

## Introduction and Methodology

Until the twentieth century, tax-supported public libraries were almost nonexistent in Alabama. Once the effort to create these public libraries in Alabama began it was only through the efforts of various people, organizations, and governments working for over seventy-five years before all Alabama citizens were provided with their own tax-supported public library. This thesis examines the development of the tax-supported public library system in Alabama from 1901 until 1974, when the last county in Alabama was provided a free, tax-supported public library.

Chapter One discusses the beginnings of Alabama libraries, from their origins in the State Law Library created in 1828, to the turn of the century, when women's clubs established travelling libraries throughout the state. During the nineteenth century few Alabama cities were able to support libraries of any type, and it would be several decades before a strong commitment to the public funding of libraries became a reality.

At the turn of the century, women's clubs in Alabama took the lead in promoting library service. Prior to this push by the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs to bring library service to rural areas, most libraries in Alabama were part of various academic institutions such as the state's universities and normal colleges. Those few libraries that did exist were usually social or subscription libraries that offered services only to those patrons able to pay the yearly

usage fee. Chapter One will discuss these early beginnings and the status of library development in Alabama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

During the early years of public library development, the efforts of individuals and a national philanthropic program built the foundation for what we know today as tax-supported public library service in Alabama. Throughout this early development, one figure stands out as a pioneer in Alabama public library history. Thomas Owen, the first director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, was instrumental in gathering statistics, supporting funding, and fostering a unified voice for the development of the state's public libraries. Owen helped to create the Alabama Library Association in 1904, and throughout his lifetime he promoted the development of public libraries across the state. Chapter Two discusses the efforts of Owen in fostering public library development in Alabama through the creation of the Library Extension Division, modern day predecessor to the Alabama Public Library Service, in the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

While several organizations and individuals contributed to library development, Alabama also benefited from programs developed outside of the state. One such program was the Carnegie library program. Along with Thomas Owen's personal contributions to fostering interest in library development, the availability of Carnegie grants provided the needed funding for the construction of library buildings around the state. Chapter Two will also demonstrate how the Carnegie library program helped promote the idea of tax-supported libraries throughout Alabama.

After Thomas Owen's death in 1920, his successor at the Alabama Department of Archives and History continued the struggle to bring free public library service to all of

Alabama. Marie Bankhead Owen continued her late husband's work with an expanded Library Extension Division in the 1930s. Chapter Three discusses the problems she experienced in the drive to create a statewide library agency. With limited funding, the Library Extension Division was unable to develop on a statewide scale the library system needed by the state of Alabama. The chapter explores the alternative sources of funding generated to help put a statewide service plan into action. A combination of Works Progress Administration programs and a grant from the Rosenwald Foundation helped Alabama communities create their own public libraries, train library workers, and provide library service to many rural areas across the state. These programs helped maintain the needed services of public libraries for the many years Alabama continued to be without a separate state agency solely devoted to the promotion of public library development.

Chapter Four examines the creation of the Alabama Public Library Service as an independent state agency in 1959, authorized to direct library development and support throughout the state as well as disseminate federal funding to public libraries. A state agency was not the entire remedy to Alabama's lack of public libraries. Also instrumental in the long-awaited completion of statewide public library service was the Library Services Act passed in 1956. The Act, introduced by Alabama Congressmen Lister Hill and Carl Elliott, allowed for the allocation of federal funds to individual states for the improvement of public library services in rural areas. These funds were instrumental in bringing statewide service to all Alabama citizens beginning with the first disbursement of federal money in 1957. Even though the program specifically targeted rural areas, the Library Services Act provided a needed stimulus in funds to public library development in Alabama. With additional methods of funding and the

creation of a separate state agency, Alabama was on its way to providing free public library services for the entire state. Library services were made available to more citizens in the 1960s when the Library Services Act was expanded to include aid to all public libraries. The Library Services Construction Act of 1965 made the construction of public libraries throughout the state possible. Only nine years later, in 1974, public library service was extended to serve all sixty-seven counties in Alabama. Chapter Four will examine the creation of the Alabama Public Library Service and the federal programs that aided the state in providing all its citizens access to a free public library. The chapter will also examine the county regional system created during this time that continues to be in effect today.

Through an examination of the administrative files of the Alabama Department of Archives and History and the Alabama Public Library Service, the personal papers of Thomas M. and Marie Bankhead Owen, as well as literature relating to the development of public libraries in Alabama and the United States, this study will show how Alabama, a leader in the public archives movement, fell behind most of the country, and even other southern states, in establishing a true tax-supported public library system. Though Alabama lead the nation in establishing a state archives, the poverty, low level of formal education and the rural nature of the state made the development of a statewide tax-supported public library system difficult to achieve. Only with the combination of efforts of individuals, philanthropic programs, and finally federal funding did the creation of a statewide system become a reality in Alabama. This thesis will tell the story of the long struggle for Alabama to develop statewide public library service and will explore various people, organizations, and projects, and how these together were able to develop the present statewide tax-supported public library system in Alabama.