

Chapter 2

Alabama's Public Libraries Take Shape: Thomas McAdory Owen, Alabama Law, and Carnegie Grants

Public library development in Alabama had its beginnings with women's clubs, but other individuals, laws, and private funding also helped promote and develop public libraries in Alabama. During the first part of the twentieth century Thomas McAdory Owen became one of Alabama's chief public library crusaders and worked diligently to bring about the development of public libraries throughout the state. Not only were individual people responsible for the growth of public libraries, but laws were also created to aid their growth. Without legislation enabling the distribution of funds and taxes, the new public libraries would be without operating budgets. A large boost to the development of the public library in Alabama was a series of philanthropic grants provided by the Carnegie Corporation. These grants provided money to build seventeen library buildings across Alabama. Without the combination of efforts from these three areas, statewide free public library service would not have been established in Alabama.

One of the first individuals to work towards the development of public libraries in the state was Thomas Owen, born in 1866 in Jonesboro, Alabama. After graduating from the University of Alabama in 1887, Owen worked as the city solicitor in Bessemer, Alabama and then as the assistant solicitor of Jefferson County, Alabama until 1894.¹ In 1893 he married Marie Susan Bankhead, daughter of Alabama Senator John Hollis

¹ Wendell H. Stephenson, "Some Pioneer Alabama Historians: III. Thomas M. Owen," *Alabama Review II* (January 1949): 46

Bankhead.² A year later Owen became the Chief Clerk of the Division of Post Office Inspectors, and the Owen family moved to Washington, D.C. After spending three years in Washington the family returned to their home in Alabama in 1897.

While in the nation's capital, Owen showed an interest in history and spent much of his spare time in the Library of Congress. He befriended Ainsworth R. Spofford, who was then Librarian of Congress, and during his three years in the capital, Owen began compiling a bibliography of Alabama and Mississippi.³ Owen's interests in history and the importance of preserving public documents led him to crusade for a state archives upon his return home.

While Alabama cannot say it was a leader in the public library movement, it can claim to be home to the country's first state-supported archives. Working with the Alabama Historical Society, which he helped to revive in 1898, Owen began promoting the idea of a state archives.⁴ In 1901 the Society published a work entitled *Report of the Alabama History Commission to the Governor of Alabama*. In this report Owen set out his recommendations concerning the need for the establishment of a Department of Archives and History that would include an official repository of state documents, a museum, an art gallery and a State library. His dream was realized when the Alabama legislature passed an act creating the Alabama Department of Archives and

² Arthur L. Ketchersid, *Thomas McAdory Owen: Archivist*, (Masters thesis, Florida State University, 1961), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

History (ADAH) in February of 1901 and appropriated \$2,500 to the new state agency.⁵ It was this state-supported archive, the Alabama Department of Archives and History, that cradled the beginnings of Alabama's first state public library agency.

Owen's interest in the development and support of libraries evidenced itself through a variety of projects over the course of his lifetime. Three years after his success with ADAH, Owen and four other civic leaders, including librarians and educators, organized the Alabama Library Association (ALA). During the successful first meeting of the Association on November 21, 1904, an election of officers and installation of fifty members occurred.⁶ Early founding members and officers of the Association included Secretary Junius M. Riggs, who was also the Alabama Supreme Court Librarian, and Treasurer Laura Martin Elmore, the librarian of the Carnegie Library in Montgomery.⁷

The Alabama Library Association met regularly and held programs featuring speakers from around the country. The Association continued to work to improve the interests of libraries throughout the state, and through its work the Association created much of the public support for public libraries. In a 1910 newspaper article Owen wrote of the Association, "[I]t has been a stimulative influence in developing a library sentiment and has given impetus and vitality to the movement." Owen gave great praise

⁵ Stephenson, "Some Pioneer Alabama Historians," 53.

⁶ Thomas M. Owen, "Alabama Libraries and Library Buildings," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 25 December 1910, 1.

⁷ Alabama Library Association, "Annual Convention and Diamond Jubilee 1975." Alabama Department of Archives and History, Public Information Subject Files, SG 6971, Folder 1038, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

to the group in the same article when he wrote, "[T]he greatest service of the association has been the preparation of the way for State supported library work and enterprise."⁸

In 1905 the Association continued the work of the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs by taking over the operation of the travelling libraries. By this time the travelling library system totaled nearly 700 volumes, and the Women's Clubs continued to donate books to the libraries after the Association took over their circulation.⁹ The administration of the travelling libraries was placed under the responsibility of Miss Laura Elmore, chairperson of the travelling library committee, and the libraries were circulated out of the Carnegie Library of Montgomery, where she worked.¹⁰

It was at that first meeting in 1904 that Owen, President of the newly formed Alabama Library Association, called for the creation of a state library agency to administer the development of public libraries throughout the state. By the end of the nineteenth century thirty-three states had passed laws creating different agencies, commissions, or extension divisions, under state authority to take responsibility for the development of public libraries in their respective states. Massachusetts was the first to do so in 1890, with New York and Wisconsin following in 1892 and 1895, respectively.¹¹ In his address entitled, "The Duty of the State to Libraries and Library Effort" Owen spoke of the void in Alabama laws that failed to provide its citizens with public libraries. He noted the fact that there "was at present practically no legislation [in Alabama] on the

⁸ Owen, "Alabama Libraries and Library Buildings," 1.

⁹ Mildred White Wells. *History of the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, 1917-1968, Vol. II*, (Montgomery, Alabama: Paragon Press, 1968), 8.

¹⁰ Marie Bankhead Owen, *The Story of Alabama: A History of the State*, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1949), 283-284.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

subject of libraries." Owen felt these very circumstances gave an opportunity for the state of Alabama to enact legislation creating a "wise and comprehensive system, which would embody the good points and avoid the unsatisfactory features of laws in force elsewhere."¹²

Owen presented several areas in which he believed the state should take responsibility and pass legislation supporting free public libraries. Owen believed the state's first duty should be to establish "a State library commission, charged with administration and promotion of the library interests of the State, the management of travelling libraries, the publication and dissemination of library statistics, etc, etc." He also suggested the development of a State library and an historical reference library. Owen's other recommendations directly involved the development of public libraries and their support around the state. Owen suggested laws be enacted enabling cities and towns to support and maintain individual libraries through the "county commissioners, or boards of revenue; municipal authorities; and trustees in school districts." He also felt it was important that laws be made allowing for the development of libraries not only for the public, but also for colleges and schools.¹³

Alabama's early library legislation only provided funding for the establishment of libraries by public schools. In 1911 the state appropriated one hundred dollars to each of the state's counties specifically for the development and maintenance of libraries in public schools. The law also allowed courts and boards of revenue in counties to

¹² Alabama Library Association, "Proceedings of the First Meeting of the Alabama Library Association," 20-21. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Director's Office, Thomas Owen, Administrative Files, 1904-1910. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³ Ibid.

appropriate money to rural schools in areas with a population of less than one thousand.¹⁴ This early legislation for school libraries set out in detail the steps necessary to select books, library board, and library staff. Not until September of 1919, however, was an Act written allowing for the establishment of free public libraries outside of the public school system. This 1919 Act allowed counties to appropriate up to five thousand dollars annually, or if the county had more than 150,000 inhabitants, the county could appropriate ten thousand dollars to support a local library. The law provided for the creation of a library board made up of a Probate Judge, county superintendent of education, and three elected officials to govern the county library. The law also took into consideration that at the time there were scattered public libraries around the state, and where library boards were already in place, the law allowed the county authorities and existing board to set up their own agreement concerning the library's governance.¹⁵

During the fifteen years following the creation of the Alabama Library Association in 1905, laws relating to the development of state-supported free public libraries were nonexistent in Alabama. Nevertheless, Thomas Owen continued to campaign for public library development in Alabama. Owen, who had been successful in his efforts to create a State archives, worked toward a similar goal concerning Alabama's public libraries. Though he was instrumental in persuading the legislature to create the State archives, he did not meet the same success in his endeavors to see legislation enacted to create an entirely separate State library agency. Yet in 1907 Owen did succeed in seeing the legislature expand the responsibilities of ADAH to include a

¹⁴ S. Res. 222, Session of 1911, *Alabama General Laws and Joint Resolutions*, April 13, 1911.

¹⁵ H.R. 944, Session of 1919, *Alabama General Laws and Joint Resolutions*, September 30, 1919.

Library Extension Division. The new department was created to encourage and assist in the establishment of public school libraries and in the improvement and strengthening of those already in existence; to give advice and provide assistance to librarians and library workers in library administration, methods and economy, and to conduct a system of travelling libraries.¹⁶

Not only did the Library Extension Division help manage the development of public libraries in the state, but in 1915 it was also made responsible for acquiring statistics of all types of libraries throughout Alabama. Owen kept track of the state's libraries, with the exception of private libraries, in his *Official and Statistical Register*, which the ADAH published regularly.

Tommie Dora Barker served as the first Library Extension Assistant in a new poorly funded division that faced monumentous challenges. Its first responsibility was to help promote the creation of public libraries throughout the state. Barker embarked on fieldwork and visits to various areas around the state to help set up libraries. Along with the work to create public libraries, the Division began a program called "Books for the Blind" that consisted of a travelling library specifically for the blind.

Not only did the new extension division help set up libraries, manage the travelling library system, and create a new library of books for the blind, but it also embarked on what Owen thought to be the most important aspect of the division's work - training librarians. As other states set up library commissions, the division also set about to provide some formalized training of librarians, since few library schools existed. Many of the state library agencies began to offer short courses to train librarians. Owen

¹⁶ Owen, "Alabama Libraries and Library Buildings," 1.

understood the importance of this training and felt that the public deserved the opportunity of free public library service; but he also knew this service entailed the need for library buildings and trained library professionals.¹⁷ In response to this need the ADAH's Library Extension Division offered similar courses in librarianship.

The Division offered the courses in a summer training institutes. The institutes were opened to educators and library workers. Many of the institute's participants chose the field of librarianship as their career, often staying on to work in Alabama libraries, while others continued training in professional library schools outside of Alabama. By 1910 Alabama had eleven professionally trained librarians working around the state. These eleven had graduated from formal library schools in New York, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.¹⁸

Library development in Alabama made progress, if slowly. Owen's underlying goal was to see Alabama's current library development proceed in such a way that there would be a "free public library in every city, town, or village in the State of Alabama of over 1,000 inhabitants."¹⁹ The Alabama Library Association, the Library Extension Division, and Owen's own efforts did much to expand the public's perception and knowledge of public libraries, but many towns and counties continued to be hindered in their struggle to provide a free public library. Without monies to construct library buildings or large amounts of funding from the state or local government many towns

¹⁷ Owen, "Alabama Libraries and Library Buildings," 1.

¹⁸ Ibid.

were unable to provide adequate space for a library without outside support. An avenue for this very type of support came to Alabama by the way of Carnegie Library Grants given by Andrew Carnegie of Pennsylvania.

Businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was responsible for the construction of over 2,500 free public libraries in the United States and United Kingdom through a generous grant program he instituted in the late nineteenth century.²⁰ Carnegie, known as the "Patron Saint of Libraries," made it possible for thousands of communities to secure their very own free public library building.²¹ Several Alabama communities, unable to afford their own public library building, were able to obtain funding for a library building through the Carnegie program.

Carnegie, a native of Scotland, moved to the United States as a young boy in 1846. By 1901 he had made close to a billion dollars, mainly in steel and railroads. It was at this time that Carnegie published an essay that came to be known as the *Gospel of Wealth*. The essay explained Carnegie's own philosophy on wealth and the responsibility of the rich to society. Carnegie felt it was the responsibility of the wealthy "Capital" to help the less fortunate, "Labor," by providing means by which they could improve themselves.²² Carnegie wanted his monetary gifts to help provide services the common man could use to educate and uplift the spirit in a moral and beneficial way. He suggested that the wealthy contribute to society by helping communities provide for the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Timothy Rub, "'The Day of Big Operations': Andrew Carnegie and his Libraries," *Architectural Record* 173 (July 1985): 81.

²¹ George S. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), 3.

²² Rub, "'The Day of Big Operations'", 81.

following areas: "universities, libraries, medical centers, public parks, meeting and concert halls, public baths, and churches."²³

Carnegie first began donating funds for the establishment of a library in his native Scotland in 1881.²⁴ Soon afterward he began giving grants to towns in his home state of Pennsylvania. By 1896, he had provided for the construction of fourteen library buildings in Pennsylvania and Iowa towns, and he also provided endowments to continue the maintenance of the buildings. In 1899 the grant program began to expand rapidly, and from 1899 until 1919 the philanthropist made gifts for the construction of library buildings to 1,403 communities.²⁵

Carnegie's purpose for the public library construction program was to provide a tool to help a population improve itself. He believed the library was the "people's university" which could offer, for those who worked for it, a path similar to his own rags-to-riches experience. Carnegie said of the library

I choose free libraries as the best agencies for improving the masses of the people, because they give nothing for nothing. They only help those who help themselves. They reach the aspiring, and open to these the chief treasures of the world--those stored up in books.²⁶

Carnegie made his gifts available to any community in the United States and Great Britain. In his opinion the grants would be of greatest benefit in these countries because both had already managed to establish a public library system of their own. In

²³ Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, 11.

²⁴ Rub, "'The Day of Big Operations'," 81.

²⁵ Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, 14.

²⁶ Rub, "'The Day of Big Operations'," 81.

his mind he believed that his monetary contributions would therefore go to make improvements on the already existing base of library development.

To receive a Carnegie grant, a town, city, or village had to meet a few basic requirements. The requested money could only go towards the construction of a library building, and other uses of the facility space were prohibited. The site chosen for the library should be acceptable to the city, provide adequate room for later expansion, and the community should own the land. Another of Carnegie's requirements was the issue of the ten percent maintenance fee. The Carnegie Corporation insisted any community receiving a grant from them must promise to issue, on an annual basis, a fee, in the amount of ten percent of the original award, specifically for the building maintenance.²⁷ This ten percent requirement had to be in writing to be considered acceptable. This requirement would prove to be both a stumbling block and an impetus to later library development.

Forms were created to expedite the process of grant giving as the Carnegie library program grew. The more well known Carnegie's gifts became the more likely the requests did not satisfy all of Carnegie's requirements. The use of an application was deemed to be necessary to ensure the process would not become encumbered by too much correspondence. The form consisted of four areas of questioning that could be answered and submitted as a formal request for a grant. Answers to basic questions concerning the community and present library services such as the total population of a town, if a library presently existed, and if so, statistics on its collection and usage were requested. The application form inquired about the land to be used for the new library

²⁷ Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, 34-53.

site, such as whether it was owned by the community and lastly, the amount of money the town was willing to tax itself to supply funds for annual building maintenance.²⁸

Satisfactory answers to all the questions became the most basic and necessary requirement for receiving a grant.

Because the Carnegie Corporation received so many requests and all transactions were made by correspondence, the corporation decided to draw up a proper and legal resolution to satisfy the requirement that the town provide continued maintenance of the facility once the grant was given. The resolution could be filled in by the town's council and submitted as their promise to continue funding for the new building's maintenance and upkeep.²⁹ Since a town's population helped decide the amount of funding Carnegie would grant for library construction, the grant administrator relied on the most recent census data to calculate awards. The grant covered the population at approximately two dollars per capita.

Though it sometimes seemed that anyone applying for the grant program would likely receive funding, Carnegie did not give grants to every city requesting one. He believed that for towns with less than 1,000 inhabitants a public library building was not necessary. He encouraged smaller towns to join efforts and apply for a library to be funded and used by the populations of combined communities or county.³⁰ Other requests not awarded were for the construction of State libraries, historical societies, and subscription libraries.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 206.

³⁰ Ibid., 45.

Despite general support for the library construction grant program as a desirable and welcomed philanthropic project, not everyone saw the grants as a positive gesture. Many people felt Carnegie's wealth had been amassed through exploitation and rejected the use of his money in their own communities. Others were wary of the program's requirement that a 10% annual contribution be maintained forever. This requirement often meant an increase in taxes, which drew staunch opposition. Some communities did not have local laws in force that would allow the taxation for this purpose. Others did not see the need for such a publicly supported endeavor even though public school systems had developed and successfully continued in the twentieth century through taxation. The need for free libraries supported by a local population was found by many to be unnecessary.³¹

In 1919 the Carnegie library construction program ended after twenty-seven years. Communities throughout the United States received just over forty-one million dollars. The states receiving most of the awards were located in the Northeast and Midwest. Those states making up the Northeast region received 35% of the total awarded by Carnegie, and the Midwest received 33%. Three states---New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio received over a third or 34% of the total project funds to help construct 269 public library building.³² The South received 7% of the total awards, or just over three million dollars, to construct 135 library buildings. Kentucky and Georgia received the greatest amount of this total with over 42% of the total given to the Southeastern states.

³¹ Ibid., 95-96.

³² Ibid., 16-22.

Alabama's total was average compared to its neighboring states, with \$195,800 in grants awarded to various communities across the state. Of this amount, construction costs of free public library buildings cost totaled \$163,800. Alabama was able to construct fourteen public library buildings in the fifteen-year period from 1901 to 1916, totaling 9.6% of the buildings constructed throughout the Southeast. This small percentage was dwarfed when compared to funds received by other states. Of the forty-six states that received grants Alabama received only .005% of the total funding.³³

Table 3 shows the fourteen libraries built with Carnegie funding in Alabama. The total amount of the grant is listed as well as the date the money was given and the date of the library's opening. Only one of the Alabama cities had previous public library service before the Carnegie grant. The Carnegie library program ended in late 1917, as it became more difficult to fund the program during World War I. In the end the program provided funding for libraries in 1,412 towns and cities across the country. Though Carnegie did not require his name on the buildings or his bust and pictures to be hung inside, his presence continued to be associated with library development throughout the country.³⁴ But as discussed earlier, the southeastern states did not participate in the library program to the extent enjoyed by other areas of the country.

Those states that received the most Carnegie library grants were those that had previously set up state library commissions and had at least basic enabling legislation in place to direct library development within the state. Alabama had neither of these prerequisites firmly in place at the time of the Carnegie program. Though public libraries

³³ Ibid., 16-17.

³⁴ Ibid., 186-187.

were slowly developing in the South, Alabama's citizens were not of the opinion that the public library was an essential part of a community.

Table 3.--Alabama Cities Receiving Carnegie Grants
for Public Libraries, 1901-1916

City	Amount of Carnegie Grant	Date Funds Received	Date Library Opened	Public Library Established Before Grant?
Anniston	20,000	May 15, 1916	--	No
Avondale	10,000	Dec. 13, 1907	Oct. 1, 1908	No
Bessemer	10,000	Feb. 13, 1906	Sept. 1907	No
Decatur	10,000	Feb. 12, 1906	Jan. 1, 1907	No
Ensley	10,000	March 25, 1905	July 1906	No
Eufaula	10,000	Feb. 2, 1903	May 1904	No
Gadsden	10,000	Nov. 18, 1903	Dec. 20, 1906	No
Huntsville	12,500	May 8, 1914	--	No
Montgomery	50,000	Feb. 13, 1901	May 2, 1904	No
Selma	11,800	April 3, 1903	1904	Yes
Talladega	12,500	Feb. 13, 1906	Sept. 15, 1908	No
Troy	10,000	April 6, 1908	Nov. 4, 1909	No
Union Springs	7,000	Jan. 6, 1911	Nov. 25, 1912	No
West End	10,000	Feb. 1, 1909	Sept. 1909	No

Sources: George S. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), 208-239.; Thomas M. Owen, "Alabama's Libraries and Library Buildings," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 25 Dec 1910, p. 1-4., Marie B. Owen, *The Story of Alabama: A History of the State*, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1949), 277-363. A. J. Wright, *Carnegie Comes to Union Springs: The Development of an Alabama Public Library*, Research proposal, May 1, 1990, 6, ERIC, ED 324 002.

Alabama's Library Extension Division was only a part of the state agency ADAH and did not yet receive its own funding. This left Alabama at a disadvantage when dealing with the Carnegie program, compared to other states that had library commissions set up as separate state agencies with continuously funded budgets.

Without an effective state library program in place and lacking public support, communities experienced great difficulty in gathering information necessary for participation in the Carnegie program.

Overall the Carnegie library program did advance the public library movement throughout the country. The public became aware of the function libraries served in communities and saw their benefits. The requirement that the community continue support annually with a ten percent maintenance fee also helped bring to light the need for public support through taxation for libraries.

Critics of the Carnegie program found fault with the requirement that made small communities fully responsible for the support of their public libraries. Later, due to larger tax bases, county libraries proved more efficient to support and maintain than municipal libraries. But during the first part of the twentieth century roads and transportation were not fully developed, thus making the local municipal library closer to its user population and therefore easier to support.

The Carnegie grants made the construction of fourteen public libraries possible in Alabama, as well as libraries for colleges and schools.³⁵ Alabama did lag far behind much of the country in developing a public library system. Yet this program along with the involvement of women's clubs, individual leaders, and organizations such as ALA helped promote library interests throughout the state. Though the program did not leave as many library buildings as in other states, the Carnegie program helped the state understand the need for libraries and a system of tax support to maintain their existence for the public.

³⁵ Carnegie grants funded the construction of six university, college, or school libraries in Alabama between 1897 and 1910.

From the creation of the Alabama Library Association in 1904 and Thomas Owen's efforts to improve Alabama's situation, the state gained momentum in the movement towards establishing a public library service throughout Alabama. Over the next thirteen years the state gained a number of public libraries through the aid of the Carnegie grants as well as through creation of laws allowing for the counties to establish libraries using tax monies. Despite these strides forward, in 1917 the state still lagged behind most other states in establishing statewide tax-supported public library service. Alabama had yet to establish a separate state library agency and continued to work within the confines of a small and poorly funded division within the ADAH. Alabama's struggle to bring public library service to all parts of the state was just beginning.