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Lagniappe*

*Lagniappe (lăn-yăp′, lăn′yăp ʃ n. An extra or unexpected gift or benefit. [Louisiana French]

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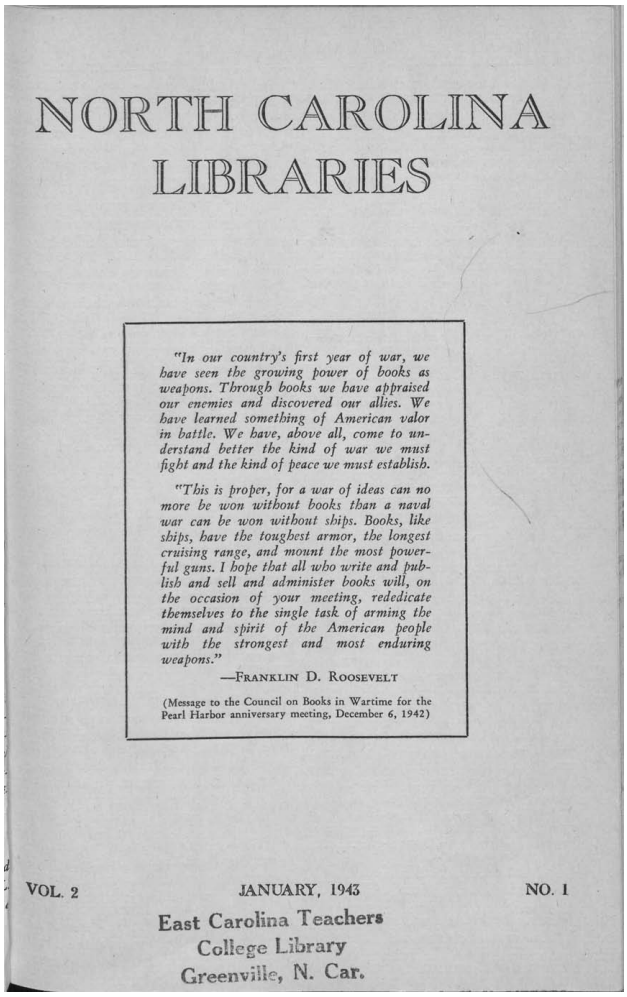
Books on the Home Front: *North Carolina Libraries* as Democratic Infrastructure in Wartime

"In our country's first year of war, we have seen the growing power of books as weapons" (Roosevelt, 1942, as cited in *North Carolina Libraries*, 1943, p. 1). In the same message, Roosevelt frames wartime reading not as ornament or escape, but as a practical necessity in a "war of ideas." North Carolina's library record from the World War II years makes that claim tangible. Here, libraries were not merely symbols of morale; they were working systems that moved information, extended access, coordinated civic participation, and preserved evidence for the future.

If we want a grounded definition of "libraries as democratic infrastructure," understood as the often-invisible systems that make public life workable at scale (Star, 1999), North Carolina offers an especially instructive case. In a largely rural state, librarianship in wartime became inseparable from transportation networks, staffing models, public appropriations, and the everyday logistics of getting the right book to the right reader at the right moment. The story is also full of the unglamorous details that make infrastructure real: mending backlogs, fuel rationing, loss of federal labor, and urgent advocacy to keep services from collapsing at the very moment demand surged ("Library appropriations," 1943).


NORTH CAROLINA
LIBRARIES

"In our country's first year of war, we have seen the growing power of books as weapons. Through books we have appraised our enemies and discovered our allies. We have learned something of American valor in battle. We have, above all, come to understand better the kind of war we must fight and the kind of peace we must establish.

"This is proper, for a war of ideas can no more be won without books than a naval war can be won without ships. Books, like ships, have the toughest armor, the longest cruising range, and mount the most powerful guns. I hope that all who write and publish and sell and administer books will, on the occasion of your meeting, rededicate themselves to the single task of arming the mind and spirit of the American people with the strongest and most enduring weapons."

—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

(Message to the Council on Books in Wartime for the Pearl Harbor anniversary meeting, December 6, 1942)

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Laying the groundwork, how public library service spread before the war

North Carolina's wartime library work did not appear out of thin air. It rested on decades of uneven development, in which public libraries emerged early in a few cities while much of the state remained outside sustained service. Patrick M. Valentine's historical overview of 1900 to 1960 is particularly helpful here because it describes library growth as a civic and geographic problem, not simply a professional one. In his account, early "public" access was frequently driven by local women's clubs, civic associations, and philanthropic gifts, and it often served white communities first, with Black North Carolinians facing systemic exclusion and later, uneven expansion (Valentine, 1996).

"North Carolina's library history shows that democratic infrastructure is not self-sustaining. It requires visible work and invisible maintenance, steady coordination and repeated political defense."

That prewar spread matters to the wartime story in two ways. First, it helps explain why extension models, county service, regional cooperation, and bookmobiles became central in North Carolina. Second, it clarifies why state-level support became such a critical lever. Even after legislative changes expanded what counties and multi-county systems could do, funding, staffing, and political will remained fragile and locally variable (Valentine, 1996).

One of the most useful bridges between "prewar" and "wartime" is Elizabeth H. Smith's retrospective synthesis of North Carolina library development around 1945. Smith describes the late 1930s as a period of partial recovery after severe Depression-era cuts, aided by federal programs that supported building repairs, extended hours, and book mending, even as the early 1940s brought a new tension: growing wartime demand for information, paired with losses of personnel to the war effort (Smith, 2006). Smith's overview also underscores that the profession itself was building connective tissue during the war years, including the launch of *North Carolina Libraries* in 1942 as a publication meant to serve not only public libraries but all types.

Federal labor and the mechanics of extension

North Carolina's extension story is inseparable from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) library project. Elaine von Oesen's 1952 study remains a key account of the scale and structure of that work. She reports that service coverage rose dramatically across the state by the early 1940s, and she emphasizes how WPA staffing strengthened existing libraries while also helping establish permanent county and regional service (von Oesen, 1952).

The critical point for a wartime article is not only that the WPA expanded service, but that it created dependencies that had to be replaced quickly when the program ended. That vulnerability shows up plainly in North Carolina's professional discourse in 1943, when library leaders warned that the loss of WPA clerical assistance and book mending support would be a severe blow unless state and local funds filled the gap ("Library Appropriations," 1943).

State Aid enters the picture, and the politics of continuity

That brings us to one of the clearest North Carolina-specific infrastructure markers in this story: State Aid. The State Library of North Carolina's summary of the Aid to Public Libraries Fund notes that since 1941 the General Assembly had appropriated money for public library service, and that State Aid was intended to "promote, aid, and equalize" public library service statewide (State Library of North Carolina, n.d.).

In other words, just as the war years intensified the need for reliable access to books and information, North Carolina was also in the early stages of a structural shift toward sustained state responsibility for public library service. That shift was neither smooth nor guaranteed. North Carolina librarians in 1943 were still fighting for appropriations and making the case publicly, not privately, that the state's library system could not hold without adequate support ("Library Appropriations," 1943).

Rural access as a transportation problem, the bookmobile as a philosophy

In a rural state, "equal access" is always partly a transportation question. North Carolina experimented early with traveling libraries and book delivery models, and by the World War II period the bookmobile had become a practical expression of the library's public purpose: take books to people, then build systems sturdy enough to keep doing it under constraints.

A vivid example appears in a 1943 report on regional library service by Mrs. Ford S. Worthy and Elizabeth House. They describe the BHM Regional Library serving Beaufort, Hyde, and Martin counties, a model that treats circulation as a shared regional

resource rather than a set of isolated county shelves (Worthy & House, 1943). Within that system, readers are not limited to "their" county's holdings. Worthy and House emphasize "free exchange" across the region and describe request routines that allow patrons access to any book in the regional collection (Worthy & House, 1943, p. 6).

Their report also captures something librarians recognize immediately: the way demand reveals what infrastructure means on the ground. "People will walk through ice and snow to meet the bookmobile," they note, and some readers walked to different points on the route to avoid going "a whole month without something to read" (Worthy & House, 1943, p. 6). This is democratic infrastructure at its most literal, a system engineered to reduce the inequities of distance, weather, and rural isolation.

War information centers, civic literacy as home-front labor

As the war intensified, North Carolina libraries were asked to do more than circulate books. They became informational nerve centers for communities navigating rationing, mobilization, and fast-moving policy. Von Oesen notes that "almost every library became a War Information Center," supported by bulletin boards, maps, directories of war agencies, and collections geared toward defense work skills (von Oesen, 1952, p. 392).

Smith's retrospective adds an important nuance: wartime demand for information rose at the same time libraries were losing personnel, including trained staff leaving for military library work (Smith, 2006). Taken together, these accounts frame War Information Centers not as a special project layered on top of "normal" service, but as a public role that intensified the need for dependable staffing, coordinated collections, and a credible institutional voice.

The 1943 pinch point, funding fights, labor loss, and the surge in demand

The January 1943 issue of *North Carolina Libraries* captures a moment when expanded wartime responsibilities collided with institutional fragility. A section titled "Library Appropriations" warns that without coordinated advocacy for state aid, North Carolina libraries faced "a great set-back" ("Library Appropriations," 1943, p. 2). The article details budget cuts, urges librarians to mobilize local legislators and civic organizations, and names the immediate operational threat: the end of WPA clerical support in public libraries and the discontinuation of WPA book mending services.

What makes this moment feel so pivotal for infrastructure is the timing. Gasoline rationing and reduced travel kept people closer to home, and the same piece observes that more time could be devoted to reading, with a "marked improvement" in the quality of books being borrowed ("Library Appropriations," 1943, p. 2). In other words, exactly when demand for books and information increased, the system faced a staffing and maintenance cliff. If State Aid is the long arc of stability beginning in 1941, this 1943 appeal is a snapshot of the fight to keep that arc from breaking midstream (State Library of North Carolina, n.d.).

The Victory Book Campaign, logistics, professional judgment, and respect for the reader

If the appropriations appeal shows the political side of wartime librarianship, the Victory Book Campaign notice shows the logistical and ethical side. North Carolina's 1943 campaign ran from January 5 to March 5 and was coordinated by the North Carolina Library Commission ("Victory Book Campaign," 1943). The local message is direct: "Books, good books, are greatly needed," especially for USO centers ("Victory Book Campaign," 1943, p. 7).

The most revealing instruction is not about volume but about judgment: "Quality is more important than quantity," and librarians are asked to be "ruthless" in sorting gift books ("Victory Book Campaign," 1943, p. 7). This is selection as care. It treats servicemen as readers who deserve usable books, not leftovers, and it treats the library as a coordinating institution capable of turning citizen generosity into effective supply.

The New York Public Library's guide to the Victory Book Campaign records adds valuable national context for what North Carolina librarians were participating in. The guide describes how the campaign was structured as a coordinated operation with manuals for state and local directors, formal

collection and distribution routines, and extensive transportation and warehousing documentation, including shipping lists and bills of lading (New York Public Library, n.d.). That national structure helps clarify why North Carolina's notice emphasizes professional sorting and centralized routing through the Library Commission. This was not informal charity; it was civic logistics conducted through systems built to scale.

War records as memory work, and the evidence that remains

The same January 1943 issue highlights another wartime role the public often overlooks: preservation as civic responsibility. In "War Records," Elmer D. Johnson describes a statewide plan to collect records of the war as it unfolded, with county collectors appointed throughout North Carolina and local librarians frequently asked to cooperate or serve as collectors (Johnson, 1943). The program explicitly treats documentation as public work: preserving newspapers, compiling records, and using guidance materials designed to standardize collecting (Johnson, 1943).

The wartime collecting effort also left an archival footprint that remains visible and usable. The State Archives of North Carolina's finding aid for the *North Carolina County War Records* describes a World War II era collection containing county-level scrapbooks, letters, questionnaires, lists of servicemen, photographs, reports of war-related activities, newspaper clippings, and related materials, arranged alphabetically by county (State Archives of North Carolina, n.d.). Read alongside Johnson's call for systematic documentation, the survival of this body of records demonstrates that wartime "memory work" in North Carolina was not merely aspirational or rhetorical, it produced durable documentary infrastructure that continues to support research, public history, and civic remembrance.

What the North Carolina story offers us now

It is easy to read these wartime episodes as inspiring vignettes, the kind that end with professional pride and a warm glow. The deeper lesson is more demanding. North Carolina's library history shows that democratic infrastructure is not self-sustaining. It requires visible work and invisible maintenance, steady coordination and repeated political defense. It also requires a willingness to function as an organizing institution, not merely as a passive warehouse of materials.

By 1943, that organizing role was on full display. North Carolina librarians were simultaneously lobbying for appropriations, bracing for the loss of WPA clerical staffing and book mending support, sustaining rural access through regional cooperation and bookmobile routes, coordinating Victory Book Campaign donations with clear professional standards about what should, and should not, be sent, and participating in statewide war records collection that treated documentation as a public responsibility ("Library appropriations," 1943; Johnson, 1943; Worthy & House, 1943; "Victory book campaign," 1943). Read together, these efforts show a profession operating as infrastructure, building and defending the systems that made access, coordination, and collective memory possible under wartime strain. The arc of State Aid, beginning in 1941 and explicitly intended to promote, support, and equalize public library service, helps explain how North Carolina could translate emergency-scale expansion into a more durable statewide commitment (State Library of North Carolina, n.d.).

For those of us working in North Carolina libraries today, the point is not nostalgia for a simpler era. It is to notice how clearly the profession articulated its public function, and how concretely it organized community participation through trusted systems. Roads require budgets, repairs, and advocates. So do libraries. Collections require stewardship, selection, and sometimes the willingness to say no to what will not serve the reader. Our predecessors put it bluntly: "Quality is more important than quantity" ("Victory book campaign," 1943, p. 7).

Democracy, especially in periods of strain, depends on institutions that can provide knowledge where it is needed, keep it usable, and preserve the record of what happened. North Carolina's wartime library work shows we have done that before, with creativity, grit, and an insistence that access is not an abstract virtue. It is something you build, and then keep building.

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