Through the efforts of a white South Carolina textile worker, the Faith Cabin library movement provided book collections for rural black communities in South Carolina and Georgia during the segregation era. Willie Lee Buffington's campaign for used books grew into a nationally publicized and supported movement, with community, civic, and church organizations providing collections for the rural southern communities. Over a span of thirty years, more than one hundred libraries were established, with most being located near black schools and serving as both school and public libraries.

This paper examines the development of the movement, sources of support, community involvement, and attitudes and programs of federal and state library agencies of the time.

Library service for most rural inhabitants of the southern United States was not provided on an effective level until fairly late in this century. For the black segment of the population, provision of library service was even slower, with few libraries and denial of access to main branches. In a region with limited economic development, the practice of separate facilities for blacks and whites placed a greater strain on the states' already limited financial resources for library support.

In a survey conducted by Mary Frayser in the early 1930s, it was found that "there are in South Carolina only three well-organized, adequately supported public libraries giving systematic county-wide service. . . ." The three libraries mentioned were in the more urbanized counties of Greenville, Richland, and Charleston. The latter two received grants from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, with the provision that service be extended to all races. Most rural communities in the state were without any form of library service for either whites or blacks.

Dan R. Lee is reference/cataloging librarian, Lander College, Greenwood, South Carolina.
Plum Branch residents at first Faith Cabin Library, near Saluda, S.C. (n.d.)
(Collection of W. L. Buffington, Jr.)
Faith Cabin Library at Bettis Academy, Trenton, S. C. Mr. Buffington is second from right (n.d.)
(Collection of W. L. Buffington, Jr.)
Against this background, there was a void to be filled by whatever sources were willing to make contributions. One such source was the Faith Cabin library movement, under the direction of Willie Lee Buffington of Saluda, South Carolina. Without the financial resources of a Carnegie or Rosenwald, he initiated and directed a project that would eventually provide book collections for more than one hundred rural communities in South Carolina and Georgia.

Beginnings of a Library Movement

In 1931 Willie Lee Buffington, a white millworker from Saluda County, South Carolina, made a modest attempt at alleviating some of the disparity in services for blacks in his home community, an effort motivated by his deep respect for black schoolteacher Euriah Simpkins, whom Buffington had known since childhood. At the dedication of Simpkins’s new Rosenwald-funded school, Buffington was struck by the absence of reading material for the students. Without funds of his own to help, Buffington sent letters to five individuals whose names were found in a religious periodical, requesting donations of books. Within a few months, Buffington received shipment of one thousand books from a black minister in Harlem, New York, whose congregation had conducted a book drive for the South Carolina community.2

With inadequate space in the school for such a collection, Buffington and Simpkins called a community meeting at the local black church. At this time a decision was made that a log cabin would be constructed to house a library, with labor and logs donated by the community. The 18- by 22-foot structure, located on the school grounds, was dedicated on 31 December 1932. The comment by an elderly lady that “we didn’t have money, all we had was faith” led to the naming of the library, and the ensuing movement, as Faith Cabin library.3

Some publicity followed this first library, as local newspapers and the Southern Workman, a publication of the Hampton Institute, carried articles about the efforts of Buffington and the residents of the Plum Branch community. More donations were received, and Buffington reported: “Before the first year had passed, there were 2,000 books in the library, and, in addition, I had 1,500 books for a second cabin on the opposite side of the county.”4

The second Faith Cabin library was also constructed on the grounds of a Rosenwald school and was a community-initiated project, with local residents again donating timber for the log structure. The community of Ridge Springs received some county and federal assistance as well, with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration providing labor for construction, and the County Board of Education providing additional lumber.5
As news of the libraries spread through the national press, the library movement steadily expanded to other rural communities. Within ten years, a total of twenty-nine Faith Cabin libraries were established in South Carolina, with each community being responsible for housing the collection and operation of the library. Building projects varied from community to community, with log, board, shingle, stone, and concrete block used as construction materials, depending upon availability. Most of the libraries were located in separate structures near black schools, although a few were placed in rooms in existing school buildings.

Buffington had continued to spearhead the movement, with assistance from his wife in soliciting, sorting, acknowledging, and placing the book collections around the state. During this time Buffington managed to support a family while completing high school and receiving degrees from Furman University, Crozier Theological Institute, and the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1944, after serving two years on the faculty of Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, Buffington joined the faculty of another black institution, Paine College, a Methodist-supported school in Augusta, Georgia. Until 1951 Buffington carried a full teaching load while directing the Faith Cabin library movement, an activity he frequently referred to as his “hobby.”

While at Paine, Buffington placed collections primarily in Georgia, although two more libraries were begun in South Carolina. As new libraries were developed, the existing units continued to receive support from Buffington in the form of additional gifts of books and consultations with the teacher-librarians and principals.

**Library Development in South Carolina and Georgia**

South Carolina lacked an active state library agency in 1935, when the WPA began sponsoring a library program in the state. From 1936 to 1943 the WPA undertook the task of providing an extensive range of library services throughout the state, including bookmobiles, deposit stations, regional library service, and book repair.

The degree of WPA-assisted service was exceedingly disproportionate among the races. Although blacks comprised 42 percent of the state’s population, there were 392 units for whites compared with only 25 serving blacks in 1941. In the same year there were 26 Faith Cabin libraries in South Carolina. In regard to size of collections, there were reportedly some 35,000 volumes in WPA-sponsored units serving blacks compared with over 100,000 volumes in Faith Cabin libraries.6

Stanford, who published an extensive study of the WPA project in South Carolina, reported that, in the establishment of a tricounty regional library system in the eastern portion of the state, the following policy was adopted:
Service to the 46,000 Negroes who comprise 42 percent of the region’s population has been deliberately postponed by those in charge of the demonstration. Since such services as these folks receive throughout the state is characteristically extended from agencies which were established to serve the white population, it was deemed expedient to concentrate first on developing a strong and permanent regional system, without forcing the racial issue.7

In 1943, with the end of WPA-assisted library projects in the state, responsibility for the continuation of library services was left up to individual counties. The State Library Board became the primary agency in the state concerned with overseeing library development and began receiving limited funding in 1943. Not until 1949 did this agency initiate a program specifically for services to blacks. At this time such service consisted of loans of small book collections for distribution by bookmobiles and by County Home Demonstration agents as they performed their various other duties in the communities.8

Estellene Walker, the executive secretary of the State Library Board, took a somewhat aloof interest in the work of Buffington. In 1947 Walker wrote Buffington, informing him that “as the state agency immediately concerned with library extension, we feel that we should be in possession of the facts concerning these libraries.” Buffington responded politely, informing Walker of the project’s background and of his activities.9 In 1952, responding to a letter of inquiry from an individual interested in assisting the Faith Cabin movement, Walker replied: “so far as I know, there are no active Faith Cabin Libraries in South Carolina. Service to Negro residents is given through the regular library systems.”10 In actuality, a large number of Faith Cabin library units in South Carolina were still in existence and were receiving additional grants of books as well as counseling from Buffington.11

Walker’s statement regarding service “through the regular library systems” would appear misleading, considering the limited services offered to the black population at the time. Although black branches of municipal and county libraries were gradually being established throughout much of the state in the 1950s, most of these suffered from small collections and limited hours of service, with access to main library units available to whites only.

Library services for blacks in rural areas of Georgia reflected the similar slow trends of those in its neighboring state. With a black population of approximately 35 percent in 1948, there were reportedly twenty-four libraries for blacks in the state.12 During that year the position of “consultant for library services to Negroes” was established as part of the Library and Textbook Division of the Georgia Department of Education. After surveying the
state’s library resources and noting the extent of work that needed to be done, state consultant Clarice Jones Alston determined that ‘‘emphasis should be placed on the growth and development of good school libraries and that public library service to Negroes should be de-emphasized for a little while.’’

Buffington received regular assistance from Robert Cousins, director of Negro Education in Georgia, in identifying communities interested in establishing Faith Cabin libraries. In several instances, assistance in organizing and cataloging collections in libraries was provided by Alston and the Atlanta University Library School. Between 1944 and 1960 some seventy-five Faith Cabin libraries were established in Georgia, all but a few of which were located on school grounds or within school buildings.

Publicity and Book Drives

One of the biggest factors in the success of Faith Cabin libraries across South Carolina and Georgia was assistance from the press in publicizing Buffington’s activities and the need for books. Reader’s Digest, Saturday Evening Post, Coronet, Kiwanis Magazine, American Magazine, and Library Journal were among the publications that carried articles on the movement. Religious publications such as World Outlook, Christian Herald, and Guideposts were a strong source of support, usually carrying lengthy articles, with photospreads of the libraries and with appeals to the missionary spirit of their readers. Newspapers also provided publicity, with local coverage both in the communities where Faith Cabin libraries were established and in communities that sponsored book drives.

In addition to the printed media, radio programs were utilized to further the cause. In 1938 Buffington appeared on the Hobby Lobby radio program in New York and as a result received enough books for a library in Lexington, South Carolina. Ted Malone, the Westinghouse Story Teller, profiled the Faith Cabin library movement in a 1948 broadcast. In 1951 Cavalcade of America, a national radio series sponsored by the Du Pont Company, presented a dramatization of the life of Buffington and the origin of the first library.

Other efforts by Buffington included presentations on college campuses and at conventions of the Woman’s Society of Christian Service of the Methodist Church. In 1950 a slide collection, complete with script, was made available to Woman’s Society chapters interested in promoting the movement.

Sponsorship of Libraries

With a successful national public relations effort, responses from com-
munity, church, and civic groups were steady. Although too numerous to mention, organizations that supplied libraries with collections included a Kiwanis Club in Redland, California, the fifth grade class of a Quaker school in Baltimore, and the college communities of Oberlin, Wellesley, and Dartmouth.

By far the biggest sources of book donations were the various chapters of the Woman's Society of Christian Service. Since Paine College was Methodist-supported, cooperation from the agencies of the church was to be expected. Several, but not all, of the Christian publications that carried articles on the libraries were Methodist as well.

In 1946 Buffington proposed that the Woman's Society conference presidents "urge and sponsor this project of collecting and sending books—seeking the cooperation of every local group within the conference." The women apparently responded well, with ten different conferences supplying between 3,000 and 10,000 usable books each between 1946 and 1948. In 1950 Buffington reported "within recent years, 13 conferences in Methodism, through the Woman's Society of Christian Service have made Faith Cabin Library a project and each has supplied the books for a library.... Three more conferences have approved it for a project for the new conference year." Most of these conferences, not surprisingly, were located in the northern and midwestern states, where sentiment was more sympathetic toward the plight of southern blacks.

More Methodist Support

Until 1951 Buffington had carried on the library project, with assistance from his wife and an occasional part-time student helper, in addition to his full-time teaching duties at Paine. With the increasing number of libraries and quantity of book donations, he began a campaign for more assistance from the Board of Trustees in 1948. While considering other channels to continue the library work, Buffington made the following appeal to the board in May 1951:

With only a student helper for an hour and a half a day (five days) we estimate that we have handled between 25,000 and 30,000 books this year... and all the correspondence that is attached to such a venture.... The physical and mental strain from overwork has prevented us from enjoying a satisfaction that we are doing a creditable job at either the classroom work or the Faith Cabin Library endeavor.... With the coming in of books for ten libraries a year, and with 65 communities to keep in contact with, it does not seem unwise or unreasonable to assume that the full time of one person would be required for this service.
Buffington had already informed President Peters that he would not be available to teach sociology classes the following year, but hoped that a way could be arranged to continue the library program through Paine College and the Methodist Church. Through appeals to members of the Board of Trustees who served on the Faith Cabin Library Committee, Buffington managed to enlist sufficient support, and a plan was approved for funding the project. Beginning with fiscal year 1951-1952, the Division of National Missions, Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, and Woman’s Division of Christian Service of the Methodist Church began providing Buffington’s salary plus one hundred dollars per month for travel expenses.¹⁹

With more time available for the library work, Buffington was able to have more contact with existing libraries while working to establish new ones in other communities. In 1953 he reported:

Special attention has been given during the past year to improving the library service in the communities where Faith Cabin Library Extension serves. In most of the communities a visit has been made by the Director. In the case of 30 of the libraries additions have been made to the bookshelves. The Woman’s Society of Christian Service in 16 conferences have [sic] each supplied books for a library and when they send additional books a special effort is made to have these books added to their library project.²⁰

This concept of forming a link with the library and source of donations helped to assure ongoing acquisition of books for the collections. Buffington counseled librarians and principals not only in matters of community service, but also in public relations. In a letter to a principal in Ashburn, Georgia, whose library received donations from a Woman’s Society of Christian Service conference, Buffington advised:

When they send books—be sure that you make arrangements for someone to acknowledge them. The Librarian could have youngsters to write essays, or letters to these good women—telling them what the library means to them...anything you can do to keep their interest—so that they will send you some books each year will be to your advantage.²¹

Quality of Collections

As the library collections were composed primarily of used volumes collected in book drives, the quality of these collections would appear somewhat questionable. Buffington himself stated that “many of the books are castoffs, unsuitable scourings from attics and such.”²² An assessment of the
collections in South Carolina by Stanford in the early 1940s offered the following observation: "Most of [the libraries] have relatively poor collections of books, since they depend upon donations for most of their holdings. A few of them, however, staffed with WPA workers, are giving service that is more adequate than that offered to Negroes by most communities in the State."23

In her travels around the state, the Georgia "consultant for library services to Negroes" gained some familiarity with collections in Faith Cabin libraries and offered mixed praise. At one location, Alston reported that "a casual glance at the book collection indicates that a large proportion of the books are useable."24 At another, she noted that "most of the books seem to be valuable. However, some weeding should be done."25 After a trip to Paine College, Alston found "some of the books are good, and some are new and others are not. This, of course means a gigantic task of screening. Mr. Buffington has neither the time nor the space for such a task. Obviously, problems occur."26

Without adequate assistance, Buffington was not able to thoroughly screen books for grants-in-aid. In several instances, students from Atlanta University traveled to Faith Cabin libraries to help in sorting and cataloging the collections. The McRae unit benefited from such assistance, as did the unit at Cartersville, Georgia. The library at Quitman, Georgia, was assisted by students and the library consultant. In 1950 Alston reported: "In February four students from the Atlanta University Library School and the Consultant went to Quitman to aid in the organization of the school library. With the aid of the teacher-librarian, several teachers and students, 1,000 books were processed and made ready for circulation."27

In his appeals, Buffington stressed the need for "unused used books" and for juvenile literature, because book drives tended to collect more adult than juvenile literature. As in many communities that offered no service whatsoever for blacks, these used books were much-needed resources. Occasionally new books were shipped, including at least one shipment of four thousand children's books from Spencer Press in Chicago.28

Schools as Community Library Centers

The first Faith Cabin library, which served as a community center, set a major precedent for those to follow. As one of the criteria for a grant-in-aid of books to a school, Buffington insisted that the libraries be made accessible for use by adults in the community as well as by children. In 1947 Buffington instructed a high school principal as follows:

... you should know that we are interested in a community program, not just a school program. The library should be housed in a
separate building from the school and while it serves the students of
the school should also be open to the adults of the community. . It
is good to have the separate building for two [sic] reasons: 1. Books
are much safer in case of fire in the school plant. 2. The library can be
opened several afternoons and evenings each week during the sum-
mer without opening up the entire school building. 3. When the
people of the community join together to put over a project, like erect-
ing or helping to erect a building for the books, they have a feeling
that it belongs to us—not just something someone wanted us to have.29

The idea of use by the entire community was often reiterated by Buff-
ington, and formal openings, with community-wide participation, were
greatly encouraged.

The reason for establishing libraries near or in schools was a practical
one. Without resources for hiring librarians (and without government
assistance) the arrangement with schools allowed for at least some staffing,
from which both school and community could benefit. The use of school
libraries for community-based service was a fairly common occurrence dur-
ing this period and was by no means restricted to black schools or to the
South. In "Library Services for Negroes in South Carolina: A Report to
the Negro Advisory Committee of the Southern States Cooperative Library
Survey Committee," Emily America Copeland, reporting for the period
1946-1947, found that "of the 27 counties served by county and regional
libraries, 123 stations are maintained in Negro schools, which serve both
school and adult populations.30

It is difficult to determine the extent of adult use of these facilities. Eliza
Gleason, in The Southern Negro and the Public Library (1941), offered reserva-
tions about such arrangements:

. . . can it be safely assumed that an institution located in another in-
stitution, which operates primarily for the instruction of the juvenile
members of the community, can operate effectively when it attempts to
serve adult members of the community? First, is it not probable that a
psychological barrier may be immediately set up in the mind of the
adult, the result being that he at once feels that the library is for children
and that it is not really an institution designed to serve adults . . .31

Buffington may well have been concerned with such a psychological bar-
rier. With the provision of separate housing for libraries, the facilities could
be kept open during nonschool hours. Even if located on the same grounds
as the school, a separate building provided some degree of distinction from
that institution.
Without the availability of library user statistics, it is difficult to determine the extent to which adults in communities with Faith Cabin libraries actually utilized the collections. In the following report on the first Faith Cabin Library, Buffington indicated that the facility was used quite extensively in 1933: "It has become the community center. . . . I venture to say one-third of the 2500 volumes are in use all the time. During winter days, when people are not so busy, the library is open most of the time for reading and drawing of books. However, when busy with crops... it is open just a little while every evening, and then all of Saturday afternoon, and Sunday." 

Conclusion

As of March 1960 Faith Cabin libraries had provided book collections for 107 communities in South Carolina and Georgia. Although the Faith Cabin Library Committee of Paine College remained in existence until Buffington’s retirement in 1975, the growth of the project had long since begun to subside.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s many of the conditions that had created the need for the movement were slowly being eliminated. The Library Services Act provided funding for improved service to rural residents. The early 1960s saw progress in the integration of public libraries in the region. Consolidation of schools beginning in the late 1950s and continuing through the 1960s eliminated many of the smaller schools with Faith Cabin collections.

A World Outlook article in 1946 referred to Buffington as "a champion beggar of books." The phenomenal growth of the movement was generated by this man’s desire to assist a segment of the population often neglected by local, state, and federal agencies. Although Faith Cabin libraries did not represent the ideal in either public or school library services, a definite need was addressed by this project.

Faith Cabin libraries present a reminder of an era in southern history when provision of basic services to a disenfranchised segment of the population often relied upon the efforts of the philanthropist and the missionary-minded. The contributions of Willie Lee Buffington were part of a concerted effort among principals, teacher-librarians, community members, and others involved in the establishment and operation of these libraries. Against the odds, library service was made available during a time when denial of services to the black population was often the norm.

Notes

Unless otherwise stated, all personal correspondence and reports by Buffington
are from the private collection of his son, W. L. Buffington, Jr., of Spartanburg, South Carolina.


10. Estelline P. Walker to Amanda Love, Biloxi, Miss., 23 April 1952, Negro Library Service Files, Box 29, South Carolina State Library.

11. Accounts of Buffington’s trips to Faith Cabin libraries in South Carolina during this period are included in his “Report to the Student-Faculty Assembly, Paine College, 2 October 1951, 11 December 1951, and 28 April 1952.”


13. Clarice Jones Alston, “Five-year Progress Report, library services to Negroes, September 1948–August 1953,” Director of Negro Education Series, Negro Education Miscellaneous Files, Box 60, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

14. On 13 March 1951 NBC Radio’s *Cavalcade of America* broadcast “Uncle Eury’s Dollar.” The script was written by Morton Wishengrad, and Buffington was portrayed by actor Robert Cummings.


18. W. L. Buffington, “Report to the Committee on Faith Cabin Library Work,” 24 May 1951, pp. 4–5 (Ellipses without spaces are Buffington’s.).


24. Clarice Jones Alston, "Report of Consultant for Library Services to Negroes, September 1950–May 1951," Director of Negro Education Series, Negro Education Miscellaneous Files, Box 60, Georgia Department of Archives and History. Alston is referred to as Clarice Jones in reports as late as February 1950.

25. Clarice Jones Alston, "Report of Trip through SW Georgia" [n.d.], Director of Negro Education Series, Negro Education Miscellaneous Files, Box 60, Georgia Department of Archives and History, p. 5.


29. W. L. Buffington to Hodge King, Ashburn, Ga., 30 September 1947.


