

# "First in Freedom?" Censorship in North Carolina, 1966-1980

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For those who knew the 1960s, the powerful demonstrations that broke out then on college and university campuses across the country will be remembered as characteristic of a period marked by activism on all fronts. The issues were chiefly political and social, and energies were organized in increasingly sophisticated ways to confront attempts to monitor or suppress what citizens wrote, said, or did. Many events made headlines nationwide and some became international news items of considerable magnitude. World coverage of the "Free Speech Movement" at the University of California at Berkeley in the fall of 1964 developed unprecedented interest in issues surrounding the restriction of content of speech and political advocacy. Intellectual freedom was hardly an academic matter.

While the more publicized efforts to censor or to resist censorship were running their course from the mid-1960s on, cases of many kinds occurred across the nation without fanfare. It is the nature of such incidents that interests the authors of this article. Reviewed together, apparently minor and disparate attempts at suppression nationally, regionally, and in states can reveal trends in censorship, giving concerned persons a more informed sense of the status of intellectual freedom in their own areas. The purpose of this article is to present a brief overview of censorship attempts during a fifteen year period in North Carolina, and to urge readers to look at the evidence and draw their own conclusions.

The time frame for this study, 1966-1980, includes the decade 1966-1975 when political and social activism was at its height, with repercussions for both educational and other environments. Although in North Carolina, as elsewhere, both educational and non-educational

institutions were the sites of censorship incidents, the object of this study is censorship in libraries and schools only. For public and special libraries, elementary and middle schools, high schools, and colleges and universities, statistics are included regarding the specific locations of censorship attempts, initiators of attacks, reasons given for censorship, objects of attack, and the outcome of censorship cases. Information is based on incidents reported for the period concerned in the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*, published by ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom.<sup>1</sup>

A summary of data available for the period 1966-1975 may be of interest to those curious about comparing the number of reported censorship activities in North Carolina with incidents reported in other states during the same ten-year span. North Carolina ranked thirty-seventh out of fifty-one states, which means that, for its population, reported incidents were relatively few.<sup>2</sup> Although a comparison of North Carolina data with national data through 1980 cannot be made at this time, Table I suggests a discernable pattern.

TABLE I  
Number of Cases Reported

1966	1	1974	4
1967	0	1975	0
1968	0	1976	1
1969	0	1977	2
1970	3	1978	2
1971	2	1979	2
1972	0	1980	6
1973	2	Total	25

Several observations can be made regarding the occurrence of incidents. Only one case was reported for the 1960s, and in this respect North Carolina does not deviate significantly from national patterns, which show few cases for that period—and an upsurge in the early 1970s. The five-year span, 1976-1980, on the other hand, accounts for 52 percent, or slightly more than half, of the total number of incidents reported. In 1980, the highest number

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reported in any one year was recorded, and this represents nearly one-quarter, or 24 percent, of the total for fifteen years. The increase is disturbing, and the possibility that greater publicity has been given more recent incidents cannot offset the fact of a considerable increase in the number of incidents actually reported.

TABLE II  
Locations of Censorship Attempts

Asheboro	2	Durham	4
Asheville	1	Greensboro	1
Cabarrus County	1	Raleigh	2
Chapel Hill	3	Rocky Mount	1
Charlotte	1	Southport	1
Clinton	2	Tar Heel	1
Columbus County	1	Wilmington	1
Davidson	1	Winston-Salem	2

It is worth noting that postsecondary institutions are located in all but six of the sixteen sites listed and that the highest number of incidents is related to two university cities, Durham and Chapel Hill. In other respects, the geographical distribution of censorship attempts presents no singular features. Towns and cities from small to large populations are represented and all areas of the state are included.

TABLE III  
Sources of Attempts

Citizens	5	Police	1
College and University		School Boards	4
Administration	3	School Superintendent	1
Governor and University		State Employee and Legislators	1
Trustees	1	Students	1
Librarian	1	Unknown	1
Parents	6		

Sources of censorship attempts vary widely. In educational institutions nationally, citizens and parents, administrators, and trustees—in that order—have been primarily responsible, as have boards of education. North Carolina runs fairly true to national trends established through 1975. Parents were responsible for the highest number of attempts, followed closely by citizens, school boards, and college and university administrators.

School boards and university administrators shared similar objectives in efforts to halt the distribution of student newspapers. At least one school board, however, found itself opposed to police by playing the role of suppressor of censorship. The Wilmington school board voted to retain an anthology of short stories, *The*

*Curious Eye*, which police had attempted to remove on the grounds of objectionable language.<sup>3</sup> In one instance, students, usually the direct or indirect victims of censorship efforts, were the initiators. In 1974, black students at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte burned copies of a university literary magazine containing a story they termed racist.<sup>4</sup>

Citizens' attempts at censorship usually took the form of group action, frequently with religious affiliation. Included in the category of "citizens", for example, are the "Christian Action League," which worked in consort with "Answer for America," the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the North Carolina Independent Baptist Fellowship, and the Twin City Fundamental Ministerial Association.

Similarly, parents seldom initiated censorship attempts on their own. They tended to gain the support of other citizens or representatives of the school systems whose practices they were questioning. A typical case involved a parent and a member of the clergy in Cabarrus County whose action, unanimously supported by their county board of education, resulted in removal of a book from the shelves of the high school library.<sup>5</sup>

Credit for one of the three censorship attempts ascribed solely to individuals—the others were a university president and a school superintendent—goes to a university librarian at Duke University who reportedly, in 1977, censored an exhibit of books and graphics on the grounds it was "offensive."<sup>6</sup> Persons in positions of authority, it would appear, have been able to act autonomously even when reasons given for their actions were no more specific than the librarian's tag of "offensive."

TABLE IV  
Reasons for Censoring

Communism	2	Religion	2
Language	7	Sex	4
Nudity	1	Unauthorized distribution	2
Obscenity	3	Other reasons	6
Politics	2	Reasons not given	3
Pornography	2		
Racism	4		

Censorship cases are difficult to categorize, especially when attempting to sum up reasons for attacks. Often, more than one reason for censorship may be given, with the result that the totals for Table IV exceed the number of censorship incidents. When a stock reason such as "obscene" is cited, who is to know what, precisely, the term means to the objector? In

Table IV, reasons are arranged in categories which reflect as closely as possible the apparent rationale for the variety of censorship attempts reported for North Carolina.

The range of reasons cited is broad and no possibly controversial topic is omitted. Several categories of reasons are closely related: language, obscenity, pornography, and sex. Collectively, these account for the most frequently offered explanations for censorship attempts. Of these, "language" is the most easily manipulated to imply specificity without actually presenting well-formulated arguments. When a book of poetry was removed from the shelves in an elementary school library in Southport, for example, the reason given was that it contained words and ideas "inappropriate" for school libraries.<sup>7</sup>

The style of writing employed, rather than language used, was cited in an incident subsumed in Table IV in the category "Other reasons." A school board endorsed an Asheboro principal's decision to withdraw an article on birth control from a student paper on the grounds of prose style and grammatical errors.<sup>8</sup> Various given as the only reasons for other attempts to censor exhibits, a film, and a biography were "filth and garabage," "abdication of responsibility," and "offensive."

"Violation of school policy" was the reason given by a school superintendent for his rejection of a biology textbook selected by Winston-Salem high school teachers in an incident which reveals a related explanation for the action taken.<sup>9</sup> Rather than remove the textbook in its entirety, the teachers had discussed excising the offending pages (about birth control and abortion). The idea was dismissed by the superintendent on the grounds that such excision would be a form of censorship.

TABLE V  
Institutions Affected

Public Libraries	2
Special Libraries	1
Elementary and Middle Schools	4
High Schools	12
Colleges and Universities	6

Attempts to classify institutions affected by censorship suggest questions of interrelationships. The institutions themselves are not so much the targets as the environments. Often, distinctions between the overt material object of attack, the direct or indirect victim, and the environment as a whole become blurred. For example, in an incident that occurred in a

public library in Columbus County, a parent's complaints about a specific book led to the County Board of Commissioners' directive to remove the book from the library. When both the library director and board of trustees refused, restrictions were placed on the use of adult books by children under eighteen if parents should have any objection to their use.<sup>10</sup> One book was the object of attack. As a consequence, the activities of many library users, indirect victims, were affected.

A final example illustrates the intrinsic ambiguity of many cases, especially those involving libraries. In 1979, a public library permitted the Ku Klux Klan to use the library's auditorium for an exhibit, having been advised by a county attorney that, legally, permission could not be denied.<sup>11</sup> The exhibit was closed in the wake of citizen protest and the library was chastised for not looking out for public interests in its role as a publicly funded facility. The writers suggest that both the library, censured for not practicing censorship, and the climate of intellectual freedom it represented, rather than the exhibit itself, were the victims.

TABLE VI  
Objects of Censorship

**Books:** *Andersonville*, *Black Like Me*, *The Car Thief*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For All the Wrong Reasons*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Janis, Jaws* (2), *The Learning Tree*, *Look at the People* (poetry), *Of Mice and Men*, *Soul on Ice*, *To Have and To Have Not*, *Wifey*, *The Wild Boys*.

**Textbooks:** *Biology*, *The Curious Eye* (2), *New Worlds in Literature*, *Voices in Literature*.

**Films:** *About Sex*.

**Newspapers (student):** *The Campus Echo* (2), *The Radish*, *The Uprising*, *Wildcat Prowl*.

**Other:** College yearbook, Communist speaker, Exhibit of books and graphics, Exhibit of Ku Klux Klan, paraphernalia, Short story in school literary magazine.

As to be expected, books head the list of censored materials. Frequently censored titles include classics such as *Of Mice and Men* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as well as *Jaws* and *The Wild Boys*.<sup>12</sup> There are far fewer textbooks on the list, these dealing predominantly with studies of fiction, and only one film. Student newspapers and miscellaneous items complete the list, which reveals that over half the materials censored were associated with library environments.



The circumstances surrounding censorship attempts reveal how swiftly would-be censors of various materials often acted, successfully or unsuccessfully, to achieve their goals. A school board member chose a straightforward approach. After removing six books from a high school library, she sent a check to the school principal to cover the retail price of the books.<sup>13</sup> Equally expeditious was the removal of over twenty books (including *A Farewell to Arms*) from a high school library in Tar Heel, following the county board of education's direct order to the school that all books should be screened.<sup>14</sup>

Censors sometimes chose to bring their objections to as many people as possible, with varying degrees of success. Screening of a film about sex for an audience of state legislators resulted in the withdrawal of an edited version of the film, which had been available through the library of an advisory council on family planning located in Raleigh.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, an attempt to prevent the use of a textbook in the New Hanover County schools reached an impasse when, in the ensuing controversy, it was learned that only nine of 250

parents surveyed denied the book to their children.<sup>16</sup>

TABLE VII  
Disposition of Attempts

Successful	13
Partially successful	3
Unsuccessful	6
Unknown	3

How were the twenty-five instances of censorship reported for North Carolina resolved? Table VII groups censorship cases according to their final outcome. A "successful" attempt is one in which censorship was achieved with or without the support of judicial or court action, while an attempt termed "partially successful" is one in which the original intent of the censor(s) was compromised. As an example of the latter, rather than stopping publication of a yearbook, college administrators struck a compromise with student editors who agreed to delete offending words, substituting asterisks, and partially to cover photographs of nude streakers.<sup>17</sup> A similar compromise was reached

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regarding an "offensive" book banned from a school library. After intervention by the North Carolina Civil Liberties Union, the ban was removed, but the book was placed on restricted reserve and students or their parents were required to sign waivers for access.<sup>18</sup>

Figures given in Table VII indicate that efforts to ban materials were somewhat more successful than efforts to oppose censorship. Over half, or 64 percent of all censorship cases were successful or partially successful, 24 percent were unsuccessful, and the disposition of 12 percent unknown.

Proceedings involving cases with unsuccessful outcomes best illustrate the effectiveness of the law in endorsing freedom from censorship. In 1973, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that university officials could not suspend support of a campus newspaper simply because the officials disagreed with the newspaper's editorial opinion.<sup>19</sup> In 1979, a year after the confrontation had begun, a U.S. District Court judge ordered officials who had withdrawn an article from a student newspaper to pay legal fees accrued by students filing suit. The reason originally offered for censorship, that the article was "poorly written," did not stand up in court; the action of school officials was declared illegal.<sup>20</sup>

No doubt many of the individuals and groups in North Carolina who attempted to suppress materials acted from the conviction that it was their duty to uphold social values they believed to be threatened. Motive is not at issue, though. The single factor censorship attacks have in common is that each, in its own way and regardless of motive, is antithetical to intellectual freedom. A concerted attack on intellectual freedom in public school settings was launched in April 1981 when the North Carolina Moral Majority released its review of "objectionable" materials. Although specific titles were listed, underlying the review was the Moral Majority's quarrel with what its Executive Director described as a philosophy of "secular humanism" in public education.<sup>21</sup>

In light of such activities, how can environments conducive to the flourishing of intellectual freedom be nurtured? Librarians, as professionals who have long advocated freedom of access to all information, can play an important role. To be effective in their own libraries and in their larger communities, they will be well served by an awareness of censorship cases and issues which can be cultivated through reading, discussion at professional

meetings, and participation in seminars and continuing education programs. Perceptions sharpened through thinking about censorship in its broadest sense can be employed to advantage in the specific instances librarians are bound to confront on their own turf. Will it be said in another decade that during the 1980s North Carolina libraries were "First in Freedom"?

## References

1. This study does not claim to be exhaustive in scope. Not all attempts are reported in the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*.
2. The ranking is based on censorship indexes constructed for each state by dividing the percentage of reported incidents (as related to total national occurrences) by the population percentage (state population as a percentage of national population). For a survey of censorship in educational institutions during 1966-1975, including censorship indexes, see: L.B. Woods, "For SEX: See Librarian," *Library Journal* 103 (1 September 1978): 1561-6. Indexes for the period 1975-1980 are in preparation.
3. *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* 23 (November 1974): 155.
4. *Newsletter* 23 (July 1974): 79.
5. *Newsletter* 27 (January 1978): 6.
6. *Newsletter* 26 (September 1977): 134.
7. *Newsletter* 29 (September 1980): 100.
8. *Newsletter* 27 (November 1978): 143.
9. *Newsletter* 29 (November 1980): 128.
10. *Newsletter* 29 (July 1980): 72-3.
11. *Newsletter* 28 (May 1979): 49.
12. Of the sixteen books censored in North Carolina, six are among the most censored materials nationally for the period 1966-1975: *Andersonville*, *Black Like Me*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Learning Tree*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Soul on Ice*. See: L.B. Woods, "The Most Censored Materials in the U.S.," *Library Journal* 103 (1 November 1978): 2170-3.
13. *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* 22 (May 1973): 52.
14. *Newsletter* 25 (July 1976): 86.
15. *Newsletter* 28 (July 1979): 76-7.
16. *Newsletter* 24 (January 1975): 15.
17. *Newsletter* 24 (March 1975): 42.
18. *Newsletter* 29 (March 1980): 32.
19. *Newsletter* 22 (July 1973): 92.
20. *Newsletter* 28 (May 1979): 53-4.
21. ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, "Memorandum" to State Intellectual Freedom Committees, June 1981.

