

Chapter 1

The Beginning of the Free Public Library System in the United States and Alabama

The early library movement in Alabama was slow to gain momentum. Many other states across the country, especially outside of the South, began taking advantage of early library legislation in the nineteenth century to help provide tax-supported libraries throughout their cities and communities. Alabama's early libraries were established mainly as subscription and society libraries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This trend in library development was decades behind other regions of the country. Not until the women's social clubs adopted the cause of public libraries in Alabama did the movement begin to take root to form a foundation for library development in the state. This chapter looks at the early legislation allowing for the creation of libraries in the United States and the creation of state library agencies. It also examines the early beginnings of Alabama public libraries and the women's clubs that helped foster early library development in the state.

For free public libraries to exist, states, cities, or municipalities must enact tax legislation to provide the funding to support the libraries. Free tax-supported public libraries in the United States had their beginnings in the early 1800s. New Hampshire created the country's first public library supported by municipal funding in 1833 when the town of Peterboro established a law taxing itself to support a free public library. In 1849 all cities and towns of New Hampshire could take advantage of a general library law providing for free public libraries. Massachusetts

was another state to establish early library legislation. In 1848 Boston levied a tax on the city's inhabitants to support a public library. Shortly thereafter the tax expanded to cover all Massachusetts' cities and towns.¹

Other forms of library legislation appeared around this same time with the development of school district libraries. In 1835 the first school district library was created in New York by legislation authorizing taxes specifically for the use of maintaining a library for the general public in a school district. Several states followed this lead, and by 1873 nineteen states had created school district library laws. Though eventually the idea proved to be insufficient for providing for the population at large both adequate funds and sufficient numbers of books, the school district library laws did provide a base from which to make the next step in the development of true public libraries.

Throughout the nineteenth century some states began to take the same principle of taxing the public to provide for library material and began levying taxes in an effort to create true public libraries. During the second half of the nineteenth century this trend continued to spread through much of the country, and laws were broadened to include libraries supported by the state. By the close of the nineteenth century, twenty-nine states had passed laws providing for the creation of public libraries through taxes. Unfortunately, Alabama was not among this early group.²

Though libraries existed in Alabama in the nineteenth century, public sentiment

¹ United States Bureau of Education, *Public, Society, and School Libraries in the United States*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 524-25.

was not so easily swayed to provide monies for the establishment of free public libraries. There was no legislation providing for taxation to create free public libraries at this time in Alabama, and in 1850 only four public libraries were reported with a total of 3,848 volumes.³ These four libraries were actually public libraries but were not supported by taxes.

Alabama's earliest library legislation providing funding created a State Law Library. Though it did not provide services to the general population it was the first tax-supported library in the state. The library was created on January 19, 1828 when the Library Society of the Bench and Bar of the Supreme Court of Alabama met to discuss the need for a library for its members. The group appointed a committee of five to provide a constitution for the Society. The group wrote a constitution and held an election of officers. Two years later Alabama's first library legislation appeared. The 1830 law provided public funding for the State Law Library in the sum of five hundred dollars, but with the provision that the library was to be used by the members of the General Assembly and the state's Executive Officers.⁴ Though the state claimed an early beginning in the creation of library legislation, the general population did not consider public library development, and the state did not pass legislation for library development for another sixty years.

² George S. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), 5.

³ United States Census Bureau. Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research, "United States Historical Data Census Browser"; available from <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>; Internet; accessed 22 February, 2000.

⁴ Marie Bankhead Owen, *The Story of Alabama: A History of the State*, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1949), 277-279.

Near the end of the century, across the country, library legislation had grown from single laws allowing local governments to collect taxes to support school district libraries to legislation enabling first individual towns and then states to collect taxes in support of free public libraries. As the movement grew, legislation regarding libraries also expanded to include provisions for the creation of independent state agencies to oversee library development within states.

The development of these state agencies was so widespread that the United States Bureau of Education listed in its 1895-96 bulletin eight provisions important to creating state library law:⁵

1. Library law should be general in definition of libraries.
2. Library law should allow for establishment of public libraries.
3. Library law should provide for maintenance by taxation.
4. Library law should allow trustees and boards to manage the libraries.
5. Library law should impose penalties on those violating library use privileges.
6. Library law should provide for the collection of State publications and their free distribution.
7. Library law should allow a State commission to oversee public library interests in the state.
8. Library law should give State commissions authority to provide assistance in administering state aid and instruction.

Several states acted on the last provision and created state library commissions was enacted by several states. Outside of the South, the tax-supported library service movement continued in the 1890s when states such as Massachusetts and Wisconsin adopted legislation creating independent state library commissions funded by state appropriations. A number of other states, including Ohio, Wyoming, and New York, also created agencies to guide the development of their public libraries.

⁵ United States Bureau of Education, *Public, Society, and School Libraries*, 1903, 527-528.

However, even as states enacted library legislation, not all provided sufficient funding to maintain the agency. Some states were quick to pass laws providing for state programs but did not always follow with the needed funding to maintain the program. After the turn of the century many states establishing state programs experienced a constant roller coaster of funding. These new departments received funding one year, only to have it cut the next. In 1934 West Virginia's governor included \$100,000 in the 1934 budget for development of public libraries, but the allotment was later cut by the legislature before passing the budget. Arkansas's Free Public Library Service Bureau's appropriations were cut to zero in 1933 after being in operation for only a few years.⁶

Alabama continued to lag behind even these states in forming a publicly funded statewide library system. Thus, the state lacked adequate library resources well into the twentieth century. Alabama did not witness the creation of a separate agency devoted solely to the formation, administration, and funding of public libraries until 1959. A tax supported public library system serving every county was not completed until 1974.

While it was obvious that Alabama lagged far behind much of the country in enacting library legislation and in establishing libraries, it was not different from its neighboring states. In the late 1800s Alabama was about average when compared to other southern states. In 1885 Alabama claimed 41 libraries, only eight of which were public libraries, not belonging to a private society, educational or state institution. Of these eight, only four reported to be truly free

⁶Tommie Dora Barker, *Libraries of the South: A Report on Developments, 1930-1935*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1936), 16-23.

libraries, not charging subscription fees of their users as shown in Table 1.⁷ None of the eight were tax-supported libraries.

Table 1.--Public Libraries in Alabama, 1885*

Place	Name of Library	When Founded	Type	Free or Subscription	Number of Volumes
Florence	Ladies Library	1885	Social	Free	350
Gainesville	Gainesville Book Club	1870	Social	Subscription	820
Huntsville	Young Men's Christian Association	1885	YMCA	Free	500
Marion	Young Men's Christian Association	1885	YMCA	Free	800
Mobile	Mobile Library	1879	General	Subscription	5,500
Opelika	Library Association	1877	General	Subscription	700
Selma	Young Men's Christian Association	**	YMCA	Free	1,000
Tuscaloosa	Book Club	1876	Social	Subscription	400

*Includes all libraries reporting over 300 volumes.

**Not reported.

Source: United States. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, *Statistics of Public Libraries in the United States*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886), 691.

Most libraries in Alabama in the late nineteenth century were academic or school libraries. Of the forty-one reported in 1885, twenty-one were affiliated with a college, university or school. Table 2 shows the total number of libraries reported in the deep South in 1885 was 328 (or 6%) of the nation's 5,338 total number of libraries. The region did not fare any better in the 1900 report. Statistics reveal Alabama with only nine general, or non-

⁷ United States. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, *Statistics of Public Libraries in the United States*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886), 691. These statistics include all libraries with 300

subscription, libraries. That year the nation claimed 1, 979 general libraries, and the deep South counted for a mere fifty-four (or .03%) of this total.⁸

Table 2.--Total Number of Libraries in Deep South, 1885-86*

State	Population	Number of Libraries	Number of Volumes
Alabama	1,513,017	41	95,303
Arkansas	1,128,179	16	48,143
Florida	391,422	14	26,660
Georgia	1,837,353	66	230,714
Louisiana	1,118,587	42	139,759
Mississippi	1,289,600	37	96,072
South Carolina	1,151,149	40	176,563
Tennessee	1,767,518	72	195,186

*Total number of libraries reporting over 300 volumes.

Sources: United States. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, *Statistics of Public Libraries in the United States*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886), 691; Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research, "United States Historical Data Census Browser, 1890"; available from <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>; Internet; accessed 22 February, 2000.

Subscription libraries had been in existence throughout the country for many years, levying fees on users for the upkeep and maintenance of library collections. But as the nineteenth century neared its end, these subscription libraries had often evolved into free public libraries.⁹ As in most other states, many of Alabama's libraries had their beginning as

and greater volumes of books.

⁸ For the purpose of this study the Deep South is made up of the following states: Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina and Tennessee. *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1899-1900, Vol. 1*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), 931.

⁹ Haynes McMullen, "The Very Slow Decline of the American Social Library," *Library Quarterly* 55 (2), 1985: 207.

subscription libraries, but Alabama lagged behind much of the country in turning its subscription libraries into free public libraries. In 1901 the United States Bureau of Education published detailed statistics on public, society, and school libraries in the United States. The report listed libraries across the country by various size and type and by 1900 forty-eight states boasted 2,734 free libraries. Of these only six were located in Alabama.¹⁰

Alabama was not completely without public libraries prior to the twentieth century. There were a number of libraries in Alabama during the late 1800s, mostly in larger cities around the state. Some Alabama cities formed private associations such as the Selma Library Association in 1884 and the Fairhope Library Association in 1888. A number of other libraries followed in the 1890s in Gadsden, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa and Union Springs.¹¹

Even though some Alabama libraries had early beginnings, maintaining an existence through the years proved difficult to some, such as the library in Selma. Thomas Walker reportedly opened the city's first library in 1830, a library which later ceased to exist. It was not until the late 1800s, when the Selma YMCA and the Selma Library Association formed, that library service returned to the city. In 1890 Dr. John H. Phillips, the Superintendent of Birmingham Schools, created a library for use by the system's teachers and students. In 1891 the library was transformed into a subscription library for the general public's use for a yearly fee of two dollars and later became the

¹⁰ *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1899-1900*, 928. These statistics include all libraries with 1,000 and greater volumes of books.

the Birmingham Free Public Library.¹²

Several factors were to blame for the slow emergence of interest in public library development in Alabama. When research into library development began after World War I, scholars concluded that the South as a whole was without basic library services due to a variety of factors.¹³ The economic hard times faced after the Civil War kept libraries low on the list of priorities while rebuilding roads and establishing school systems found tax support. In 1900 the per capita wealth of the region was estimated at \$509, while that of the country as a whole was \$1165.¹⁴ This disparity continued to exist as the South lagged behind the rest of the country well into the twentieth century.

Not only was Alabama part of the economically depressed South, but the state was mostly rural with few large cities. Support for public libraries was hard to gather through such small tax bases. In 1900, Alabama's urban population counted for only 13% of the total population. Across the state 1,591,027 people lived in towns of less than 2,500 inhabitants.¹⁵

¹¹ Hulen Bivins, "Ability with Age: the History of the Alabama Public Library Service, 1969 (?)" [photocopy], p. 2, Vertical file, Alabama Public Library Service, Montgomery, AL.

¹² Owen, *The Story of Alabama: A History of the State*, 301. Elizabeth Parks Beamguard, "Alabama Public Libraries: How the Story Began, (1970)" [photocopy], p. 5, Vertical file, Alabama Public Library Service, Montgomery, AL.

¹³ Barker, *Libraries of the South*, 1-8.

¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: State University Press, 1971), 318.

¹⁵ United States Census Bureau. Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research, "United States Historical Data Census Browser."

Even with all of these impediments, several individuals and organizations worked throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to bring about the development of libraries throughout the state of Alabama. Across the United States women's clubs played an important role as early proponents of public library service.

Formed in April 1895, the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs (AFWC) was made up of literary clubs from throughout the state. The Federation came to be a force for social improvement throughout Alabama and was one of the first groups to promote the development of libraries in Alabama.

The AFWC's initial efforts for literary advancement among its members soon broadened and at the annual convention in 1897 the group added philanthropic efforts, including library development, to its interests. The AFWC took special interest in education and literacy in the late 1890s. Libraries were a natural and obvious connection to these interests. A year after the various clubs joined the Federation the group made a call for philanthropic efforts and the outreach of the AFWC began to have an impact in these areas throughout the state.

The first effort in library development for the AFCW was a recommendation made at the 1897 convention to assist in creating a library for the Alabama Girls' Industrial School. In the two years following this call for help, the library acquired 600 books through gifts. During the 1897 meeting the Federation also took up the issue of travelling libraries. The group discussed the idea of the travelling library and the possibilities of operating such libraries. The meeting ended with a resolution "to investigate the travelling library, its content and method of

operating, etc., with a view to sending such libraries into communities without library advantages."¹⁶

During the 1899 annual convention the Federation reported having "350 books, 300 magazines, ten book cases" for its travelling libraries, and had already transported the cases to five rural areas with favorable results. The AFWC funded twelve travelling libraries the following year, but a growing concern emerged about the costs levied on library users. The Federation wanted to eliminate the fees for using the travelling library service and make them truly free public libraries. The cost of transporting books was so great it was necessary to mandate a fee to provide for their transportation and it eventually became an obstacle to continuing the program. Though the next three years showed "an increase in interest and use of the libraries" as well as "contributions for their upkeep," the organization continued to lack the funding and personnel needed to continue the travelling library program.¹⁷ By 1903 the AFWC had enlisted the help of the Alabama Education Association to help find the areas in most need of the travelling libraries, and the following year interest in the libraries reportedly continued to increase. As the need increased, the Federation found it harder to keep the libraries circulating.

Transportation costs became the largest obstacle, and in 1905 the committee on Travelling Libraries transferred the responsibility to the newly formed Alabama Library

¹⁶ Lura Harris Craighead, *History of The Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, 1895 to 1918, Vol. I*, (Montgomery, AL: Paragon Press, 1936), 26-27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

Association (ALA). The Federation continued to work towards library development in the state. In the seven years between 1897 and 1905 during which the group took on library development as an effort, fifteen travelling libraries circulated approximately 1,000 volumes, Alabama Girls Industrial School had a new library, and the AFWC had sent over 2,000 books to rural schools throughout the state. The Federation's efforts in library development did not end here.¹⁸

The AFWC not only funded travelling libraries but also helped to create libraries among its Study Clubs. Individual clubs maintained a library within a town store or home. The town of Tuscumbia, Alabama, was home to a new library created by the Literary Association of Tuscumbia. The local literary club furnished the library with a building and staff of volunteers.¹⁹ Mrs. G. Leuddemann of Tuscumbia proudly reported to the annual convention in 1898 the establishment of the library, named for the city's own Helen Keller.

Even after the Federation transferred the responsibilities of the travelling libraries to the ALA the women continued their efforts in public library development. In the 1920s the Federation again undertook a collective effort to promote the use of county funds for free public libraries. The Chairman of the Club's Library Extension Committee, Mrs. L.D. McCollum, proposed that the clubs become familiar with the laws providing funds for county libraries in the state. McCollum wrote that she "endeavored to state a strong movement under the influence of

¹⁸ Ibid., 168.

¹⁹ Beamguard, "How the Story Began," 6.

Alabama clubwomen for the release of county funds provided under state law for the establishment of free county libraries.²⁰ McCollum wanted her fellow AFCW members to send representatives to the various county and city administrators across the state and appeal for the funds to be released.

In the 1930s the AFCW again took up the issue of library development. By this time Alabama was far behind the rest of the country in creating a separate state library commission. Mrs. J.U. Reaves, the Federation president in 1937, lobbied gubernatorial candidates on the issue and also led a grassroots campaign that included speeches, radio addresses, and postcards.²¹ Through these efforts a commission was established, administered by the Alabama Department of Archives and History. The Federation continued its work alongside the Alabama Library Commission and later, when the Alabama Public Library Service was established in 1959, the group worked to obtain both state and federal aid for the continued development of public libraries.

From its start in 1897 the AFWC worked to bring about the development of libraries in the state of Alabama. In 1965, the director of the APLS, Elizabeth Beamguard, gave credit for the creation of three-quarters of Alabama's public libraries to the AFWC.²² The Federation had achieved quite an accomplishment through its continued efforts. However, the work of the women's clubs was not the only force working toward the development of libraries in the state.

²⁰ Mildred White Wells. *History of the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, 1917-1968, Vol. II*, (Montgomery, Alabama: Paragon Press, 1968), 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² *Ibid.*

The newly formed Alabama Library Association, the very group to which the Federation once passed its travelling libraries, also made tremendous contributions to the effort. But it was the founder of the ALA, Thomas M. Owen, who was able to take this early work of the AFWC and the Alabama Library Association and build an even stronger foundation for the development of the tax-supported library system in Alabama.