Books in Tolerable Supply: College Libraries in North Carolina from 1795 to the Civil War

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The historical role of college libraries has seldom been investigated on a regional or state level in the United States, but such studies are valuable in explaining the cultural infrastructure of education and print culture. State and regional studies also set the context for further research on individual libraries and colleges as well as histories on a larger level. This work examines how college libraries developed in North Carolina from 1800 to 1860 and illustrates the growth and ambience of education and print culture during a formative period of the antebellum South.

A “professor in a College who is without books in tolerable supply, is analogous to the creation of nobility which for want of estate is obliged to live in rags.”

Joseph Caldwell, Letter, 19 February 18244

A number of southern colleges and universities trace their founding back to pre-Civil War times, yet historians have rarely studied their libraries. The scope, size and stability of libraries was limited in the early United States but grew during the decades preceding the Civil War. College libraries often had a dual role, serving both the college and the local community, yet curriculums and community interest were restricted. Nevertheless, some educators and students appreciated their worth and worked for library expansion. Benedict Anderson has argued convincingly that print culture had an important role in the formation of imagined national communities while Michael O’Brien has shown how the South was both regionally distinct and also part of a national, indeed international, intellectual community.2 What have been missing are studies of library development and infrastructure in the South, set within the context of Southern history and college life. This study will shed light on the role and status of libraries and education in general as well as the place of print in the antebellum South.5

Most southern colleges saw their role as educating an elite of planters and lawyers. Smaller denominational colleges looked towards educating ministers, some teachers, and local planters. The students were young males pursuing a classical curriculum, often with reluctance. Discipline was a major problem. Course work generally emphasized memorization and outside reading was not encouraged. Professors, as elsewhere in the United States, were minimally-paid lecturers with scant interest in research or publishing. Southern education was not aimed at practical skills or interests beyond rhetoric, ministry, and teaching. Even within this cultural sphere, many observers of antebellum America considered North Carolina a backward state with little ambition and less education, a southern Rip Van Winkle. Nationally, this was a period of dynamic political and commercial change, but North Carolina in the early decades remained a largely rural and semi-subistence economy. The state experienced only limited growth and urbanization even by 1860.6

What became North Carolina’s largest library had its beginnings in 1795 with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina’s first college and the first public university to open in the nation.5 The University, like later colleges in North Carolina and most of the South, was set in a rural area. Chapel Hill remained a village until well after the Civil War. Town life in the South, shackled with slavery and largely self-sufficient small farming or stable agribusiness, demonstrated modest signs of growth compared to northern towns and cities and provided little stimulus for the growth of college libraries.6 North Carolina had at the time only a few libraries, small private collections of schoolmasters, lawyers, clergymen, and planters.7

One of the University’s first actions was to start a library with $200 and whatever donations could be gleaned. The collection soon counted some 330 volumes but most were gifts and barely grew thereafter. “We find much difficulty in procuring books,” admitted one professor. As a scholar-librarian in South Carolina later commented, “Nothing but the highest motives, or the most stringent necessity, could induce a man who knows and loves books, to make the sacrifice of parting with his [personal] library.” The lack of suitable library books was such that students wrote home for standards like histories of Rome or copies of Thomas Paine. The largest library increase at the University came when its president, Joseph Caldwell, went on a book-buying trip to Europe in 1824. He acquired 979 books for the library — including copies of the Bible in forty-eight different languages.8 Caldwell, while an advocate of popular education, also imbued the University with a proper Princeton classical curriculum.

Book selection was difficult as professors often based acquisition decisions on very inadequate announcements in estate catalogs and newspaper advertisements. In addition, most of the university books were out-dated and in poor condition. One contemporary observed of the library that “...on its shelves are many ancient books of great value, but vacant spaces plead piteously for new books in all the departments of literature and science.”9 No college in North Carolina charged student fees for libraries, unlike Virginia institutions like Roanoke College and the Virginia Military Institution.10

A second large accretion came in 1858 when the University of North Carolina bought the books left by its most prominent professor, geologist Elisha Mitchell — only to discover that many of the books in Mitchell’s estate already belonged to the school.11

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This was during the administration of David L. Swain, the University’s president from 1836 through the Civil War, who bought few if any other books for the library. In contrast, South Carolina, with a view towards cultural independence, during this same period spent some $3,000 a year on books. Swain, a former governor who finished only three years of college at Chapel Hill, supposedly sometimes kept the library books in an attic. Swain moved the library to a new building, Smith Hall, in 1854 more to justify its construction than to provide a suitable library. Smith Hall was primarily used for dances, with books lined around the walls and a reading room in the basement.12 Libraries, here as elsewhere in the United States at this time, were modest collections of books, plus perhaps a few periodicals, not grand edifices with determined acquisition programs.

Little is known about how academic libraries organized their books. It does not appear that the Philanthropic Society books, for instance, were actually arranged by subject in the 1820s. The Euzelian Society of Wake Forest arranged its books “according to appearance” and boasted of its Latin Bible printed in Germany in 1566. The University of North Carolina library in 1857 noted how many of its books were folios, quartos, octavos, or little duodecimos, which suggests the books were arranged by size.18 There does not seem to be any evidence that books were chained to shelves or lecterns as in many medieval and Renaissance libraries.19 Southern colleges and their libraries were not research institutions although the German model was certainly not unknown.20

Librarian Ashbel Green Brown reported in 1850 that the University had 3,501 books, the Dialectic Society had 4,535 and the Philanthropic Society 4,311, quite a jump from the 300 or so books in 1800. The society libraries, however, often selected identical titles – “only more handsomely bound, if possible” – so it cannot be assumed that students had access to some 10,000 or 11,000 different volumes. The Dialectic library was open two hours a week while the University’s stayed “open five times a week, an hour at a time.” “All residents on the Hill who seem to be proper persons to have books” were allowed to use the University library unlike the society libraries. Records, however, clearly show that the latter circulated more books.21

Although the University library was theoretically open to all, and therefore something of a “public” or community library, its collection was very academic and dated, while the student libraries had more lively reading matter but restricted its use to their own members and faculty. This situation was probably true for all the colleges mentioned here and most college libraries everywhere in the States.22 The location of college libraries in very small towns like Chapel Hill, Wake Forest and Davidson, moreover, accentuated their isolation and attenuated public usefulness outside of academia.

Students ran the debating libraries, but who manned college libraries? Little is recorded about them. That is because there were few if any persons whose chief duty in life was to operate the library. There were libraries but no librarians.23 One of the initial faculty members at the University of North Carolina, Hugh Williamson, apparently organized its first set of library books...
in 1795. Signer of the Constitution and a prominent scientist, historian, and physician, Dr. Williamson might be considered the most distinguished nineteenth-century North Carolina librarian— but that would be stretching an afternoon's duty too far. In any case, Williamson hardly stayed at the University after its founding.24

Starting sometime after Williamson’s departure, graduate-tutors served as librarian as part of their duties. In 1834 Thomas Samuel Ashe, later to be a Congressman, was assured that the duties “are light and would leave a great portion of time entirely” at his command, but he declined anyway. The librarians received one-half of the overdue fines collected, a figure that was stabilized at $100 a year in 1838 after which the Senior Tutor was confirmed as librarian. The first tutor-librarian mentioned by the University’s historian was Joseph Hubbard Saunders in 1824. Saunders later became an Episcopal priest but died young in Florida. His most noteworthy successor was William Hayes Owen who served seven “tedious and toilsome” years from 1836 to 1843 and then became a professor of ancient languages at Wake Forest College.25 The already mentioned Ashbel Green Brown was librarian for the following twelve years. A tutor of ancient languages, he impressed one visitor to the campus with his “retentive memory and discriminating mind.” But a close acquaintance instead said Brown “was a serious man, devoid of humor, … of abnormal nervous sensibility” who had to resign while only in his forties.26

Reverend John Armstrong, Professor of Ancient Languages, served as the first librarian at Wake Forest College, 1835 to 1837, and was succeeded by the tutor, Reverend H. A. Wilcox. Wake Forest, a Baptist institution, gave the library books to its student societies in 1844. J. Thomas Raynor, Euzelian, and William Jones, Philomathesian, were the first student librarians while Professor Owen, the former University tutor, and his sisters made significant benefactions to both society libraries. By 1857 Wake’s Philomathesian Society had some 2,400 volumes and the Euzelian Society owned 3,386. “Great crowds” would gather when a new shipment of library books arrived. When “the beautiful new volumes [were] laid out,” the students “could not restrain their expressions of admiration, while those nearest would not make way for those in the rear, some of whom had to wait another day before getting to see and handle the volumes.” Students readily filled library subscriptions for two hundred to three hundred dollars. The Wake Forest societies would even borrow substantial sums rather than wait to fulfill their book orders. “Not only were many volumes procured in this way, but most of them were readable; … very few were dull theological treatises.”27 Again, this demonstrates the relative popularity of the debating libraries while also showing that students were not numb to the charms of print culture.

What evolved into Duke University started in Randolph County in 1838 as Union Institute. Its founders, serious Methodists, complained of the “dissipation” current at the University of North Carolina. Union became North Carolina’s Normal College in 1851—a training school for teachers—and then changed its name to Trinity College five years later. Union’s Columbian Literary Society had thirty-two books in 1849 and the rival Hesperian Society had amassed some 500 eight years later. While the official college library wilted without new books, Normal Institute matched donations given to the society libraries. The student societies bought books from dealers in Salisbury, Greensboro, and Raleigh as well as in the North. By the time the Civil War broke out, each Trinity debating society had 2,200 uncataloged volumes while the college library only possessed 650 books—mostly reference works. Lemuel Johnson, professor of mathematics and college treasurer, became the first official librarian in 1864, but Trinity later returned to selecting a different student as librarian almost every year.28

Figure 2: In 1860 Davidson moved its library into the new and very impressive Chambers Hall designed by Alexander Jackson Davis of New York. Date of picture unknown. Courtesy of the Davidson College archives.

Davidson, a Presbyterian college that opened north of Charlotte in 1837, had fewer than 224 different titles in 1841, all of them donated; its two debating societies had another 700. The donations included sermons and histories, science texts, biographies of Napoleon and Lafayette, textbooks of Latin and Greek, and belle lettres of Shakespeare, Burns and Scott. The most interesting gift was a rare, complete set of the Enlightenment classic, Diderot’s thirty-five volume Encyclopédie. After the historian William H. Foote gave money as well as books to the library, Davidson bought the Encyclopaedia Metropolitana, twenty-six volumes, and the Encyclopaedia Britannica, also twenty-six volumes. President Drury Lacy wrote to his Trustees in 1856, “If the Board could realize how refreshing and how animating these books have been, and are to us who, by our seclusion, are cut off from all access to Libraries, they would surely contribute to our enjoyment and usefulness by regular additions to our meager and ill-selected Library.” This pathetic letter testifies to the poor quality of the library collection. The Davidson faculty honestly commented on one donation, some of the books “are worthy of a place on our shelves [only] because they serve to fill them.” Professor Elijah Frink Rockwell, a graduate of Yale University, called in 1851 for a larger library: “Textbooks are not sufficient, we need the accumulated wisdom of all ages and all countries.” On the other hand, the student societies at Davidson eagerly discussed and recorded their own selections and expenditures. “Everything about their libraries was a trouble the societies willingly undertook.”29

Reputedly the wealthiest college south of Princeton before the Civil War, Davidson had about 8,000 books for its ninety enrollees in 1857. Two years later some students burned books by Voltaire, Rousseau, and Thomas Paine—possibly a worse fate for books than at Chapel Hill, where “the tall tomes of St.
Augustine” were especially “efficacious in slaughtering” mice that infested the halls.30 Perhaps inspired by Davidson’s example, the Philomathesian Society at Wake Forest banned Paine’s theological works. Philomathesians also apparently removed Boccaccio’s Decameron while the Euzelians at Wake burned their copy. Paine’s atheism had long inspired North Carolina rebuttals, but the tense years leading up to the Civil War saw the growth of a prickly and defensive Southern mentality of which book burning may be another sign.31 A side consequence of this attitude, along with the parsimony that was a constant in Southern college life, was that college trustees made little effort to improve these “meager and ill-selected” collections other than by buying encyclopedias. And that encyclopedias could be considered important acquisitions at such a wealthy institution as Davidson indicates much about the situation of college libraries.32

All these colleges were for men only despite the fact, as Carolina historians long ago acknowledged, “girls displayed considerably more ambition for knowledge of books.”33 Salem Female Academy was perhaps the most noted, and certainly longest lived, advanced school for women. Starting shortly after the turn of the century, it had fifty books in 1807 (kept in a closet at Salem Tavern) and 1,800 volumes by 1857. This would have been a very strong collection for such a small school and reflected the Academy’s high reputation and serious – if restricted – curriculum.34 Most small colleges, male and female, were established and sponsored by denominations but almost always insisted they were non-sectarian.35 Probably all these colleges had some complement of books set aside as a “library” but southern colleges were loath to publish particulars.36

Other small schools included Western Carolina Male Academy, which neglected to declare how many books it had when asked in 1857, and the Chowan Female Collegiate Institute which demurely said it had “a small select library, and is well supplied with periodicals from various parts of the Union.”37 Louisburg, chartered in 1787, reported a slow but real growth in its collection over the next half century.38 Transient colleges are not included here because of the lack of information, while others now called colleges, like Salem and Louisburg, were more academies than colleges.39 Establishing a college and building a library were not easy accomplishments even in the relatively prosperous 1850s.40 The South, as Michael O’Brien has convincingly shown, was not interested in professional scholars or their institutional underpinning.31 Even Harvard thought undergraduates needed access to only 500 books without special permission.42 Therefore it is not surprising that college libraries did not thrive. Statistics are not very revealing for North Carolina or its neighboring states but do back up this bleak if truthful view of Southern college life. The 1850 census counted only five college libraries in North Carolina; that same year a researcher found three college libraries with 9,401 volumes. Seven years later a survey totaled ten college libraries in North Carolina with 12,501 books while the 1860 census found only seven colleges with but 15,100 volumes. If the Census is correct, colleges in North Carolina, while increasing in number during the 1850s, lost a quarter of their books. Although it seems futile to analyze the statistical inconsistencies further, it should be noted that North Carolina was clearly falling behind its neighboring states in the number of books available. “By itself,” remarks a leading historian of southern culture, “the size of libraries means little,” which is why the context of libraries and those who ran

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them is stressed here.43 With the onset of the Civil War, southern intellectuals would disclaim passionately about the superiority of their culture and cultural institutions but in fact had done little, as we have shown here, to build and strengthen college libraries.44

College libraries in North Carolina were assemblages of books and magazines with minimal organization or cataloging. They were not imaginary but neither were they substantial, and in this were not too dissimilar from college libraries in the North or, for that matter, in France or Britain.45 Insignificant libraries hardly fed the meager Southern intellectual establishment, and it is noticeable that no leading literary works or magazines originated from Southern colleges. Library equipment and furnishings were almost non-existent, while collection development, reference, and research services all waited for the future.46 Near the end of our period, a student at the University of North Carolina concluded, “If Rip Van Winkle wants … libraries which shall command the attention of good talents, he must wake up.”47

In 1800 North Carolina had only one college library, with a couple hundred mostly cast-off books, and in 1860 it still had only seven colleges with 15,000 books. The increasing presence and accessibility of print materials were noteworthy but further development was cut short by the Civil War and Reconstruction.48 The limited attention paid to college libraries reinforces the dominant view of the South as an area of “low investment in education and other social amenities.”49 One might say that Southern disinterest in intellectual and literary matters resulted in a lack of social structures such as libraries reflective of such inclinations, and that the lack of libraries in turn reinforced the non-intellectual cast of mind.50 Although the antebellum South tried, it never produced an adequate library infrastructure to support much more than an imaginary intellectual community. By 1860 North Carolina and Southern colleges had books in tolerable but not ample supply.

References

1 Quoted in Fisk P. Brewer, The Library of the University of North Carolina (North Carolina?: s.n., 1870?).
5 William D. Snider, Light on the Hill: A History of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and William S. Powell, Higher Education in North Carolina (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1970). Chapel Hill was a small village thirty miles from the state capital, Raleigh, which itself had less than 700 people in 1800 and less than 5,000 in 1860. Neither of North Carolina’s largest towns, New Bern (2,674 in 1800, 5,432 in 1860) and Wilmington (1,689 in 1800, 9,552 in 1860), had colleges. The University of North Carolina remained little known in the North. See Francis L. Hawks to David L. Swain, January 3, 1860, cited in O’Brien, Conjectures of Order, 44.


The following have little or no mention of a library during this period: Mildred Morse McEwan, Queens College Yesterday and Today (Charlotte: Queens College Alumnae Association, 1980), 16-54; Life at Saint Mary’s, Katherine Batts Salley, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942); “Greensboro Female College,” Southern Index 1 (May 1850): 23-25. See also Guion Griffis Johnson, Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 307.


Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Lenoir Collegiate Institute male and female 1857-8 (Kinston: American Advocate Office, 1858), does not mention any library. Lenoir Collegiate Institute, founded by Methodists in 1855, was meant as a preparatory school for Normal [i.e., Trinity-Duke] and Greensboro Female College. Similarly, see Davenport Female College, Catalogue of Paintings, April 21, 1861 (n.p., n.d.): the painting collection was significant enough to catalog but not its books. Methodists opened Davenport in Lenoir (Caldwell County, across the state from Lenoir Collegiate Institute in Lenoir County), as a rival to the Presbyterian female college at Statesville. Davenport was disbanded “at the approach of the Federal Army . . . not knowing what license might be allowed a reckless soldier,” W. M. Robey, Centennial of Methodism in North Carolina... (Raleigh: J. Nichols, 1796), 193-201, quotation 201. See also Thomas Hall Wetmore, “The Literary and Cultural Development of Ante-Bellum Wilmington” (Master’s thesis, Duke University, 1940), 157-60. Tewksbury, Founding of American Colleges and Universities, 17, found an 81 percent failure rate in college formation.

Peace College, “founded” in 1857, did not open until after the Civil War.

O’Brien, Conjectures of Order, contains over 1,200 pages of text. See also Michael Thomas Smith, A Traitor and a Scoundrel: Benjamin Hedrick and the Cost of Dissent (Newark: University of Delaware, 2003); and David Brown, Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and ‘The Impending Crisis of the South’ (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).


A recent examination of Southern cultural nationalism is Michael Thomas Bernath, “Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2005).


