Useful Books: 
Community Libraries in Antebellum North Carolina

by Patrick M. Valentine

Abstract

While little has been published on libraries and print culture in the antebellum South, citizens were aware of the need to accumulate and disseminate knowledge in the form of books and magazines. North Carolina was not renowned for its schools or literary culture but it did witness over thirty attempts to establish community libraries between the American Revolution and the Civil War. This paper examines this library movement in its historical and cultural context as a reflection of the importance of print culture and voluntary associations within American civic society. By surveying a wide range of often-neglected primary and secondary literature, this article stands as a model for further research.

Law to establish the Allemance [sic] Library Society, Guilford County:
“For the purpose of procuring and establishing a circulating Library of Useful books…”

North Carolina, one of the original thirteen colonies, hibernated like Rip Van Winkle in a stage of seeming isolation after the American Revolution. Despite a sprinkling of towns along the coast and river valleys, the state largely remained a land of self-sufficient farmers. Women, who in later times were often great boosters of literary culture and libraries, were expected to center their lives on home while the widespread practice of black slavery corrupted cultural norms. Yet, as population grew and towns proliferated after 1800, farmers and townsmen became more tightly enmeshed in commercial society. And as transportation and communication improved, opportunities for education and cultural growth increased. Even so, Northerners as late as 1857 considered Carolinians “cultivators of turpentine rather than letters.” This article will show, however, that libraries and literate culture did have a growing if limited place in everyday life. Both the desire to create numerous community libraries and the lack of practical result tells us much about North Carolina and the antebellum South.

Our understanding of what libraries were like at the beginning of the period would be greatly enhanced if a survey proposed by an unknown gentleman, probably the bibliophile lawyer Waightstill Avery, had been successfully carried out. He asked readers of the American Review and Literary Journal in 1802 to send particulars not only of schools and school libraries but also of “Library Companies” and any “Societies instituted for the promotion and diffusion of useful Knowledge.” He wanted to know when schools and societies were established and by whom, what funds they had, their rules, members, how many books they had, and the “number of shares and their prices.” An incurable optimist, he hoped to “offer his work . . . in the course of the present year.” Unfortunately, we do not know the result, if any, of his appeal.

North Carolina had a few scattered bookstores and public reading rooms, but most people depended on printers, general stores, peddlers, and trips out of state for books. Print shops such as those of Salmon Hall in New Bern and Joseph Gales in Raleigh doubled as “circulating libraries,” while Wilmington had various such stores until the 1850s. Some North Carolinians sent to London or Philadelphia for books. In 1821 a “Yankee” reported that Wilmington, then the second largest town in the state, could not support a bookstore as people would “borrow” its books but forget to return them. Charlotte did not have systematic access to books until after 1824 when the Yorkville Book Bindery opened for business. A quarter century later a magazine editor still complained that merchants did not carry enough books: “The listless indifference, idle hours, crimes, punishment, widows, and orphans of our land, call for books, Books, BOOKS.”

Peddlers were a major source of reading material in a state as rural as North Carolina, on what might be called the “cultural periphery” of America. Peddlers had to pay, or rather were supposed to pay, a county tax of $20 for each “cart wagon or other vehicle” except those “who sell books only.” Many peddlers, some of them Jewish, began with a small supply of goods, including books, only to end as respected and successful merchants. Peddlers often sold prints and brochures as well as books and could be sources of information and unorthodox opinion. Mason Locke Weems, the “book-peddling parson” who spread
some of the earliest fanciful tales of George Washington, took his “Flying Library” – an early bookmobile, a wagon fitted with book shelves and waterproof top – not only to rural customers but also stopped in towns like Raleigh and Hillsborough. According to Weems, North Carolinians especially liked “great numbers of little entertaining books,” while Methodist religious peddlers believed that only “about one third [sic] of the parents can read, write, cast accounts, and gauge a barrel of brandy.”

Almanacs, often locally printed, were among the most widely used books while planters and merchants might subscribe to magazines, a few of which were also locally produced. Doctors, lawyers and architects all increasingly learned their professions through reading as well as apprenticeship. Presbyterians and other Christian groups used printed tracts to spread their message. Commercial farming more and more relied upon agricultural journals to tell them how to grow, fertilize and market their crops. Access to useful books and other printed materials became increasingly important.

Among the better-known personal libraries in North Carolina were David Stone’s collection of 1,400 books and Archibald D. Murphey’s with over 2,000 books. Waightstill Avery early in the century owned an extensive and carefully selected library in western North Carolina while Nelson Travillion of Davie County kept a collection not just of history, biography and sermons, but also sets of morally ambiguous works such as *Adulterer’s Looking Glass*, *Drunkard’s Looking Glass* and *Gambler’s Looking Glass*. The historian John Hill Wheeler had some 1,200 titles on his bookshelves in 1850, not apparently arranged in any strict order.

These years saw a rapid growth of lyceums that sponsored debates and usually had their own libraries, yet few left records of their presence in North Carolina. Lyceums were not precisely libraries in any case. It is, however, indicative of the connection between libraries and lyceums that Virginia’s earliest library society, the Alexandria Library Company, founded in 1794, moved into Alexandria’s new Lyceum building as a permanent resident in 1837. Many colleges also had debating societies with libraries.

While lyceums do not seem to have been significant in North Carolina, about thirty North Carolina towns and counties did incorporate community libraries between 1794 and 1852. Although not in a strict sense open to the public, such libraries were emblems of literate society and tokens of community pride. They made the statement that a town recognized the social and economic as well as cultural and educational benefits a library could bestow.

### Chart 1: Incorporated Community Libraries, 1790-1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place, County</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1794 Fayetteville, Cumberland County</td>
<td>Fayetteville Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1799 Williamsboro, Granville County</td>
<td>Franklin Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1803 New Bern, Craven County</td>
<td>Newbern Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1815 Person County</td>
<td>Person Library Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1816 Raleigh, Wake County</td>
<td>Raleigh Library Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1817 Iredell County</td>
<td>Centre Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818 (Buffalo Knob?) Lincoln County</td>
<td>Buffalo Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818 Fayetteville, Cumberland County</td>
<td>Fayetteville Library Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819 New Salem, Randolph County</td>
<td>Salem Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819 (Alamance Church?) Guilford County</td>
<td>Alamance Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820 Randolph County</td>
<td>Carraway Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821 Union Grove, Iredell County</td>
<td>Union Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822 Richland Creek, Guilford County</td>
<td>Richland Creek Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822 Hillsborough, Orange County</td>
<td>Franklin Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1823 Mecklenburg County</td>
<td>New Providence Library Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1823 Davidson County</td>
<td>Sandy Creek Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824 Stokes County</td>
<td>Clinton Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825 Northampton County</td>
<td>Farmers’ Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825 Greensboro, Guilford County</td>
<td>Greensboro Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825 Abbott’s Creek, Davidson County</td>
<td>Abbott’s Creek Library Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1826</td>
<td>Lincoln County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1826</td>
<td>Randolph County²¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>New Garden, Guilford County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>Nazareth, Guilford County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>Hookerton, Greene County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>Asheville, Buncombe County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>Lenoir County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>Hookerton, Greene County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>Chatham County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td>Providence, Mecklenburg County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>Fayetteville, Cumberland County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1845</td>
<td>Fayetteville, Cumberland County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Williamson, Martin County</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This list does not include lyceums or literary and debating societies that may well have had book collections or encouraged the collecting and sharing of books. Nor does it include unincorporated libraries like one apparently active in Tarboro in eastern North Carolina before the turn of the century.\(^{23}\) Several, indeed most, of these library societies are completely unknown other than their being incorporated by the legislature. As can be readily seen, some of these groups were re-incorporated later and a few may have been more pious wishes or town boosterism than actual libraries. Fayetteville, for example, had been passed over as the state capital but still wanted in 1794 to attract attention as a more refined location than the almost unpopulated area chosen near a tavern in Wake County. Incorporation did, however, establish a legal and historical record of the desire to form a library, not just a society.

Such societies were usually already active before requesting incorporation. For example, “sundry persons, citizens of the county of Iredell, have associated together and formed a circulating Library, for the purpose of disseminating useful knowledge.” It is also probable that many were created in imitation of earlier communities, just as Raleigh would later open a public library in imitation of Durham.\(^{24}\) Who these people were and the rules for membership in the library societies is usually not recorded but they seem to have been similar to the “farmers, mechanics, Justices of the Peace, ministers of the Gospel – Military Officers, Lawyers, School masters – merchants – postmasters” mentioned in a letter to Thomas Jefferson about the Westward Mill Library Society of New Brunswick County, Virginia.\(^{25}\) Library societies allowed for a generous membership of local white males, and perhaps females too, and as such were as close to “public” libraries as there were in this period outside of New England. In places where more evidence has survived, non members could typically borrow by paying a small fee.\(^{26}\)

Almost all the incorporations stated that “disseminating useful knowledge” was a primary goal. However, since the records of almost none of these libraries have survived, it is also impossible to know if “useful knowledge” was disseminated. Promoting access to “useful knowledge” was surely a public good in a progressive society.\(^{27}\) The problem was that the institutional or communal basis for public access was always extremely limited in practice. There is moreover the question whether the South by the late 1850s was interested in promoting a progressive or knowledge-based society.\(^{28}\)

The general sense of the term “useful knowledge” suggests these local societies were interested in practical books rather than belles lettres and that they were not indulging in an ideology or false consciousness of pretension. The phrase “useful knowledge” was widely used in library circles in England and America. Library society members, to use terms not yet invented, were “middlebrow,” not “highbrow”. The lack of detailed information about these libraries, however, precludes authentic reconstruction of their mentality.\(^{29}\)

Almost the only thing known, for instance, about the Williamston Library Association founded in 1848 is that Cushing Biggs Hassell, himself irregularly educated but an important Primitive Baptist minister and leader, was its secretary-treasurer. In only one case does state law mention the demise of a library society, in Person County, apparently because the association owned property that had to be distributed.\(^{30}\)

The two best-documented library situations were Fayetteville and New Bern. The state’s first incorporated library group was...
the Fayetteville Library Society in 1794. It set the legal pattern. Some laws included names of the petitioners but most did not:

“That the present members of the Fayetteville Library Society, and all persons who may hereafter be admitted into the same, be, and are hereby constituted, a body corporate by the name of the Fayetteville Library Society; and by that name shall have succession, sue and be sued, and may purchase and convey property, and make bye-laws and regulations in all matters relating to the objects of their association, provided the same are not inconsistent with the laws and constitution of the state.”

Nothing more is known about this Society.\(^{31}\)

In 1818 local citizens “actuated by the desire of disseminating useful Knowledge” next incorporated the Fayetteville Library Company. They paid a $10 initiation fee with annual dues thereafter of $1.00. How long this library survived is not clear, but there appears to have been three additional libraries in Fayetteville in the 1840s. The first was the Franklin Library Institute of 1841 and the second was the Fayetteville Library Institute in 1845.\(^{32}\) Little is known of these libraries and their existence seems forgotten.

Meanwhile, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows operated a Fayetteville library from 1844 until 1877, but strictly speaking this was a society but not a community library. There were a large number of similar associations across the state, Odd Fellows and Masons as well as several Mechanics’ Associations that may have had libraries. Thus, leaving aside private, church and school libraries, Fayetteville alone witnessed at least five attempts to create community or society libraries between 1794 and the Civil War.\(^{33}\)

To turn to New Bern, North Carolina’s largest town before 1840, Frederick Grist, its legislative representative, sponsored the incorporation of the Newbern Library Society at the end of 1803. This was probably in response to the conditions set in Thomas Tomlinson’s will that left 100 pounds, a princely sum, towards establishing public libraries in New Bern and in Wigton, County of Cumberland in Great Britain. The Newbern Library soon sold an additional eighty shares at $20 each. John Louis Taylor and William Joseph Gaston, later both highly respected justices of the North Carolina Supreme Court, were early library presidents.\(^{34}\)

Salmon Hall, a printer and bookseller who had moved to New Bern from Connecticut in 1800 when he was 28 years old, seems to have been the principal spirit behind the Newbern Library Society, in a manner very similar to the situation in the exactly contemporary Library Society in Georgetown, South Carolina. According to its by-laws, “members may detain [keep] a folio one month, a quarto three weeks, an octavo a fortnight, a duodecimo or pamphlet one week.” Overdue fines also varied according to the size of the book, with Hall receiving the money as compensation for his labors.\(^{35}\)

Purchases included old standards like *Amadis of Gaul* in four volumes (1818) bound for $1.60; and new works like the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition (1820) $50, bound for $1.25 – for most books were still sold without covers and buyers could have books bound as they wished. In June 1823, thirty of forty-one library stockholders met to check accounts and to forfeit shares of “such stockholders as have not complied with the [annual] registration . . . of four dollars on each share.” A catalog of 1829 lists 207 titles, many of them law books, but also including philosophy and history. The last meeting recorded was in 1835 when new directors were appointed. As the saga of this library indicates, New Bern remained culturally important in North Carolina well into the nineteenth century despite its fading economic situation and loss of political power.\(^{36}\)

Hookerton in Greene County, much smaller than New Bern or Fayetteville, was ambitious enough to try incorporating a library twice, in 1827 and 1833. Hookerton earlier had an academy in the 1810s with a school library apparently open to public use. Lincoln County also incorporated its library twice. Or to cite another example, it is symptomatic of the obscurity to which these library efforts sank, that a good history of Guilford College, which grew out of the New Garden Boarding School, makes no mention of the earlier New Garden Library Society.\(^{37}\)

In 1819 the legislature empowered the New Salem Library Society near New Garden, between Asheboro and Greensboro, “to
purchase one acre of land . . . and erect such buildings thereon as may be deemed necessary.” New Salem was briefly home to the remarkable Swaims. Benjamin Swaim, president of the North Carolina Manumission Society after 1827, wrote a number of law books and edited a newspaper while building up a fine private library of his own. His cousin William Swaim, son of a substantial landowner, had enough schooling as a child-two months’ worth in an old field school and another two months of intermittent schooling when he was eighteen-to learn to read but was twelve before he learned to write. His diary mentions a community circulating library that helped him “learn about all subjects.” This must have been the New Salem Library Company. William took up printing in Baltimore and enjoyed the city library there before returning to North Carolina and starting his own newspaper in 1829. “His editorials were fearless in their attacks, sparkling with wit and humor or burning with sarcasm,” says his biographer. He died young but not before having a daughter who would become the mother of William Sydney Porter, better known as O. Henry.

That Providence in Mecklenburg County near Charlotte—probably Providence Presbyterian Church—started a children’s library in 1834 is most intriguing. Possibly some other communities or churches had similar, if less documented, juvenile libraries. Obtaining a legislative charter might not be difficult, but also would not be simple. The legislature ceased requiring special legislation in 1852, after which no new incorporated libraries were recorded.

Wilmington, which became the state’s largest town by 1850, started an unincorporated Wilmington Mercantile Library Association in 1849 with evidently little success. Significantly, however, it became part of the Wilmington Library Association formed six years later. “All donations of Books, Maps, Charts, Engravings, Paintings or Plaster Casts of eminent persons must be directed to Mr. J. J. Norcom, Librarian. Editors of Magazines and papers throughout the country are asked to send copies of their publications.” In 1858 the library moved into the newly completed city hall where it soon proposed to be open every day for six hours. But at the end of the Civil War the books were scattered and lost.

Men could join the Wilmington Library Association for five dollars with an annual subscription of four dollars. Members would bind and donate such British magazines as Chamber’s Journal, Blackwood’s Magazine and the Edinburgh Review while many Wilmington readers enjoyed Dickens, Thackeray and “whispered about” Emerson. The Association also sponsored public lectures with speakers from outside Wilmington. The library, admitted the niece of one of its prominent members, was more a public forum for the “exchange of ideas than a visible agency for dissemination of knowledge . . . for . . . all the educated people know each other, and were united by all the ties of a vigorous mental life.” Thus it might be considered an example of a library as a public sphere or agency of culture.

These community libraries appear to be very scattered but some statistics may add to the picture. According to the 1850 Census, North Carolina had four public libraries with a total of 2,500 volumes: Craven County (probably the Newbern Library Society) with 700 books, Guilford County (where there were possibly five incorporated Library Societies) with 1,500 books, Martin County (probably the Williamston Library) with 250 books, and Randolph County (three possible Library Societies) with fifty books. Census statistics are not necessarily accurate-Fayetteville and Wilmington are conspicuous in their absence— but do indicate a general level of activity. Still, North Carolina compares very unfavorably with its two neighboring states.

*Chart 2, Comparative Public Library Statistics, 1850*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>White Population</th>
<th># of Public Libraries</th>
<th>Public Library Volumes</th>
<th>Public Library Volumes / White Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>553,028</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>274,563</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>73,758</td>
<td>0.269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA</td>
<td>894,800</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32,595</td>
<td>0.036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the 1860 census, North Carolina had two more libraries than in 1850, but 600 less books. The census counted 1,936 teachers, 1,266 physicians, 500 lawyers, 205 printers and publishers, 48 editors, 57 peddlers, sixteen booksellers and bookbinders, eight telegraph operators, and only two librarians. It is just not true, at least of North Carolina, that the number of libraries “increased dramatically” in the antebellum South.
Nonetheless, if one looks at comparative regional statistics for the antebellum period, the South was making progress. Counting all known libraries except private and school, historian Haynes McMullen found that the cumulative number of southern libraries grew from forty-one in 1800 to 100 in 1820, to 213 in 1840 and 372 in 1860 – but many of these were very short-lived or, as we have seen, only on paper. The South's percentage of growth outpaced the Northeast's – which started with a far larger number of libraries – yet was less than the Midwest or the West. What might have happened if war – as in the 1770s – not intruded? The South was not as widely or highly literate as New England but hardly Emerson's "culture of no mind."  

Chart 4, Library regional statistics, 1800-1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>Other Regions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Percent change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>1,108</td>
<td>737</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>2,211</td>
<td>1,078</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While some Southerners feared books and the thoughts that books might enkindle, particularly thoughts of political reform and emancipation, other Southerners strove to found community libraries and increase access to books, magazines and other printed materials. The antebellum period saw many North Carolina communities incorporate libraries in their effort to promote education and spread useful knowledge. They were a significant Southern example of the American tendency to form voluntary associations to serve public needs. North Carolina, as these libraries indicate, was no longer Rip Van Winkle. People spread across the state recognized that community libraries could be useful. Libraries, or at least the concept of libraries, were slowly making their mark as places symbolic of public literacy and community interest.

References


Catawba Journal, December 7, 1824, and February 1, 1825.


The Laws of the State of North-Carolina 1819 (Raleigh: Thomas Henderson, Jr., 1820), chapter i.


19 Three years later the Franklin Library Society petitioned unsuccessfully to start a lottery for “the purchase of useful books.” Charles L. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1908, 1:289).


21 Ebenezer Library Society was formed “for the purpose of promoting religion and aiding the progress of learning and science” with such powers necessary “for the management and safe-keeping of the books and other property of said society, as they may from time to time think expedient, not inconsistent with the Constitution and laws of this State, or of the United States.” No exact location was specified. *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina … 1826* (Raleigh: Lawrence & Lemay, 1827), chap. xxxix.


26 The Petersburg Library Association, chartered in 1853, had several female members. Edward A. Wyatt IV, “Schools and Libraries in Petersburg, Virginia, prior to 1861,” *Tyler’s Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 19 (1937): 80. Edgefield in South Carolina had a separate Female Library Society. North Carolina had several women's association such as the Dorcas about which little is known.


31 *Laws of North-Carolina, 1794* (Halifax: Hodge & Willi [sic], n.d.), chap. xc, in *Session Laws of American States* (microfiche, N.C. State Library). Roy Parker, *A Brief History of Cumberland County* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources, 1990), 36-37. (Just to clarify, the first library in North Carolina was donated by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts to Bath in 1700; the first community or subscription library was the Cape Fear [Wilmington] Library Society founded in 1760; the first tax-supported public library was Durham’s in 1897.)


33 Cross Creek Lodge I.O.O.F, SHC (originals in the Cumberland County Public Library). See also Jerry A. Thrasher, “History of the Cumberland County Public Library & Information Center” (typescript, Cumberland County Public Library files, 1985); and Arthur C. Jenkins III, “A Public Library for Fayetteville, North Carolina” (thesis, Clemson University School of Architecture, 1970).


38 *Laws of the State of North-Carolina, passed … 1819* (Raleigh: Thomas Henderson Jr., 1820), cv.


48 Adapted from McMullen, *American Libraries before 1876*, table 3.3.

49 Nye, *Society and Culture in America*, 33; O’Brien, *Re-Thinking the South*, 1-56; Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, 335-38. The development of a mass national book market had a negative effect on local printing.