

Summary and Conclusions

It took Alabama nearly seventy-five years to bring complete statewide public library service to all of its citizens. Like many other southern states, Alabama was slow to fund the development of public libraries especially in the early twentieth century. Even though Alabama legislation allowed for the establishment of libraries in public schools as early as 1911, and allowed counties to establish libraries by 1919, local communities did not immediately make use of the laws. It was not until the 1940s that Alabama began to move steadily forward with public library development. By that time the south had recovered from the economic disparity caused by the Civil War, mandatory education laws were in effect, populations became more urban, and the general public had been introduced to the public library experience through philanthropic and federal library projects. The public, given a taste of free public library service, never lost the desire for more.

Alabama's library beginnings were rooted in individuals concerned about the need for public libraries and the role they played in every community. Women's clubs began the drive to provide library services in 1897, and they continued their support of the state's public libraries as the state struggled to establish its one library agency. Dedicated individuals also brought the plight of public libraries to the public's attention early in the nineteenth century. Thomas Owen fostered the creation of the state's first library

association in 1904 as well as its first library extension office in 1907. Owen, and later his wife, Marie Bankhead Owen, provided the critical support and dedication that the public library movement needed during this early developmental period.

By the early part of the twentieth century Alabama began benefiting from outside assistance in the form of philanthropic grants from the Carnegie Corporation. In a fifteen year period (1901-1916) \$163,800 in Carnegie funding was given for the construction of free public library buildings in Alabama. Additional philanthropic support was also beneficial to the state in the 1930s, when the Rosenwald Foundation provided funding to support the state's library extension office as well as to develop a countywide library system in Walker County.

As the county system idea took hold, rural areas were able to provide library services, and some locations went a step further by implementing regional library service for its citizens. By this time the library division had been given a small appropriation and in 1939 became the Public Library Services Division. The new division worked with the WPA library project in the 1930s and 1940s to help bring library services to increasing numbers of the state's population.

The struggle to create a fully funded state library agency was the core of the state's library development problem. Though a library extension division had been created in 1907, a true independent state agency was not in existence until 1959. Before the creation of the Alabama Public Library Service, the Library Extension Division and the Public Library Extension Division were poorly funded for a number of years. The WPA enabled Alabama to provide public library services at a much higher rate than ever before. The funding and manpower provided by the federal government brought needed

publicity to the free public library movement. With almost 600 WPA library workers, Alabama enjoyed an increase in library services throughout the state. When the project ended Alabama's citizens noticed the loss. The Public Library Service Division benefited from the increase in public awareness, as libraries became more of a necessity to individuals across the state.

By the 1940s only a little over half of the state had public library services, but the gap was closing. Federal funding through the Library Services Act in 1956 and later the Library Services Construction Act helped provide the last push to build public and political support for public library service. In 1959 the state made the PLSD a separate and fully funded state agency. Fifteen years later, in 1974, every county in Alabama had access to its own free tax-supported public library.

This thesis traces the development of the statewide tax-supported public library system in Alabama from 1901 to 1974. Many areas of this story are yet to be told. Each of the state's public libraries has its own story to tell of its creation and the work of the concerned citizens who worked diligently for their local library's development. The history of the state's library agency has yet to be told in its entirety. That agency, the Alabama Public Library Service, has a rich history, and the story of its leaders, programs, and developments needs to be told in much more detail than appears here.

Finally, other southern states had similar histories in their struggle to create a free statewide tax-supported public library system. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the developments of each state's library programs so that one could obtain a more complete picture of the development of the tax-supported public library in the Southern states. The story of New England and Midwestern public library development

is well documented, but the story of the South is still fragmented. This thesis has focused on Alabama's public library development as a beginning point to telling the larger story of library development in the South.