As a free-lance oboist and flutist, I play for weddings, in chamber music ensembles, and community orchestras and bands. I have played flute obbligati with the Catawba College Choir in several concerts and hope to continue to do so in the future.

If a librarian were to ask you why you joined NCLA — and why you agreed to a leadership position with the organization — what would you say?

Affiliating with the state professional library association came quite naturally to me. My education at Drexel was full of lectures and classes that stressed the value of professionalism and contribution to librarianship. I have been a member of the North Carolina Library Association since the beginning of my career in librarianship. My involvement has been with the College and University Section, serving as Vice-Chair from 1991 to 1993 and Chair from 1993 to 1995. I was program chair for the 1993 NCLA biennial conference because Gwen Jackson asked me and encouraged me throughout the planning process. While working as program chair in 1993 I attended many of the quarterly NCLA Executive Board meetings while Janet Freeman was President and Gwen was Vice President. I've told Janet and Gwen in person many times, and I don't mind repeating it here, that they inspired me by their leadership to get more involved with NCLA.

What do you see as your greatest challenge as incoming President of NCLA? What are your plans for addressing this challenge?

NCLA's strength lies in the obvious fact that it is a very diverse organization offering a forum for public libraries, school libraries, academic libraries, and special libraries, as well as various specializations in librarianship and advocates of library response to social changes. If NCLA is weak, it is not in diversity. NCLA's weakness lies in its lack of unity among the often competing diverse elements. Most of our members feel extreme loyalty for sections or round tables that address issues affecting them individually and collectively. On the other hand, I'm afraid that many members see NCLA as being superfluous. I personally view NCLA as the glue that binds all of this wonderful diversity into a powerful professional organization with the clout to affect societal change through the political process with the North Carolina General Assembly and ultimately the U.S. Congress.

Many of us forget that NCLA is a nonprofit organization and as such does not have a substantial income from gifts, endowments, and sales. Year after year NCLA must earn each dollar through service to its members. If NCLA is not meeting a need, the Executive Board needs to know this and to act responsibly to fill it.

At the end of the 1997-1999 biennium, Past President Beverley Gass called for a Commission on School Libraries to address the issues facing the North Carolina Association of School Librarians Section and to discuss NCASL's proposal to form a separate organization independent of NCLA. With the help of Karen Gavigan, current NCASL chair, I have appointed ten school librarians, to convene as many times as necessary from November 1999 through October 2000 to address pros and cons of having NCASL within or outside of NCLA, and ultimately to determine if and how NCLA can meet the needs of NCASL. Facilitating the work of the commission will be Lou Wetherbee, library consultant from Dallas, Texas, who has had experience working with large organizations, including most recently the State Library of North Carolina and the American Library Association.

On January 27, 2000, Lou Wetherbee will also work with the NCLA Executive Board at the biennial retreat to be held at the Rowan Public Library in Salisbury. She will help the board address the paradox of NCLA's strength in diversity and weakness in unity. The Executive Board, with the facilitation of Lou Wetherbee, will examine how NCLA can be more unified and more universally acknowledged as the tie that binds all of our divergent causes and issues together. The workshop will be an opportunity for us to see the benefits of collaboration — working together to achieve goals of the individual sections and round tables, but also goals that affect the future of librarianship as a profession. We will learn together that if any segment of our profession is at risk, we are all at risk.



1999-2001 NCLA Executive Board (left to right): (seated) Marion Lindsay, Sue Cody, Mary Horton, Diane Kester, Al Jones, Ross Jones; (standing) Bobby Wynn, Phil Barton, Gerald Holmes, Kevin Cherry, Carol Freeman, Karen Gavigan, Martha Davis, Susan Smith, Frances Bradburn, Ann Burlingame, Frances Lampley, George Taylor, Robert Canida, Beverley Gass, John Via, Melinda Ratchford.

If you could make one change in the association, what would it be?

If I could make one change in NCLA during my biennium as President, it would be to promote the benefits of collaboration — of working together to solve common problems. I would like for NCLA members to see NCLA not as the problem, but as part of the solution. I think that we are dealing with a societal problem that is bigger even than NCLA — a widespread distrust of large organizations. This is a problem not only statewide, but also nationwide. For example, the problems of the American Library Association are the same problems of NCLA writ large. The dissolution of this widespread distrust must be accomplished one organization at a time, one state at a time. Let's collaborate and make NCLA a model for the other state library associations to emulate.