

First Library of North Carolina Established in 1715*

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The first library established by law in North Carolina was one provided for in an enactment by the General Assembly in 1715 for the Township of Bath. Although this library had been a church library belonging to one of the early missionaries to North Carolina, with the passage of law it became the first public library of the colony and of the State.

Following references in *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, we are able to learn some of the story behind this act.

In the earliest days of the colonies, with all necessities and luxuries alike arriving on these shores by way of the long sea journey from European or other ports, it was indeed a luxury to have reading materials available.

Books were rare and valuable items. Court orders were often necessary so that books should be returned to the rightful owner or to an executor of an estate. An early reference to books in Carolina was made by a customs collector, Thomas Miller, petitioning the King's treasurer for aid following a robbery in 1677 perpetrated by John Culpepper during the rebellion given his name. Some of the books taken were records of the revenue collected; others were Miller's personal books.

The most prevalent source of books for any purpose — personal, educational, or religious — was through the libraries of missionaries. These men were supplied collections of books pertaining mainly to the spreading of beliefs of the Church of England.

The missionaries, whether they were sent or had volunteered for the hardships of this wilderness land, were always supplied with a collection of books and pamphlets to be used for the instruction and enlightenment of the people.

One such missionary was the Reverend Doctor Thomas Bray, Commissioner to the Bishop of London, who was sent in 1699 by the Lords Proprietors to the Province of North Carolina with a letter of introduction to Henderson Walker, Esquire, President of the province and a twenty-year inhabitant of the colony.

A short time after his arrival, Reverend Bray sent to the County of Bath a small collection of books worth in the exchange of the period one hundred pounds sterling and consisting "of the explanation of the Church catechism, with some other small books . . ." On the back of the books or on the title page was the inscription, "Belonging to the Parish of St. Thomas of Pamlico."

Missionaries following Bray felt this inscription was a mistake, but it enabled the

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people of Bath to hold the library in their township while later missionaries, including Giles Rainsford and John Urmston, wished the books to be moved into other precincts or into their own libraries for the exclusive use of the clergy or the Church.

About 1701 Bray sent a second collection of books to St. Paul's Parish in Chowan Precinct. This library came from the Corporation for Establishing the Christian Religion and had originally been the library of Mr. Daniel Brett, an earlier and perhaps the first minister-missionary appointed to the Carolina Colony.

Unknown to Reverend Bray, Mr. Brett had "misbehaved" so that there was enacted a law "Subjecting the clergy to be judged by laymen" to prevent like misbehavior in other clergy. The connection of this library with one of such a reputation voided somewhat for a time the effectiveness of the instruction and catechism of the Church as contained in this library.

The second collection, however, was not the library referred to in the law of which we have reference.

In March of 1705, the Township of Bath was incorporated by the General Assembly in a meeting at the house of Captain John Hecklefield. One of the valued possessions of the Township was the St. Thomas' Parish Library sent by Reverend Bray.

In 1715 a need was felt to ensure the settlement and furtherance of the town by the appointment of trustees by the General Assembly, and thus an act was passed to promote the settlement, growth, and increase of the town. At the same time and within the same Act provisions were made for the preservation of the library so that the books would not be quickly "Imbezeled, Damaged or Lost."

The Act provided for a Library Keeper to be elected, nominated, and appointed by the commissioners. The Library Keeper was to preserve the books from "Waste, Damages, Imbezelmments and all other destruction," fire excepted.

The Library Keeper was to answer double the value, which was set upon each book by personal examination of the com-

missioners, for the books wasted, damaged, embezzled or otherwise destroyed.

People of Beaufort Precinct, of which Bath was a part, could borrow books upon giving a receipt and a promise to return the books: a folio in four months' time, a quarto in two months' time, an octavo or less in one month's time. The penalty for lateness was three times the value of the book. Close records were to be kept by the Library Keeper.

Upon refusal to return the book or books, three times its value was to be levied on the "goods and chattels" of the person. If the value was not paid, the person was to be placed in prison until the Library Keeper was satisfied that restitution would be made.

At least four catalogues were to be made by the Library Keeper of all books in the library and were to be placed in particular listed places, one of which was to be in the Library to enable people of the precinct to know what was contained therein.

Each Easter Monday an inventory was to be taken by the commissioners and matched with the catalogue to see that all books were in the Library and that none were "damnified or Spoyled." All books were to be returned ten days before this inventory so all would be "exposed to the View of the said Commissioners."

Upon the Library Keeper's death, the church wardens received the library and compared it with the catalogue and receipt already in their possession. If they found any books "wanting or damaged" they were empowered to sue the Library Keeper or his heirs.

The first group of Commissioners and Trustees for the due "Inspection and Preservation of the Library" included the governor, the Honorable Charles Eden, Esquire; the chief justice; the speaker of the Assembly; and the Attorney General.

Thus, the value of the printed word was established early in North Carolina; not as a school library, but with the establishment of a Public Library in the first incorporated town of the state, Bath.