

# Hayes Library and the Private Library in Antebellum North Carolina

by Eileen McGrath

North Carolinians of the 1990s take public libraries for granted. Most larger cities have a main library with neighborhood branches, and smaller municipalities and rural areas are served by either town libraries or branches of a regional library system. Few citizens realize that free public libraries came late to the Tar Heel State. Although the movement for public libraries swept this country at the turn of the century, in North Carolina in 1928 there were still only seventy-two libraries open to the public and more than eighty percent of rural residents were without a library.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the Citizens' Library Movement of the late 1920s and 1930s that public library service became widespread in the state, and not until after World War II that it became universal.<sup>2</sup>

The tremendous growth in library service took place three hundred years after the first European settlements on this soil. When we consider the library history of the Tar Heel State, we have to account for those three hundred years. What did people do to obtain books when there were no free public libraries? How did people meet their need for books and other reading material?

We assume that the earliest colonists brought books with them from England, and we know that by the 1670s and 1680s books were mentioned in wills and inventories.<sup>3</sup> Although books were not numerous, most families had at least a Bible. The smaller the collection, the more likely it was that all the books were religious; in collections of a dozen or more volumes, legal titles or general books such as histories or biographies might be present.

The first library established in North Carolina was at Bath. Thomas Bray, an English clergyman, gave small collections of books to colonial settlements as a way to encourage Church of England clergy to accept assignments in America. The Reverend Bray sent such a collection of books to North Carolina in 1700. The early whereabouts and use of the collection are not

known, but in 1705 it became the parish library at Bath. The books did not have a permanent home in Bath, however, and the collection was just a remnant of its original size when a law was finally passed for its protection in 1715. The Church of England made other gifts of books to clergy and communities during the colonial era, but with the American Revolution such gifts ceased, and parish libraries faded in importance as a cultural resource.

In the mid and late 1700s, as population increased and some people prospered, private book collections grew, and a few individuals began to have collections that could be considered libraries. The last three royal governors, Arthur Dobbs, William Tryon and Josiah Martin, had substantial personal libraries. They brought their collections from England, as did other wealthy immigrants. Transporting books was both expensive and inconvenient, but colonists who valued reading brought books with them because there were few opportunities to purchase them in colonial North Carolina. The colony's first press was not established until 1749, and only a handful of printers operated in the colony before the Revolution.

After the Revolutionary War, the number of printers in North Carolina increased, and it became easier to acquire books. Although newspaper publishing was their main business, printers began to publish pamphlets on political and religious topics and to reprint the classics. Publishers and tavern owners created reading rooms in their shops, and these became proletarian counterparts of the society libraries that were established by and for gentlemen.<sup>4</sup> Book peddlers, such as "Parson" Mason Locke Weems, began to roam the South. Planters and other North Carolinians who traveled on business to northern cities or the British Isles could purchase books during their trips or arrange with business associates to have newly printed books shipped with other goods. Also, as

books became more common in the state, they were more often available at estate and bankruptcy sales.

From books brought from the mother country, purchases in state and out, and gifts or bequests, some North Carolinians developed substantial book collections. Although no library in North Carolina equaled William Byrd II's in Virginia, there were significant private collections in North Carolina even in the colonial period. Edward Moseley of Wilmington owned over four hundred volumes at his death in 1749. His neighbor Eleazar Allen left more than two hundred-fifty English and French titles in 1750. James Milner of Halifax left over six hundred volumes in 1772, and David Stone of Windsor had 1,400 volumes at his death

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in 1818.<sup>5</sup> We know that other major political figures such as James Iredell and William Hooper had libraries, but we do not know their exact size or makeup. There were, however, challenges to individual book collecting. Many libraries were plundered during the Revolutionary War, and similar occurrences took place in the Civil War. Besides these civil catastrophes, personal disasters such as death, fire, or business failure could cause the loss or sale of all or part of a collection. Nature too was not always kind, and books deteriorated due to the climate and the lack of adequate vermin control. The odds were very much against the continuation of large personal libraries.

One library that defied the odds developed at Hayes plantation, near Edenton. The Hayes Collection was recently placed on exhibit loan at the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Hayes was arguably the premier private library of antebellum North Carolina, and it is the most notable of

these libraries intact today. Through an examination of it, much can be learned about the nature and uses of private libraries in the antebellum era.

The Hayes Library collection is thought to have begun with Charles Eden, governor of the colony from 1714 to 1722. Eden's stepdaughter, Penelope, married Gabriel Johnston (ca. 1698-1752), a later governor, and in that way Governor Eden's books became the property of the Johnston family. We do not know exactly how many books either Eden or Gabriel Johnston had, but an early scholar of the library, Stephen B. Weeks, in 1895 identified sixty-three volumes as having once belonged to Gabriel

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Johnston.<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Johnston left his collection to his nephew, Governor Samuel Johnston, and during Samuel Johnston's lifetime (1733-1816) the library grew to over five hundred volumes.

The collection became known as the Hayes Library because in 1817 James Cathcart Johnston, Samuel's son, moved the books into the new house at Hayes plantation, a house that was built with a special wing for the library.<sup>7</sup> Here the library grew rapidly. A catalog of the collection from about 1830 lists over 1,500 volumes, and an inventory of Hayes Farm made shortly after James Cathcart Johnston's death in 1865 mentions 2,260 volumes in the library. When James Cathcart Johnston died, he willed Hayes to a business associate, Edward Wood. We do not know, however, the extent to which the Wood family added to the library in the post-war years. The Hayes Library on display today in the North Carolina Collection Gallery at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill contains 1,874 bound volumes and approximately 480 pamphlets and loose periodical issues.

The pattern of growth of the Hayes Library is typical of southern antebellum libraries in that the collection numbered in the hundreds in the eighteenth century but

grew into the thousands during the nineteenth. There is evidence, too, that the Johnstons acquired their books in the same manner as other southerners. Inheritance played a large part in the growth of the collection. The presence of many books containing autographs of individuals not related to the Johnstons suggests that the Johnstons purchased some books at estate and other distress sales.<sup>8</sup> The Johnstons did business with factors in New York, Baltimore, Norfolk, and Charleston, and it is likely that the American imprints, and possibly others, were obtained through these business agents. The presence in the Hayes collection of two volumes with the bookplates of commercial lending libraries may indicate that the Johnstons used such services. There is also evidence that the Johnstons entered into pre-publication agreements for subscription books.<sup>9</sup>

The composition of the library tells much about the interests of the Johnstons and the uses of private libraries in antebellum North Carolina. Law books form a small, but important, part of the collection.<sup>10</sup> All the principal owners of the library before James Cathcart Johnston held significant government offices and were active in public affairs. The law books were used for their public work, and the Johnstons, like other property owners of their era, found a knowledge of the law necessary to protect and

increase their holdings. Because there were few trained medical practitioners available and because their plantations contained both their extended family and sizable slave communities, the Johnstons realized the need for basic medical and pharmacological texts. The collection contains fifty-eight medical volumes, including such standards as the *Edinburgh New Dispensatory*. These books, along with the seventy-five volumes on agriculture and husbandry, show that the Hayes Library was a practical resource for its owners. One role of the private library was to be a source of useful information in an era when there were few professional experts and the owner of a plantation was forced by circumstances to be knowledgeable about many practical subjects.

Private antebellum libraries, however, were more than just ready reference collections. The Hayes Library also shows the role that private libraries played in the general moral and intellectual education of the

plantation household. The collection contains Bibles, prayer books, collections of sermons, and religious periodicals. The presence of *The Book of Common Prayer*, *The Whole Duty of Man*, and the *Episcopal Recorder* testifies to the Johnstons's adherence to the Anglican, later Episcopal, tradition. The collection also contains encyclopedias; Samuel Johnson's dictionary; and instructional volumes for mathematics, geography, and languages. French was the language most often studied, but there are also grammars for Latin, Greek, and Italian. Present as well are many works of political philosophy, history, and biography. As with other antebellum libraries, there are many volumes relating to travel. With travel so difficult and time-consuming, antebellum southerners depended upon books to learn about distant places. Hayes Library contains dozens of geographies, travelers' accounts, and reports of exploration covering most of Europe, the Near East, the American West, and such distant and disparate places as Borneo, Brazil, and Russia.

Literature and language volumes make up almost forty percent of the collection. The classics are represented by Aristophanes, Catullus, Cicero, Plutarch, and others. Some works are in translation, but many are in Latin, and there are a few Greek texts. The works of prominent British authors, such as Byron, Dryden, Pope, Shakespeare, and Swift are present, but so are works by authors who have fallen into obscurity, such as



The interior of the library at Hayes. Photo courtesy of N.C. Collection, University of N.C. Library-Chapel Hill.)



Adela Burke and Nathan Drake. The Johnstons, like many other southerners of their time, were apparently taken with the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, for the library contains over thirty volumes by Scott. The large number of Scott's works also points to a fact about the development of the library. Books meant for entertainment and enjoyment, such as plays and light fiction, are much more heavily represented in the post-1800 volumes in the collection than in the earlier imprints. As the wealth of the Johnstons increased and household routines were established,<sup>11</sup> the inhabitants had more time to read for pleasure, and the books added to the library reflect this fact.

When historian Stephen B. Weeks examined the eighteenth century part of the collection, he noted the predominance of British imprints.<sup>12</sup> His observation holds true for the collection as a whole. Not only do the works of British authors dominate the literary part of the collection, but books with British imprints also account for over half the volumes in the collection as a whole. The high number of British imprints is a reminder of the slow growth of publishing in the South and of the ties that southerners had with Great Britain. The southern economy was based, in part, on a strong trading relationship with England, and southern elites considered themselves

part of a trans-Atlantic culture. Private libraries were repositories of that culture, and one function of the libraries was to keep the cultural heritage of the British Isles alive in the antebellum South.

The books in the Hayes Library contain twelve different bookplates and over two hundred signatures. The bookplates are a clear indication that the Johnstons were not the only North Carolinians who built collections of books worthy of being called libraries. The bookplates and signatures together offer evidence of the number of people in a small area of North Carolina who owned books. As the composition of the Hayes collection shows, these books were acquired to serve a variety of needs. Private libraries on the grand scale of Hayes were possessions of an elite segment of society, but the small collections of humbler citizens were attempts to meet the same needs. In an era before public libraries, the private library served as a valued source of useful information, a repository of books for moral and intellectual guidance, and as a medium for the transmission and reinforcement of a cultural heritage.

## References

<sup>1</sup>*The Handbook of the Citizens' Library Movement* (Charlotte, N.C.: North Carolina Library Association, 1928), 10.

<sup>2</sup>Louis R. Wilson and Marion A. Milczewski, eds., *Libraries of the Southeast: A Report of the Southeastern States Comparative Library Survey* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Published for the Southeastern Library Association by the University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 21.

<sup>3</sup>Stephen B. Weeks, "Libraries and Literature in North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1895* (Washington: Government Print-

ing Office, 1896), 177.

<sup>4</sup>The first society library was the Cape Fear Library, organized in Wilmington in 1760. Society libraries were often short-lived, but many were established in towns in the antebellum era. See Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 166, for a listing of the library societies incorporated between 1794 and 1848.

<sup>5</sup>Brief biographies of Allen, Milner, and Moseley can be found in William S. Powell, ed. *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979-). For biographical information on Stone and an analysis of his library see Robert G. Anthony, Jr. "The Library of David Stone (1770-1818): The Non-Law Collection." Master's paper, School of Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1982.

<sup>6</sup>Weeks, 201-202.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the construction of the house at Hayes, see Catherine W. Bishir, "Severe Survitute to House Building: The Construction of Hayes Plantation House, 1814-1817," *North Carolina Historical Review* 48 (Oct. 1991): [373]-403. Excellent photographs and a brief discussion of the house appear in Catherine W. Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 85-88.

<sup>8</sup>There are approximately two hundred autographs or initials in the books. Many of these are from the Johnstons and their associates, but there are a significant number from persons whose relationship to the Johnstons is unknown.

<sup>9</sup>Selling books through pre-publication subscription agreements was common in North Carolina in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Hayes collection contains several titles that are known to have been subscription books. See William S. Powell, "Patrons of the Press: Subscription Book Purchases in North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 39 (1962): 423-499.

<sup>10</sup>Law books comprise just over eight percent of the collection as it exists today. Information on the legal materials during stages of the collection's development is incomplete. Stephen

B. Weeks stated that there were thirty-four law books in Samuel Johnston's library (see Weeks, p. 203), but the 1830 catalog of the collection excludes legal volumes. The 1865 inventory of Hayes plantation mentions only the size of the library, without any listing of its contents. For a thorough analysis of the 1830 catalog of the collection see R. Alan Spearman, "The Johnston Library at Hayes Plantation." Master's paper, School of Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1988.

<sup>11</sup>When James Cathcart Johnston was given Hayes by his father, Samuel, in 1814, the plantation encompassed 665 acres. By 1860, the plantation had grown to 1,374 acres. For much of this period, James Cathcart Johnston shared the residence at Hayes with his sisters Frances, Helen, and Penelope. See *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, 4: 303.

<sup>12</sup>Weeks, 199-200.



Samuel Johnston (above) and James Cathcart Johnston: the father and son responsible for the remarkable growth of the Hayes collection.

(Photos courtesy of N.C. Collection, University of N.C. Library at Chapel Hill.)