

History of Athens Regional Library

The Athens Woman's Club voted on March 10, 1936, to start a public library for the residents of the city of Athens and Clarke County. The Library Committee of the Club, led by Mrs. John J. Wilkins, Jr., worked with the Georgia Library Commission, WPA, city officials and community leaders to organize the service. Initially, WPA provided a trained librarian, the city budgeted \$25 per month for operating costs, and materials were donated by residents.

The first location was in a building adjacent to the National Bank of Athens at 283 E. Broad Street. Mrs. Hamilton McWhorter was the first librarian and the library contained over 1000 books on April 7, 1936, the grand opening date. Patrons were permitted to borrow one volume of fiction and one non-fiction for two weeks. Service to six schools was also established.



In that first year, 13,901 books were circulated and 1,977 patrons were registered. Story hours were held each Saturday to attract children. Belk's Department Store held a Library Day promotion with the store providing a generous donation. Other Clubs also provided generous gifts.

The Library continued to grow in 1937 with circulation totaling 59,737. Hours were expanded, and the Library began offering new programs such as a Wednesday afternoon music appreciation hour and a weekly radio program on WTII. The Library was relocated to the YMCA building on Lumpkin Street at Broad Street on October 15, 1937.

By 1938, circulation totaled 75,882; eight schools were visited monthly; two weekly radio programs were offered; and the County Commission began providing regular financial support.

In 1940, WPA authorities began working with the Library Board to organize a regional library system. In October, 1940, the Athens Regional Library System was formed with three counties, Clarke, Oconee and Oglethorpe, participating. A bookmobile and staff were added to serve Clarke County plus 13 schools and 14 communities in Oglethorpe County and 7 schools and 15 community stops in Oconee County.

The Dunbar Branch Library was opened on August 15, 1942, in the Knox Institute Building at the corner of Pope and Reese Streets. This Library was available to all Black residents of Clarke County. Dunbar was one of only 13 public libraries available to Blacks in Georgia.

WPA contributions to the budget were withdrawn in 1944. Financial support was provided by the state and local governments. By 1944, the YMCA building was overcrowded and a sizeable number of books were stored at the Southern Mutual Building. In 1945 the bookmobile department was moved to the basement of the Clarke County Courthouse. The board began investigating possible expansion plans.

In 1946, the system lost its director and bookmobile librarian which in turn caused the suspension of service and temporary loss of state funds. Miss Mary Townes was eventually hired as Director and began to rebuild the service. The DAR collection was added in 1946; bookmobile service was reinstated, story hours and radio programs were provided, hospital service was begun, and there was considerable newspaper coverage.

In 1947, voters were asked to approve the issuance of \$50,000 in bonds for the purchase of the Stern House and a vacant lot located on the corner of Hancock Street and College Avenue next to the First Presbyterian Church. Remodeling work began under the direction of C. Wilmer Heery, architect, and Hubert Owens, landscape architect from UGA. Donations for the purchase of furniture and equipment came from a wide variety of businesses and individuals. That structure was dedicated on March 13, 1949.

Sarah Maret became director in 1950. Regional circulation grew to 198,357 books that year. In 1951, the Library was selected to participate in the American Heritage project which involved discussion groups at four regional locations.

In February 1953, Madison County joined the region bringing the population served to 65,750. The library system offered an exciting reading club, exhibits, hobby programs, flags of other nations donated by the League of Women Voters, and other programs.

A Grecian urn estimated to be 2,600 years old was donated to the Library in 1955. The urn was presented by Evangelos Terzapoulos of Athens, Greece, as a token of friendship for the city. In 1957, the Dunbar Library moved to remodeled quarters in the home economics building of the Athens High and Industrial School on Reese Street. Book reviews on Radio WGAU became regular features.

In 1958, the library offered its first auto-book return. The staff began working with the Red Cross to provide library service to patients at Athens General Hospital. The children's department benefitted from class projects of students at UGA. Other programs included poetry readings, travelogues, author teas, flower clinics, and art shows.

The library continued to grow in services, collections and staff. By 1967 it was very apparent that the library had out-grown its building and board members once again approached county officials with expansion plans. They proposed a 21,000 square foot facility to be located on the corner of Lumpkin and Dougherty Streets. The entire project cost was \$700,000 which included \$250,000 federal funds and \$450,000 bond funds. George Heery and Loren Goldsmith served as architects with Terry Construction as contractor. The building was dedicated on May 24, 1970.

The seventies brought a change in directors when Sarah Maret retired and was succeeded by Roxanna Austin. Franklin County joined the region in 1974, and this additional county precipitated the addition of a second bookmobile which served rural Franklin County residents. The Winterville Branch in Clarke County opened on June 15, 1974 and the Colbert Library in Madison County opened on June 29, 1976. Both were originally staffed by volunteers with Winterville eventually acquiring paid staff. Facilities



of branches began to require improvements and a new library was constructed in Watkinsville (May 23, 1976) and the Lavonia-Carnegie Library remodeled (February 4, 1979). The Library was selected as one of 13 statewide centers for the Talking Book Center in 1974. The TBC was located in the library for two years before rapid growth forced the Center to relocate into a storefront on Hull Street.

The decade of the eighties brought more construction with the Royston Library dedicating a new facility on November 1, 1981; Oglethorpe County moving into a new facility April 16, 1984; an extensive addition to the Oconee County Library dedicated September 20, 1987; and a new facility for Madison County (dedication in 1989). The Talking Book Center also moved to larger quarters on Lumpkin Street.

The Library actively sought funding to support public programming and has been quite successful in obtaining grants from a variety of sources. This activity prompted the Clarke County Office of Cultural Affairs to present the Library with a Community Cultural Award for outstanding public programs.

With the retirement of Roxanna Austin in 1986 and the appointment of Kathryn Ames as director, the library board hired a consultant to do a needs assessment and long-range plan. It was very apparent that additional library space was needed; and after long discussion it was decided by the Commissioners that the Library would be included in a sales tax referendum. The vote was held on November 3, 1987, and was approved by 70% majority of voters. So as the Library moves into the nineties, Clarke County can look toward a new 60,000 square foot facility which will be located on Baxter Street.

The Library was very active in promoting the referendum package as board members and administrative staff provided leadership on key committees and speaking to groups. The Library offers literacy training, tutorial projects, special programs for adults and children, and a variety of outreach projects. The projected facility will permit expansion of these services and the addition of young adult programs. One of the most positive additions has been the formation of the Friends of the Clarke County Library. The Friends actively supported the referendum, sponsored Family Fun Day, organized the annual book sale, and volunteer regularly with projects. This group will be vital to the library's continued success.