
Forsyth County Public Library and the Constitution's Bicentennial: Building Relationships for Our Library

Barbara L. Anderson

"You couldn't be undertaking a more timely, more vital project because the Constitution is in jeopardy—it is under attack." So remarked one Winston-Salem alderman in her 1986 letter of inquiry to the Federal Commission for the Constitution's Bicentennial, which was routed to the North Carolina Commission and then on to our library. Months before communities across the nation began to plan for local Constitution programs, the Forsyth County Public Library became a leading institution in the promotion of public programming for the Bicentennial.

The Forsyth library system, comprising a headquarters library and eight branches, serves a county of 267,000. Forsyth County uniquely blends urban and rural elements. Headquarters Library, centrally located in Winston-Salem on the edge of a revitalized downtown and a renovated historic residential area, is considered the entire county's library, and serves as the site of our community-wide programs.

For the past two years our library has been at the center of Forsyth County's celebration of the Constitution and in the forefront of North Carolina's Bicentennial initiatives. The Bicentennial has presented our library with an opportunity to promote itself as a place to talk about books and ideas; as a place to turn for varied delights; and, of course, as Forsyth County's first information resource.

We have secured speakers, respondents, actors, and funding support; planned at length with community leaders; promoted our projects with vigor; filled punch cups; managed complex seating and lighting arrangements, and found the right costume miles away; faced the public to tell them Magna Carta exhibit tickets were all given out before noon; ordered new books and prepared bibliographies; and built new bridges in our community.

Fall 1986 Program Series—Forsyth County Celebrates the Constitution

In October 1986 the library presented its first Constitution project, "Forsyth County Celebrates the Constitution." This project was not only one of the earliest in the nation to commemorate the Bicentennial, but also has been used as a model by the N.C. Commission on the Bicentennial of the Constitution. Extending for five weeks, weekly programs of lecture and discussion on contemporary and historical issues opened and closed with historical dramatizations. These events broke all past attendance records for a library program series. Official auditorium seating capacity is 150 persons. October 1986 audiences ranged from 150 to 250, with countless other citizens aware of these events.

Openness to new ideas and cooperation with our colleagues and with friends outside the library profession marked the beginnings of the 1986 program series. Above all, we wanted the library to make a mark in the community. We proceeded with the freedom to explore new alliances and try for significant results.

Early in 1985, we began to explore a program at the library dealing with issues of church and state. We received materials and advice from Diane Sasson, who was coordinating the "North Carolina Dialogue on Church, State, and the First Amendment" at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We felt the library could make an uncommon addition with a program outside the university.

Before we began to organize our church-state thinking into a definite library program, Dr. Howard Barnes, a history professor at Winston-Salem State, came by one day to ask, "Would you consider a cooperative program on the Constitution, to be held at the public library?" The idea appealed to us instantly, and church-state issues later became a significant component of the fall 1986 project.

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Wanting our programs to have as diverse and as large an audience as possible, we knew that having other organizations invest in the project would be good for its success. Therefore, we convened a community-wide planning committee. Individuals representing the League of Women Voters, the N.C. School of the Arts, Salem College, Wake Forest University, the *Winston-Salem Journal*, Winston-Salem State University, and Congressman Steve Neal's office came together with us to create a program series. Later outreach into the community for all manner of program support built on that initial coalition.

In the publicity for our series, we constantly emphasized that we would cover issues that touched people's lives. We covered North Carolina's delayed ratification of the Constitution, including concern for state and individual rights; attempts to change the Constitution, including the politicization of the personal abortion issue; the Constitution's omission of blacks and women, including the drastic economic implications for all those left out; and American pride in religious diversity uncomfortably coexisting with the special status of the favored religion. In a dramatic close, we presented a personal view of the Constitutional era through the experience of elder statesman Benjamin Franklin. Respondents' comments and audience questions turned each evening into a true public dialogue. Several programs had identifiable special-interest audiences. We chose subjects that covered the range of high interest Constitutional issues.

Inviting individuals from our community to participate in library programs has been a choice course of action.

Speakers and respondents represented the black community, the Catholic Church, our local elected officials, freelance writers, the judiciary, the newspaper media, and, of course, our local universities. Our Constitution project was local in the points of view expressed each evening as well as in its conception and planning. Unexpected talent that emerged from all parts of our county was indispensable to our program series.

To make the project truly memorable for our audiences, the series opened and closed with dramatization. Major Joseph Winston, Revolutionary War hero for whom the town of Winston was named, and Dr. Benjamin Franklin were on stage in authentic dress. Winston, played by local veteran actor Jim Austin, changed his mind

between the Hillsborough and Fayetteville conventions and decided to endorse the new federal Constitution. Franklin, played by School of the Arts Design and Production Dean John Snedon, commented broadly on the debate over the Constitution and the new world created by independence. Local historian Sam Brownlee wrote the Winston dramatization; local teacher Julia Sneden prepared the Franklin vignette.

In Forsyth County, which has one daily newspaper and many special interest groups competing for public attention, publicity is a challenge. Publication for the 1986 project, as with all further Bicentennial programs, was done with the personal touch. Unofficial channels turned out to be as important as the major media. The library staff directed a barrage of publicity. There is never too much publicity.

Newspaper coverage included standard calendar and press releases, a Sunday front page piece on Ben Franklin, editorials, and day of the event reporting in the weekly newspapers, including the influential black weekly. Radio provided public service announcements and key 5 P.M. reminder announcements, featuring a program participant or the librarian, on program evenings.

Announcements were made at meetings of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the League of Women Voters, the Bar Association, and a number of civic groups, including Rotary and Kiwanis. When these organizations had newsletters, they also published the announcement. Many of our churches promoted the church-state program.

The newspapers, the radio, and the leadership of community organizations established decidedly friendly contacts that conveyed the community importance of the events. They were part of the team making the program.

This Constitution programming came at a time when we had just attended American Library Association programs on marketing and the library's graphic image. That experience gave us a great boost in seeking out the director of our hometown Sawtooth Center for Visual Design for consultation. Our Design Director led us by the hand through the execution of a brochure that incorporated the Old Salem coffeepot and the Liberty Bell, and photography from the newly acquired Frank Jones collection. Photographs suggested the content of each program. The result was excellent, much better than previous graphic efforts. In addition to announcing the details of the upcoming series and the statement of library purpose, we chose to devote space to the Wake Forest University Tocqueville lectures on the Con-

stitution, to be held soon after the library programs.

It happened that library programs for the general public preceded WFU's more academic programming on the Constitution. (Wake Forest was well represented in the planning of our series.) The library and the University efforts complemented each other, and our colleagues at Wake Forest judged our use of the Tocqueville Forum mailing list, for well-targeted publicity, most appropriate.

Community participation even on small details makes us nostalgic as we look back. Mapping Dr. Franklin's dramatic entrance, finding Major Winston's shoes, and the last minute brilliant replacement for an absent clergy respondent, all were communal accomplishments.

Our efforts to secure funding brought us one grant from the North Carolina Humanities Council, and another from the Winston-Salem Foundation for substantial additions to the library's collection of Constitution-related materials.

Planning meetings, voluminous correspondence and telephone calls made for us a new niche in the minds of the community. Gradually, our public came less to expect the librarian's call to be about an overdue book.

Convening of County Committee

The October 1986 series brought our library a completely unexpected community role. The N.C. Commission on the Bicentennial had taken note of our efforts, even as we planned, and turned to the library to convene the new Forsyth Committee. The library staff built upon its strong planning committee assembled for the 1986 project and on instincts, developed from years of reference conversations, for trying to make everyone a friend of the library. We attempted to identify all those individuals and groups in the community whose talents and interests would strengthen Forsyth's Constitution effort. Widespread contacts were infused with an extra dose of credibility by virtue of the library's completed Constitution series.

Dr. Jack Noffsinger, then Pastor of Knollwood Baptist Church and long-time civil rights advocate in Forsyth County, agreed to serve as chairman. On February 5, 1987, the new committee was convened at the library. On April 13, 1987, the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners recognized the committee as its official designee for the Bicentennial; subsequently, both the state and federal commissions recognized the county committee.



Local actor John Sneden played Benjamin Franklin in the Forsyth County Fall 1986 program series celebrating the Constitution.

To date, the library has organized and hosted Constitution Committee meetings and co-sponsored with that committee further Constitution-related programs. In April 1987, Wallace Carroll, former editor and publisher of the *Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel* and foreign policy advisor to the President and State Department during the Cold War, delivered an address, "Our Constitutional Heritage; Guide to a Sane Foreign Policy." The text of Carroll's address was later published in the *Winston-Salem Journal*, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and the *American Thought Leader*.

Most recently, Sam Ervin, III, U.S. Court of Appeals Judge and son of the late Senator Sam Ervin, Jr., visited Forsyth County to dedicate the Kate B. Reynolds Oak at Tanglewood Park as the State's first Bicentennial tree and to spend an "Evening on the Constitution with the People" at the public library.

Magna Carta

When the Forsyth County Committee was

asked by the U.S. Constitution Council and the N.C. Bicentennial Commission to host the Winston-Salem stop of the American Express/Magna Carta tour, it turned to the library for sponsorship and assistance.

We recognized the magnitude of the event and invited Old Salem to serve as the site and to co-sponsor the outdoor exhibit. The event required coordinating efforts with Old Salem, Salem Congregation, local government officials, and a vast network of organizations and individuals.

On a very hot August 18, 1987, Salem Square was packed with thousands for the magnificent Magna Carta opening ceremonies, which featured the Army Signal Corps Band, the City Police Color Guard, dignitaries, and children in Moravian costume. Remarks by Judge Sam Ervin, who was then making the first of his two Bicentennial visits to our county, preceded the Magna Carta ribbon cutting and a picnic lunch on the Square. The free admission tickets for the day-long exhibit were gone even before the opening ceremonies commenced.

In the planning of the Magna Carta event, meetings and calls to our colleagues in county and city government were frequent. The government contributions as well as contributions from organizations such as the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, the English Speaking Union, the Chamber of Commerce and the Girl Scouts were significant. Vital, though, was the library's ability to converge these many entities and act as our intermediary. With the library and Old Salem at the center, the cooperative undertaking reflected the genuine community spirit.

Public Forum with Our Congressman—Today's Constitution: Loyal or Disloyal to Its Beginnings

Several of the events especially demonstrated principles of community relations we learned during the 1986 project. On September 16, 1987, the evening before the Bicentennial of the Constitution's signing, Congressman Steve Neal met with community leaders at the library in a round table discussion on contemporary issues. Respondents included a Wake Forest politics professor, a city alderman, an attorney with judicial experience and a conservative constitutional perspective, and a prominent black leader. Each one had his following; each spoke from a decidedly different community vantage point.

Inviting individuals from our own community to participate in library programs has been a choice course of action. There is greater likelihood the library will be successful in finding the right

community person to accept its invitation and a better possibility of producing a larger audience. Prominent individuals draw their friends and backers and often these individuals gain from new exchanges across political, intellectual, and institutional lines. These public programs on the Constitution have brought our speakers, respondents, and planning partners closer to their library and to the county's quarter million residents.

Local university faculty appreciated invitations to participate and to bring their knowledge to out-of-school adults. Lay presenters brought their own fresh insights and life experiences. We have attempted in almost all of our Constitution-related efforts to include presenters from both the academic and non-academic sectors to convey the real-life content and "general audience" quality of our programs.

Congressman Neal's forum was an occasion for typical community support. Our locally-based Piedmont Airlines actually delayed the evening flight from Washington, D.C. for a few minutes so that our Congressman could meet his public library commitment after a day of critical House votes. The community-centered publicity was, again, effective. Our public radio station featured a lengthy interview with two panel members, the politics professor and the alderman, on the Saturday morning (a peak listening time) before the event. Our community, though large, has enough small-town qualities to ensure that interviewers will receive fan phone calls from our public soon after the broadcast. Our black newspaper featured a front-page advance story on the event, which focused on the black participant's strong views.

The role of Winston-Salem's weekly black newspaper raises a significant issue for library program planners. Black participation in the Bicentennial commemoration of the Constitution has been low at the national and state levels. Yet in Forsyth County where blacks make up twenty-six percent of the population, the library and later the Forsyth Bicentennial Committee aimed at fully integrated citizen support, and in fact achieved a good degree of success. In retrospect, we were most effective in solving this issue by incorporating the minority point of view into our fall 1986 program on blacks and women. "Those Left Out" featured a widely respected black Superior Court Judge expressing his profound disappointment with the limitations of the Constitution. Again in the Congressman Neal program, the black respondent rejected any suggestion that the Constitution's framers intended

unity. Private conversations with black community colleagues bore out our belief that the assertion of a "black point of view" in an integrated setting gave to that view more universal persuasiveness than would have been achieved in an all-black setting. And participation by black Forsyth residents ensured a more diverse and reflective discussion of the Constitution's impact two hundred years ago and today.

A Historical Dramatization—Major Joseph Winston and the New Federal Constitution: November 3, 1787.

Our events built upon each other. The brief Joseph Winston monologue that opened the October 1986 Constitution series was so well received that we produced at our library a fuller dramatization.

The drama, "Major Joseph Winston and the New Federal Constitution: November 3, 1787," was presented at our library on Election Night, November 3, 1987. We saw reenacted, with costumed cast, a public meeting actually called by Revolutionary War hero and state assemblyman Joseph Winston to air views over the new federal Constitution. Several current Forsyth residents created colorful and contentious characters for the town meeting. The production covered timeless Constitutional issues, with an accent on local history.

The entire effort, the public event of the evening and the work before and after November 3, made a beautiful showcase for what the library stands for in the community. The production opened with the usual warm library welcome, which emphasized that our library was a place to talk about books and ideas and a place for further direction from the reference staff. We provided bibliographies of the best books on the Constitution available at the library. This was followed by the dramatic presentation. Following the drama, the audience was uninhibited in its questioning. The evening ended with a reception given by the Col. Joseph Winston Chapter of the DAR. DAR support of our Constitution programs has been unfailing. In the midst of the reception, the Library Director was able to report on the successful library bond vote of that day. The production was judged of such value that we arranged for a two-camera videotaping, several months later, of a second performance before a live audience.

A Future Project for Forsyth and Guilford Counties

Neighboring Guilford County became aware

of Forsyth's successful Bicentennial efforts and, through one of its county commissioners, contacted the library to review our programs and methods and to explore the possibility of a joint effort. A Triad (Greensboro, High Point, Winston-Salem) Bicentennial Committee has formed to plan a major event to be held in November 1989, on the anniversary of North Carolina's ratification of the Constitution. Our library is taking a major role in developing this event.

Our Bicentennial project has taught us approaches that we will turn to again and again. We have learned to avoid preset formulas, and to stay flexible and open to the content and methods that will bring us the most project success in the eyes of our community. The content of our five-part 1986 project was outlined gradually, with a sense of group purpose that carried us along. Contemporary Constitutional crises, for instance, with judicial appointments; church-state conflicts; minority rights—all these were readily identifiable and had their audiences in our community. Speakers and respondents again were chosen with program success in mind; we wanted the range of presenters to represent the diversity of Forsyth County. When we convened the county committee or when we sought assistance with program details, we assumed we were paying the way for further contacts.

We learned to include elements that would be considered exciting by our community at large. In the case of our Constitution project, dramatization brought to life personalities that shaped our history and encouraged the audience to imagine what it was like in the 1780s. We emphasized audience discussion, sometimes a concluding reception, and the assortment of personalities on stage. We could always say ahead of the event that this would not be a dry academic lecture.

We would always aim to appeal to all segments of the community. Reaching out at the start to make selected library patrons our planning colleagues has helped us to succeed. Through this approach, a greater number of individuals gain a stake in our success. We always seek out the opportunity to display our new alliances publicly. The community recognizes the non-librarian colleagues and sometimes has greater trust in the worth of the project.

One of the successes of the 1986 project was the diversity of citizenry who supported us. Our neighboring universities could never boast such a mix of citizenry at their programs, nor could the League of Women Voters, the Black Kiwanis Club, the DAR, or the Bar Association. Unlike the library, these organizations cater to specific con-

stituencies. The public library, our community's neutral ground, has the leading edge.

The Constitution's Bicentennial has been a powerful vehicle for communicating the library's mission to the community. Because of our work with the Constitution, our library has been instrumental in bringing people together in Forsyth County. Our public programs have considerably raised our visibility as the people's university. The Constitution's Bicentennial has given us the opportunity to take the initiative in our community. The community now looks to the public library for civic leadership and responsibility as well as for outstanding programs that teach and delight. As we have brought our public to the library for our Bicentennial Series and enticed them to return for our everyday library services, we have persuaded them that their library is an important, concerned institution, worthy of their trust and support.

Editor's Note: Barbara Anderson has coordinated the Forsyth County Public Library's Bicentennial efforts and has received the Council for the Advancement of Citizenship's Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Commemoration of the Bicentennial.

SELA Conference Announced

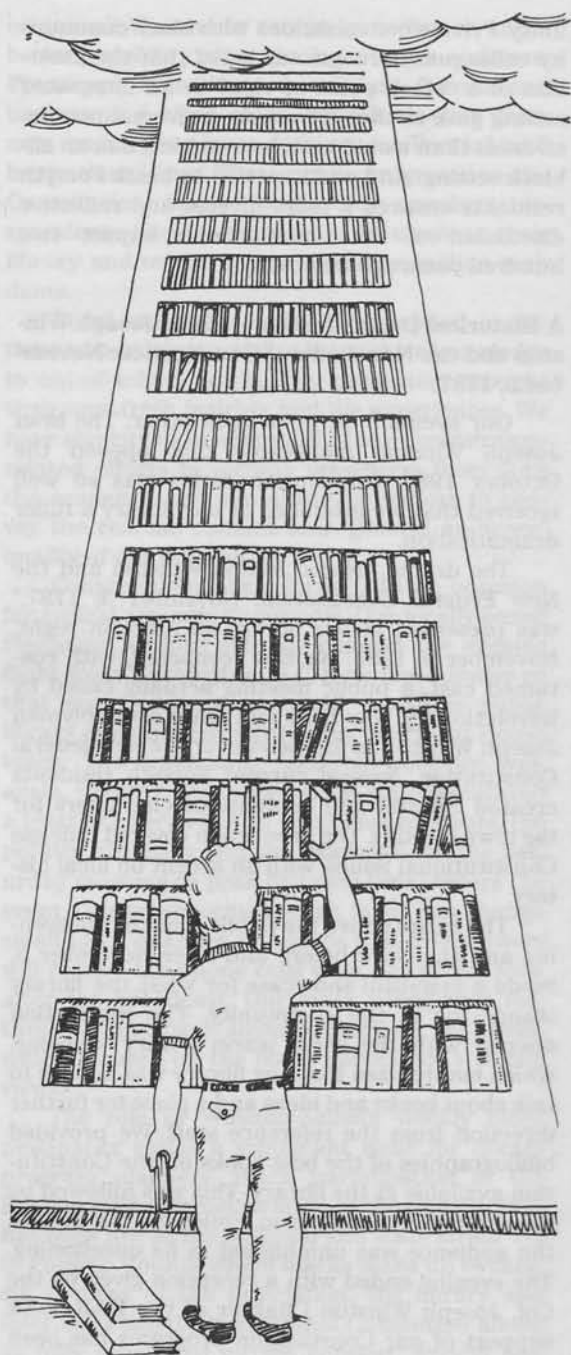
Catch "The Creative Spirit" at the SELA/VLA annual conference in Norfolk, Virginia, October 26-29, 1988.

"The Creative Spirit: Writers, Words and Readers" will emphasize books and authors throughout the conference. Rita Mae Brown (*Rubyfruit Jungle, High Hearts*), Pat Conroy (*The Prince of Tides, The Lords of Discipline*), and Clyde Edgerton (*Raney, Walking Across Egypt*), accomplished at the spoken as well as the written word, will appear as conference speakers.

Preconferences will be held October 25-26. Preconference topics include telefacsimile, interviewing, the public library planning process, and organizational impact of integrated library systems.

The conference committee is planning tours of area attractions and libraries to give you a complete picture of Virginia hospitality. A special conference poster and t-shirt will be available for sale.

For information on conference programs, contact Patricia Thomas, Tidewater Community College/Chesapeake Campus Library, 1428 Cedar Road, Chesapeake, VA 23320. For other conference information, contact Harriet Henderson, Newport News Public Library System, 2400 Washington Avenue, Newport News, VA 23607.



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