

THE ORIGINS OF THE NORTH CAROLINA
STATE LIBRARY, 1700-1840

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This study describes the early period of North Carolina history which culminated in the birth of the North Carolina State Library. This historical research represents a perspective on early interest in the creation and development of state libraries, North Carolina in particular.

Research materials were accessed through the use of the North Carolina State Library, the North Carolina State Capitol, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill general collections. The study was limited to early colonial interest in collecting literature, the birth of the North Carolina State Library, and its conjunction with the North Carolina Library organizations which produced the present-day library system.

Headings:

State Library – North Carolina

State Libraries – History

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INTRODUCTION

In 1671 Sir William Berkley, one of the Lord Proprietors of North Carolina, praised God that “there are no free schools and no printing, and I hope we shall have none these hundred years” in North Carolina (Weeks, 1891, 7). Was his remark a curse, destiny? Indeed, it was over a hundred years before North Carolina had its own first library. In 1812 the North Carolina State Library was established to aid state-level government officials in their research.

Most North Carolinians are not aware that the original North Carolina State Library was housed in the North Carolina State House from 1824 until the building’s destruction by fire in 1831. The library was re-established in the newly built North Carolina State Capitol from 1840 until 1888 (Beck, 1981). Even President Madison donated volumes from his own personal collection to the state after this fire (York, 1977).

This state library was used only by state officials until 1845 when the general public was at last admitted. The collection grew from 2,000 volumes to over 40,000, which occupied all areas of the Capitol, including the closets (York, 1977). This tremendous growth of the collection forced the North Carolina State Library to be relocated to a new building in 1888, which is currently utilized as the State Labor Building. The modern establishment is the Archives and History / State Library

Building, circa 1969. This present day location is on Jones Street between the State Legislative Building and the Executive Mansion (Beck, 1981).

Today the original State Library Room, within the third floor of the State Capitol, is being carefully restored to its original appearance. After the restoration is completed it will be open, once again, for public viewing and historical purposes. The State Capitol Cultural Resources staff and a group of restoration experts, as well as architects, are currently studying the library's original appearance through such clues as diaries, ghost marks, purchase orders, and other documents. A previous restoration effort in the 1980's restored the library to its 1850's period appearance (Capitol Education Staff, 1997). Through the years various reports have been compiled which detail certain developments and programs in the history of the State Library as well.

These studies have brought much of the State Library's early period and history to light. However, the climate surrounding the early development has not been studied in depth. This paper attempts to provide historical enlightenment as to the political and intellectual stimulus of those times which were responsible for sparking the creation of the State Library as we know it.

CHAPTER I

LITERARY DIFFERENCES IN EARLY COLONIES

Sir William Berkley's early declaration concerning the absence of the printed word in North Carolina was not as strange as it may seem. In 1671 the Southern colonies were ruled by the Lord Proprietors or by the crown; and for this reason the colonists there were not encouraged to be well versed (Weeks, 1891, 7). Information is power and in this case the power was held in the hands of the few and the wealthy. Fear of the loss of that power entrapped the masses without opportunity to access knowledge through the written word or even basic literacy.

Conversely, the New England colonies were established by those who came to the New World in search of freedoms. They gained the ability to govern their communities at an earlier time than their Southern neighbors. This privilege naturally extended to encourage the New England colonists to read, write, and share their information freely among one another (Weeks, 1891, 6).

This in turn led to another cause for disparity in literature availability between the Northern and Southern colonies. The thirst for freedoms in the North led to freedom of education. Public schools were widespread on an early basis. Through these schools, as well as private colleges established there, reading was encouraged and widely available.

In the South, schools were private and most often restricted to the planter class, an aristocracy, the people already financially enabled to own resources. In effect, private schools systems only reinforced social and intellectual class restrictions, rather than allowing them to expand to all classes of North Carolinians.

A geographic complexity further inhibited the growth of information sharing in the South. The warm climate and flat, fertile land of the Southern colonies created an agricultural based economy. Prosperous planters and small farmers alike were separated by miles, even days at times, from their nearest neighbor. In 1663, for instance, there was less than one person for each square mile in North Carolina (Smiley, 1971) This extreme distance placed definite limitations on the ability to share resources. Northern communities, quite unlike the South, were well populated in dense, tight communities. It was necessary for survival in a rugged, cold environment with hostile Indians. Hence, there existed a unified cause (Weeks, 1891, 6).

The lack of safe ports of entry in the South again acted as a detrimental force in the literacy of the colonists. There were few opportunities for ships to introduce books, for there were other basic commodities deemed far more necessary. Whereas, in New England a progressive shipping industry afforded the colonists there greater opportunity to amass literature (Weeks, 1891, 7). It was, in fact, a New Englander who introduced the first free library in the state much later. In 1887, Charles Hallett Wing, a former member of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, opened the Good-Will Library in the community of Ledger, when he retired. The books were discards of the Boston Public Library (Mitchell, 1983, 3).

Despite the many obstacles to intellectual development in the Southern colonies, the colonists there did possess a meager amount of books. As early as 1676 books were listed in Southern wills (Smiley, 1971, 3). The surviving early North Carolina wills and household inventories which mention books as possessions are the best indication of the importance and value books held in the early colonial period.

CHAPTER II

EARLY NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES

Regardless of the many disadvantages in creating libraries in early North Carolina, the strong and solid spirit of book collection was emerging. Col. Fred A. Olds; curator of the North Carolina Hall of History, now the State History Museum, proclaimed in an article appearing in the *North Carolina Library Bulletin* in 1914 that in colonial North Carolina “a book was a treasure indeed, and reading aloud from it was one of the most prized of accomplishments” (63).

It was Col. Olds, on a foray for historic artifacts in 1908, who discovered what is believed to be the oldest surviving private library in the state, containing books dating between the 16th century and 1830. This library, of one James Hassell, was found in its original state in a home near the Greenville Sound. Col. Olds state that “the bindings and the pages of the books in this quaint old library show clearly that they had much use in most cases” (Olds, 63). Today that private collection resides in the safety of the State Archives.

The joy and pride Col. Olds expressed in discovering this forgotten library of the past does not exceed the pride the original booklovers took in their collections. Books were not an uncommon entry in wills and household inventories of early North Carolina.

Hayes' Plantation, is now a private house museum; much of the library remains

intact there. The library included the personal books of both Governor Eden and his son-in-law Governor Gabriel Johnston (Smiley, 1971, 13-15). This library is reputed to have held over 1,527 general titles in addition to over 3,000 law books in 1830 (Mitchell, 1983, 2).

Of course extraordinary private libraries of this nature were the exception rather than the rule. For the majority of North Carolinians books were few and held sacred. In fact, most books listed in early North Carolina wills were bibles and other religious works. In one case a George Durant possessed a rare Geneva Bible published in 1599 (Smiley, 1971, 4, 8). Additionally, law, mathematics, history, dictionaries, grammar, and poetry books are regularly referred to in early wills.

Books were so prized that an unusual warning is alluded to in several wills. For example, Sarah Allen warned her nieces that they should never lend out the books they would inherit from her for fear that they may not be returned (Smiley, 1971, 9). Such hesitation shows clearly the high value placed on books.

Unfortunately, many private libraries of the South were destroyed or lost during the American Revolution as homes were abandoned, or destroyed by the British. In the period following the Revolution, library societies, circulating libraries, and debating societies became a fast growing trend. As early as 1794 the Fayetteville Library Society was incorporated by the North Carolina General Assembly (Mitchell, 1983, 2). Such societies were generally operated by a group whose members paid an annual fee for the use of the books owned jointly. By 1848 thirty-two societies had gained incorporation status from the state General Assembly (Mitchell, 1983, 2).

North Carolinians were seeking to share information through other mediums as well. By the end of the eighteenth century, seventeen different newspapers were established at various times and at various levels of success (Weeks, 1891, 49). There is an array of reasons why the press struggled in North Carolina. Again newspaper subscription was limited to the wealthy members of the plantation class; whose large land holdings meant that they were scattered. This made delivery difficult. Additionally, paper was a precious commodity. The Revolution had caused Great Britain to place embargoes on trade, and the Southern states were hit hard by the restriction. There were few printing presses in the South and fewer still paper mills to produce the necessary paper. Women were urged to save their rags, and scraps of linen in particular, for the use of the paper mill (Weeks, 1891, 50-53).

Joseph Gales, editor of the *Raleigh Register*, was a prominent figure in the North Carolina literary arena. He alone was responsible for a successful book-binding, printing, publishing, and book store operation (Weeks, 1891, 47).

Aside from private library collections and early library societies; North Carolina enjoyed the benefits of many college and university libraries. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davidson College, Fayette Academy in Salem, the Mission School at Valle Crucis, and Wake Forest College were considered to hold suitable libraries by the mid-nineteenth century according to Charles C. Jewett, librarian of the Smithsonian Library (Mitchell, 1983, 2).

In the 1789 charter of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a provision stipulated that the library was to be named after the largest benefactor of the college (Smiley, 1971, 19). No doubt, this was done to encourage financial gifts; however, it

Patriae Honor et Liberatas” (Smiley, 1971, 15).

CHAPTER III

THE STATE LIBRARY

In 1749 Governor Johnston lamented that,

“The Publick Records lye in a miserable condition one part of them at Edenton near the Virginia Line in a place without Lock or Key: a great part of them in the Secretarys House at Cape Fear above Two Hundred miles Distance from the other Some few of ‘em at the Clerk of the Council’s House at Newbern, so that in whatever part of the Colony a man happens to be, if he wants to consult any paper or record he must send some Hundred of Miles before he can come at it” (Governor Johnston, 1749).

Only a few years later the condition remained much the same. *The North Carolina Magazine* for 1764 admonished in its editorial that public records were moved, haphazardly, by cart from the old colonial capitol of New Bern to the new seat of government in Wilmington. The editorial questioned the people “Can you see the PUBLIC RECORDS Carted from Place to Place ... trusted to the Mercy of a Shower of Rain, and at the Discretion of a Cart-Driver? Forbid it Heaven!

In 1792 property was bought from Colonel Joel Lane to establish the new, central State Capitol in Raleigh, Wake County (Capitol Education Staff, 1997). The State Capitol, then called the State House, was designed in the center of the city. Within its walls most of the State government was housed, with the exception of the Governor’s office which was located at the Governor’s Palace, now demolished.

At the time a State Library did not exist. This was not uncommon at this period, only Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia established official library collections during the colonial period. For the most part the states slowly amassed legislative papers and other official documents until a series of laws were passed in the early nineteenth century. Among these was an 1811 Massachusetts law requiring its secretary of state to exchange copies of its statutes with those of other states. In 1813 Congress passed a similar law in which the federal government was ordered to send one copy of each *Congressional Journal* and other documents to each respective state. In 1812 North Carolina had officially directed its secretary of state to collect and maintain legal documents for the use of state government officials in a bookcase within his office at the State House (York, 1992, 31-34). These included the legislative laws, acts and journals and other treaties, books, and other such documents (York, 1992, 31-34). It was common for states at this time to instruct a public official to assume a double role including the responsibilities of a librarian (Conant, 1926, 331).

North Carolina's secretary of state in 1812 was William Hill, a Raleigh businessman (York, 1977). In 1817, five years after the General Assembly required Hill to begin collecting records, they officially proclaimed him State Librarian, whose duties included labeling and numbering books, preparing catalogs, maintaining circulation records, and keeping an expense account (York, 1992, 31). Despite these multiple duties, the position was considered part of the responsibilities of the Secretary of State. Hill served in this double capacity until 1827 (York, 1977, 9). On November 22, 1813 Hill presented the first "catalogue" to the State.

The legislature refined the scope of the library over the subsequent years. In 1816 the General Assembly allotted an annual purchase amount of \$250 for the State Library. The next year a committee led by Archibald DeBow Murphey passed extensive rules for the librarian's compliance. Already the library was reflecting the statutes and legislation of other states and the federal government through exchanges of legislative papers. The State Library was growing quickly through donations and gifts also. The legislature later increased the annual appropriation to \$500 for the years 1841 until 1921 (Mitchell, 1983, 3).

On June 11, 1816 a fire threatened nearly all of the buildings within the first several blocks of Fayetteville Street. The street begins at the southern side of Union Square. Without delay a resolution was formed which called for the "erection of a fire-proof house for the preservation of the public records belonging to this state, to be placed on the Union Square" (*Laws of North Carolina Magazine*, 1812). The resolution called for four apartments, one of which was to house the State Library. Construction was completed around 1819 and the library was moved into its new fireproof home.

In 1818 it was decided that the State House should be remodeled, and extensive repairs commenced. Giles Johnston, a Raleigh carpenter, built one bookcase eleven by ten feet for the new "Libery" (Capitol Education Staff, 1997). In 1825 the State Library moved back into the third floor of the State House; that same year the renovations were completed. In 1831 it was decided to fireproof the wooden shingles of the roof by pouring melted zinc on the roof. Unfortunately, workmen left the work unattended to eat breakfast and the entire building was destroyed by fire (York, 1992, 31). The library was lost. Only the items on loan at the time survived, consisting of only about one

hundred and seventeen volumes (York, 1992, 31). Fortunately, some state documents also were in storage in the “fireproof house.” After the fire the aforementioned Joseph Gales was appointed by the legislature to attempt to acquire copies of North Carolina’s legislation and journals (York, 1992, 31).

Gale’s efforts weren’t the only movements to expand the library’s holdings at this time. A Literary Board had been created in 1825 to encourage progressive measures in public schools. The governor served as its president. This same board was ordered by the General Assembly to select and purchase appropriate books and material for the State Library. This Literary Board authorized the purchase of law books in 1835 and negotiated the purchase of the late Archibald DeBow Murphey’s personal library (York, 1992, 32).

The Literary Board also formed a State Library board of trustees between 1840 and 1843. The legislature accepted the proposed board with the governor and Supreme Court justices as trustees. The legislation also provided for a full-time state librarian, although the board reserved the right to make the library's purchases. James Fauntleroy Taylor, Jr. was the first full-time librarian appointed in 1843 (York, 1977, 114).

In 1840 the new State Capitol was completed and the State Library was installed on the third floor. This was the safe haven for the State Library until parts of the collection were removed as General Sherman approached Raleigh in 1865 and the Capitol was then occupied by his soldiers. Miraculously, the entire Capitol and city were spared the desolate fate of other Southern capitols during the Civil War.

The Gothic style room was used until 1888 when the library moved into the present day Labor Building (Beck, 1981). Today the State Capitol has been restored to

its original appearance and the original State Library Room is available for public viewing.

CHAPTER IV

LIBRARY ORGANIZATIONS AND LIBRARY LEGISLATION

At the turn of the 20th century another movement was underway which would soon revolutionize the North Carolina State Library. The American Library Association had been established in 1876. Annie Smith Ross, the librarian for the Charlotte Carnegie Library, was in attendance at the ALA's 1899 annual meeting in Atlanta. At the time, North Carolina was not represented by an ALA chapter. Ross was responsible for organizing the effort in North Carolina. She made inquiries into the organization of other state chapters and on May 14th, 1904 a meeting was held at the State Normal and Industrial College in Greensboro, now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Others attended in addition to Ross: Annie Petty and Charles D. McIver of the State Normal and Industrial College; Betty D. Caldwell of the Public Library of Greensboro; J.P. Breedlove of Trinity College, now Duke University; R.D. Douglas of the Greensboro News Company; and Louis Round Wilson, librarian of the University of North Carolina. It was this stellar, academic group who were responsible for the initial organization of the A.L.A.-affiliated North Carolina Library Association, as well as the composition of the original by-laws and the first meeting of the NCLA in Charlotte (Mitchell, 1983, 13).

At the response of Ross's correspondence with other state librarians, seventeen charter members were signed by November of 1904. Their primary aim was to increase professional awareness through active participation with one another (Mitchell, 1983, 14).

One of the NCLA's ideas was to foster professional library growth in North Carolina through the formation of a library commission. Already by 1896 seven different states had created their own legislation which encouraged government participation in library development. In 1906 John Pendleton Kennedy, the Virginia state librarian, stated that North Carolina could not afford to not form a library commission to promote and improve libraries throughout the state (Mitchell, 1983, 15). The State Library limited its patron body to the legislature, state government officials and state employees. This was an opportunity to expand credible library service to all citizens across the state.

On March 9, 1909 the North Carolina legislature ratified an act that established the North Carolina Library Commission, designated to assist and advise all established and proposed libraries in the state (Smiley, 1971, 126). It also made provision for public and school libraries to present annual reports to the commission, consisting of the state librarian, state superintendent of public instruction, two members of the North Carolina Library Association, and one member appointed by the governor (Mitchell, 1983, 15). In the year of its creation the North Carolina Library Commission implemented an ambitious project of traveling libraries in the state and began the publication of the *North Carolina Library Bulletin* (Smiley, 1971).

The successful effort by the North Carolina Library Commission in operating traveling libraries between 1914 and 1916 spawned a statewide interest in creating

libraries. By December of 1915 the demand was so great that the Library Commission adopted the slogan, "A free public library in every town in North Carolina by 1920." Stipulations called for towns of 2,000 or more citizens with no existing public library to be targeted in the effort. During the same time frame many town and city governments in the state began to support tax levies for the benefit of their public libraries (Smiley, 1971, 128-135).

Despite these multiple efforts in the first two decades of the twentieth century, North Carolina continued to lag behind other states in its literary reputation. The ALA revealed in 1926 that sixty-eight percent of North Carolinians did not have easy access to a public library. At the NCLA's 1927 annual meeting Frank Porter Graham, then a professor at UNC-CH stated that forty-seven of North Carolina's hundred counties lacked a library. He challenged his fellow members to effect a change (Mitchell, 1983, 34-35).

In response the North Carolina Citizen's Library Movement was established at the same NCLA meeting. In spite of the Depression, the Citizen's Library Movement rallied to increase urban and rural libraries.

EPILOGUE:
THE PRESENT DAY

Today the North Carolina State Library operates as a division of Archives and History of the Department of Cultural Resources. This division is responsible for preserving and maintaining a record of North Carolina's rich cultural heritage (Programs and Services).

The present day State Library considers its mission to be the provision and distribution of information and resources to promote the fields of knowledge, education and commerce in the state. The library continues to serve as the official depository of state government publications and as a partial depository for federal documents as well (Information Services).

In keeping with modern advancements the library has moved beyond its rudimentary beginnings and is forging ahead to stay abreast of modern technological advancements including Internet access, CD-ROM products, electronic indexes to newspapers, periodicals, and other resources, and a public access, automated catalog of the State Library collection available through its homepage. The State Library's most recent addition is its creation of NCLIVE (Information Services).

Despite the State Library's additional services and programs its basic purpose remains the same, to aid in "providing customized research assistance and deliver(y) (of) the information promptly" as touted in current promotional literature (Information Services). What was originally founded in 1812 as a collection of legal reference materials gathered to ease the research of government officials, has today evolved into a dynamic power to serve not only state government but businesses and all of North Carolina citizens (Information Services).

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