

CHAPTER III

CAREER AS LIBRARIAN

Dart Hall – From Printing Shop to Reading Room

Charleston, South Carolina since its founding in 1670, has practically never been without some library facilities. The first public library in the colonies was established here in 1698. It was succeeded after its decline in 1748 by the present Charleston Library Society.ⁱ The Society's annual membership dues limited its services to those who could afford to pay for them. Prior to 1931 there was a small collection of books for the use of white children at the Charleston Museum. The public schools had small libraries which were inadequate for the demand during the school session and inaccessible during the summer. The only books available to Negroes were small collections in the schools and the reading room at Dart Hall.ⁱⁱ

This problem of the lack of library service to Negroes never seemed so acute as it did one cold night in 1925 when Lillian Patrick, a young high-school girl attending Avery Institute, came to Mrs. Butler to inquire whether there were any books in the Dart collection with the poems of Shelley and Keats and their biographies. Mrs. Butler vividly recalls this incident as it affected her in this manner:

My father collected a large number of books for his home library and I knew that these books were among them. Lillian went with me to the first floor of Dart Hall which was being used by my husband as an office since the passing of my father in 1915. The room was very cold but Lillian said she did not mind the cold. She would rather sit there and read because her home was not conducive to quiet reading. This picture was

ever before me; I knew of her situation and thought of many others like her. Where could I start a reading room which would be open to the public?

The only available room suitable for library purposes was one approximately 600 square feet in size, located in Dart Hall, which was called the printing office. My mother gave me permission to use it. The floor and walls were inky and there were several holes cut in the floor for the belts which turned the newspaper press of the Southern Reporter. Small amounts of money raised from parties, a dance and a musical concert given by the students of Avery Institute helped to buy lumber for a new floor. The walls were whitewashed and shelves were built for suitable books from my father's library. Later the work to make the reading room comfortable was accomplished by the labor of my husband.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1927 a reading room was opened to the Negro public. Two tables and approximately 12 folding chairs were all of the furniture Mrs. Butler had in the reading room with the exception of the built-in book shelves. This room was open from 5:00 to 8:00 P.M. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays with Mrs. Butler serving as librarian. The patrons were high-school students, for the most part. They would come to look up material on their English assignments or someone's biography. At times Mrs. Butler believed she had started something of which people in general were afraid because they did not come in to visit or to see what was going on in this room. Except for the books sent through Mrs. Celia P. McGowan, and an automobile load given by the late Mrs. Samuel Stoney from her Medway Plantation house, the reading room was maintained at Mrs. Butler's expense until the opening of the Dart Hall Branch of the Charleston County Free Library in July, 1931.^{iv} The closing of the reading room marked the end of Mrs. Butler's library service to the

community which had been started in 1886 by the Reverend Mr. Dart and carried on by Mrs. Butler.

Work With Philanthropic Organizations

The Charleston community was not entirely unconscious of its delayed library development for the general public. For many years prior to 1925 plans for a library were encouraged by civic organizations and private citizens of Charleston.^v

In the fall of 1925 Mrs. Butler made a survey of libraries and books in the schools and churches of Charleston but she found very little in respect to numbers or kinds of books. An Interracial Committee of the Young Women's Christian Association at this time heard a report from Mrs. Celia P. McGowan on an interracial meeting which was held in Atlanta, Georgia where it had been announced that the Rosenwald Fund was interested in getting libraries started for Negroes. Mrs. Butler was appointed chairman of a committee designed to gather information on the possibilities of starting public library service for Negroes. Reports were made frequently of progress on plans for collecting books and housing them. The work of this committee continued for approximately five years and in the meantime Dart Hall reading room was opened and continued to grow.

Relying heavily upon the assurance that help would soon come from philanthropic organizations, Mrs. Butler continued to collect books from

every available source. Some books were gathered from churches and schools, a few were received from private citizens in Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina, some were gifts from local citizens, and in addition, one-hundred dollars worth of books were purchased.^{vi} Mrs. Butler stated that when the books came she was at a loss to know what to do with them. From her travels mentioned previously she had gained some knowledge of library organization and with the assistance of two young ladies who were college juniors and at home for the summer, the books were roughly classified as fiction and non-fiction.

After a period of about three years information on help from philanthropic foundations came to Mrs. Butler. As she was working in the reading room some very distinguished gentlemen from Atlanta, Georgia visited her. They were Mr. Edwin Embree, President of the Rosenwald Fund, Mr. Clark Foreman and Mr. Clark Howell who were also associated with the Fund. They were interested in the reading room and seemed pleased with the collection of books which covered a variety of subjects. Mr. Embree had studied the Charleston situation and was very much interested in a public library for this city. While in the city he discussed a five-year plan with the Charleston County officials. It was in 1929 when an agreement was made between the city and county officials and the Rosenwald Fund that Charleston County would have a free library for all people.^{vii} The representative of the Rosenwald Fund made a generous

offer of \$85,000 to the City's library committee. In its recommendations the Rosenwald Fund made the following stipulations:

We agree to recommend that the Julius Rosenwald Fund provide for the first two years two dollars for each one dollar provided locally; for the next two years, one dollar for each one dollar provided locally; for the fifth year, one dollar for each two dollars provided by the county, its being understood that the total sum from the fund shall not exceed \$20,000 in any one year, and its being further understood that the service shall include white and colored with equal opportunities for both and with facilities adapted to the needs of each. It is further understood that the funds referred to above are intended for county-wide service, and that a central building or buildings for both white and colored shall be provided for from other funds.^{viii}

In 1931 the Carnegie Fund, through its president, Mr. Frederick P. Keppel, sent a check for \$10,000 which served as the first payment on the needed sum of \$35,000 for the Charleston County Free Library. Trustees of the Library stated that in view of the fact that the Carnegie Fund had cut down on the amount of money it was giving to public libraries in the past fifteen years, its generosity to Charleston was highly appreciated.^{ix}

Miss Emily Sanders, librarian of the Charleston County Free Library said that Dart Hall reading room which was Mrs. Butler's contribution toward making library service available to the Negro people of the Charleston community was one of the factors in persuading the Rosenwald and Carnegie Funds to endow the Free Library when it was started in January, 1931.^x

Librarian, Dart Hall Branch Library, 1931-1957

The Charleston County Free Library began serving the public on January 1, 1931. Seven months later, July 31, 1931, Dart Hall Branch of the Charleston County Free Library was opened to the Negro public with 3,600 books on its shelves. Charleston County paid the Dart family the sum of one dollar a year for the use of the building. During the first five years of the library's history, the Rosenwald Fund contributed funds as had been agreed upon and these funds were matched by appropriations from the Charleston County Legislative Delegation.^{xi} The staff at the Dart Hall Branch was composed of Julia McBeth, librarian, Susan Dart Butler, the children's librarian and Mary Sparks was the assistant librarian.^{xii} Miss McBeth served only one year as librarian. When she left, because of ill health, Mrs. Butler became the librarian.

Mrs. Butler recalls very vividly the first time that she realized her life's ambition to become a librarian. It was when plans were being completed for the day that Dart Hall Library had its formal opening. This was on Sunday afternoon, July 31, 1931. On this day a program was given in the Dart Hall Auditorium and several speeches were heard; after the program guests were invited to tour the building and visit the library. This was a great day for children and adults and an extremely happy one for Mrs. Butler. The little reading room which she started had expanded to three rooms measuring approximately 1200 square feet. There were two smaller rooms to be used for storage.^{xiii}

After serving one year as children's librarian Mrs. Butler attended Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia during the summer of 1932. Here she took courses in library science because she was very much interested in increasing the effectiveness of library service at the branch. In speaking of her library work Mrs. Butler said:

It has given me great pleasure to watch the progress that children and adult patrons of the library have made. Some of the children have graduated from high school, finished college, and have returned home with college and even more advanced degrees. During the years from 1931 to 1957, I have tried to serve the children and adults of Charleston County, helping them to help themselves by reading and using good books. Many of the students who grew up in the community using Dart Hall are teaching in Charleston today. They have contributed through the years to a fund for the purchase of professional books required by the Extension Department of South Carolina State College. A collection of several hundred books valued at more than \$5,000 was donated to Dart Hall Library by teachers for their use.^{xiv}

In 1936 Mrs. Mae Purcell began work at Dart Hall. Mrs. Butler gave her encouragement and arranged time for her to attend school periodically. In 1947 she received the Bachelor of Science Degree in Library Science from North Carolina College at Durham. She remained on the staff at Dart Hall and when Mrs. Butler retired in 1957 she became librarian in charge of the over-all program of this branch. Mrs. Purcell stated that on-the-job relationships between her and Mrs. Butler have always been commendable.^{xv} Mrs. Marie Nell and Mrs. Thelma Hurlong also served on the staff with Mrs. Butler. Mrs. Nell was in charge of the bookmobile and Mrs. Hurlong assisted in the county department.^{xvi} The staff at Dart Hall Branch consistently maintained a cooperative

relationship with the staff at the main library and with the library board.^{xvii}

Services of Dart Hall Branch Library

Since 1931 all of the ordering and technical processes, necessary for the efficient workings of the Charleston County library system were carried on at the central building of the Charleston County Free Library which is located at 94 Rutledge Avenue. Here is also a master file of all registered borrowers in the Charleston community.^{xviii}

Use of the library by Negroes came slowly at first. In 1931 the circulation figure was 3,118. There was a steady increase as is shown by annual reports. In 1952-1953 the circulation was 144,383 and in the month of April, 1957, the year Mrs. Butler retired, Dart Hall circulated 6,303 books from a collection of 16,625. The number of reference questions answered was not available but this constituted one of the outstanding services of the library.

Aside from the regular routine work of the library, Mrs. Butler and the staff carried on a variety of activities to encourage more extensive library use. A story hour for the very young was a weekly affair and older children enjoyed "the reading game" which was a project designed to encourage summer reading. The public library in cooperation with the schools of Charleston County has sponsored this "game" since 1946. The children check books from the Dart Hall Branch Library and keep a

written report on the number and kinds of books read. When school opens in the fall awards are given children whose records are commendable.^{xix}

The Dart Hall Branch Library attempted to sponsor the "Great Books" discussion which had met with success at the main library. These discussions were conducted periodically between 1950 and 1953 but were discontinued because of irregular attendance on the part of adult patrons. The adult users of the library have continuously enjoyed book review programs. These discussions were begun in 1943 and have continued on a schedule of eight programs per year with a reviewer, a moderator, a panel of two critics and audiences taking part.^{xx}

Adult patrons have been generous in their praise of the services of the Dart Hall Branch Library. Expressions similar to the one sent to the News and Courier by Mrs. Frank Veal, wife of Reverend Mr. Frank Veal, President of Allen University, is typical of users of the library. Mrs. Veal wrote:

I wish to take this opportunity to pay a compliment to the personnel of the Dart Hall Branch of the Charleston Free Library.

During my residence in Charleston, I have found Dart Hall librarians to be most accommodating and cooperative. They have been very thoughtful in that they would often call my attention to new books which they thought might be of interest to me. I have tried to show my appreciation for this service by requesting books that members of the community might find enjoyable and profitable reading. The compliance with my requests has been in keeping with the philosophy of the Free Library, namely to provide books which the people of Charleston desire.^{xxi}

Dart Hall Branch Library has also provided material for books concerning South Carolina Negroes; notable among these publications in

recent years has been a book written by Professor George Brown Tindall. Much of the research work on this book entitled, South Carolina Negroes, 1877-1900,^{xxii} was done in Dart Hall.^{xxiii} In the foreword Professor Tindall acknowledges the assistance given him in his research by the Dart Hall Branch of the Charleston Free Library and by Mrs. Susan Dart Butler.

Not all of the activities of the Dart Hall Branch Library took place within the confines of its walls. In 1943, a branch library was opened at the Shaw School. This library, also came under the direction of Mrs. Butler. Books were sent from the main library to Dart Hall and Dart Hall in turn sent them to Shaw Center Library. In addition to the sending books out, shelf-list cards were kept for Dart Hall and Shaw Center in a file at Dart Hall. Bookmobile service was another activity. In 1940 the bookmobile, then in charge of Mrs. Purcell, assisted by Helen Boring, held over 1,000 books. In the summer it went into the County making seven stops and in winter it stopped at all schools four times during each school term. Schools 20 and 30 miles away received deposits twice a year in September and January.^{xxiv}

In December, 1952 Charleston County purchased Dart Hall and made plans to continue the Negro library branch there. Howard J. Sears, the Charleston County Manager, said the heirs to the Dart estate wished to carry out their parents' wishes but felt that the rental of one dollar a year was in a sense a hardship because they still had the responsibility of upkeep, plus taxes and insurance. The family offered to sell the property

to the county for \$9,000 to be paid in 10 equal annual installments without interest, and the county accepted.^{xxv}

During the period of Mrs. Butler's service, 1931 to 1957, conditions were not ideal, but she made the most of what she had. The library and staff have been commended for the place they have held in the Charleston community in spite of serious handicaps, chief of which, and most crippling was the lack of a proper building. According to information given in the Ricketts' Survey in 1946 the physical plant was very inadequate. The structure which was not designed in the first place for a library was not considered suitable for a library building and it was not fire proof. The same conditions prevailed at the Charleston Free Library^{xxvi} and to date no physical changes have been made in either building.

In May, 1957, Mrs. Susan Dart Butler after serving as branch librarian for 26 years retired at the age of 69. Mrs. Girdler B. Fitch, President of the Library Board and Miss Emily Sanders, librarian of the Charleston County Free Library, expressed the appreciation of the Library Board and of the community for the generosity of the Dart family in making the building available to the public for so many years. They also lauded the contributions which Mrs. Butler has made to the life of the community.^{xxvii}

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- ⁱ Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration. *South Carolina: A Guide to the Palmetto State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 189.
- ⁱⁱ Mary Emily Riley, "The History of the Charleston Free Library," (unpublished Master's Thesis, School of Education, University of South Carolina, 1950), p. 1.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Susan Dart Butler, "Making a Way to Start a Library," *op. cit.*
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v *News and Courier* (Charleston), February 25, 1931.
- ^{vi} Riley, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- ^{vii} Butler, "Making a Way to Start a Library," *op. cit.*
- ^{viii} *Evening Post* (Charleston), March 4, 1929.
- ^{ix} Ibid., February 28, 1931.
- ^x *News and Courier* (Charleston), December 17, 1952.
- ^{xi} "The Charleston County Free Library Needs a New Headquarters Building", Prepared by the Public Librarians of Charleston, (Charleston Free Library, November 2, 1954), (mimeographed).
- ^{xii} *Evening Post* (Charleston), July 25, 1931.
- ^{xiii} Statement by Mrs. Susan Dart Butler, personal interview, November 2, 1956, Charleston, South Carolina.
- ^{xiv} Ibid.
- ^{xv} Statement by Mrs. Mae Holloway Purcell, personal interview, May 28, 1958, Charleston, South Carolina.
- ^{xvi} *News and Courier* (Charleston), December 17, 1952.
- ^{xvii} Statement by Mrs. Susan Dart Butler, personal interview, November 25, 1955.
- ^{xviii} "Your Public Library in Action", July 1, 1947-June 30, 1950, (Report prepared by the Charleston Free Library, Charleston, South Carolina, 1950), p. 3.
- ^{xix} Statement by Mrs. Mae Holloway Purcell, personal interview, July 1, 1958.
- ^{xx} "Your Public Library in Action", *op. cit.*
- ^{xxi} *News and Courier* (Charleston), June 21, 1953.
- ^{xxii} Tindall, *op.cit.*
- ^{xxiii} Ibid., December 17, 1952.
- ^{xxiv} Statement by Mrs. Mae Holloway Purcell, personal interview, July 1, 1953.
- ^{xxv} *News and Courier* (Charleston), December 17, 1952.
- ^{xxvi} "Ricketts' Survey of Library Services," Prepared by the Public Administration Services (Charleston, June 19, 1946), p.2, (mimeographed).
- ^{xxvii} *News and Courier* (Charleston), May 19, 1957.