

The History of Access to Public Libraries in the American South

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American democracy is dependent on a knowledgeable citizenry, and the purpose of the public library in the United States is to enable every American to be informed. The library, in one form or another, is almost as old as the United States itself; Benjamin Franklin began the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1732, with the goal of fostering the “Self-Made Man” celebrated in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. According to the American Library Association, there are over 9000 public libraries in the United States today, with the goal to “help ensure that Americans can access the information they need – regardless of age, education, ethnicity, language, income, physical limitations or geographic barriers.” However, public libraries in the United States have not always been available to every citizen. Women, children, the poor, those who live in rural areas, and African Americans have all been excluded to some extent in the history of the library in the United States, and particularly in the South.¹

Historians have studied and written about public library access. Monographs such as David M. Battles’ *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South*, Abigail A. Van Slyck’s *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture 1890-1920*, Wayne Wiegand’s *Part of our Lives: A People’s History of the American Public Library*, and Lowell Martin’s *Enrichment: A History of the Public Library in the United States in the Twentieth Century* have all discussed some aspect of the accessibility of public libraries to American citizens, however, this paper will focus on public libraries in the Southern United States, and how library leaders’ and librarians’ ideas about who should have access to materials

and library facilities have changed over time. Newspaper articles, library handbooks, and government reports from the Bureau of Education all shed light on changing attitudes towards women, children, the poor, those living in rural areas, and African Americans and their right to public library access. Libraries have gone from very restricted access to books and materials, to very open access. The current goal is access for everyone, as pointed out by Deanna Marcum in her article “Redefining Community Through the Public Library.”²

Throughout the history of the United States attitudes about women, children, the poor, and blacks have changed, as have attitudes about public libraries’ role in providing services to these groups of people. Historians have researched some aspects of this change. Van Slyck and Prizeman both describe how architecture and library design restricted access to library materials. The architecture of the building made a statement about who was welcome inside, and the size and placement of the charge desk affected patrons’ access to and use of books and materials. Martin’s *Enrichment* covers the twentieth century and he discusses how the library’s “focus shifted from collections to readers, from preservation to use,” building a “structure of service.” Wiegand’s *Part of Our Lives* tells the story of the public library from the perspective of the patron. This book attempts to share the point of view of both those happy with the library and the services offered, and those who were not (such as women and blacks). Battles and Fultz detail African Americans’ struggle for equal access from the beginning of the public library system, through the Civil Rights era. Other historians, including Carmichael, Preer, Kevane, and Sundstrom, have written about the development of public libraries and librarianship as well.³

Libraries today have changed a great deal from the first libraries in America. When the first libraries opened in the U.S., they were not very accessible to anyone. For example, in the late 1800s and into the early 1900s a great debate raged among librarians about closed versus

open stacks. Many libraries kept all books behind the circulation desk which physically barred patron's access due to a lack of trust in the public. In 1877 Melville Dewey (the inventor of the Dewey Decimal system still in use in many libraries today) denounced the practice of free access to book shelves in public libraries out of concern for the safety of the books. In 1897, John Cotton Dana urged fellow librarians to trust the public with full access to the books in order to encourage circulation of the books. However, the Atlanta Library, built in 1902, continued blocking readers from books, requiring them to ask for books at the desk. In 1897, the ALA adopted the motto "The Best Reading for the Greatest Number at the Least Cost." As time went by, access to books was more readily available, but particularly in the south, many groups of people were excluded.⁴

In general, southerners had less access to libraries because libraries in the south were much slower to be established than those in the north, or in the far west. By 1870, only twelve free public libraries were in existence in the south. A government report from 1876 stated "a view of the condition of Public Libraries in the Southern States presents after all but a barren prospect. In proportion to the population their number is exceedingly small." Many historians point to the economic devastation after the Civil War as a leading cause of lack of libraries. In 1895, the southern library movement began in earnest led by Anne Wallace. With the growth of women's organizations such as literary and cultural clubs, and the rise of the Progressive movement, libraries became more of a priority. Donations from Andrew Carnegie provided 144 new southern libraries by 1917, with the first being built in Atlanta in 1902. By 1907, there were eight free public libraries in the state of Georgia occupying their own buildings, with five more planned within that year. While that improved access somewhat, in 1936 Tommie Dora Parker reported "sixty six percent of people in the south were without public library service, seven

hundred counties lacked public libraries, and per capita spending for public libraries averaged twenty-three cents in the south compared to the national average of fifty-nine cents.”⁵

Although women such as Barker and Wallace played a large part in getting libraries built and established in the south and by 1911, across the country there were more female librarians than males, women did not always have equal access to materials. Large charge desks separated women’s research rooms from men’s research rooms. A government report from 1876 describing how to set up a library says libraries should have separate entrances for men and women, and separate counters to check out because “this arrangement better accommodates the women, as they are not incommoded by the mingling with the mass of applicants of the other sex.” Other libraries, protecting women’s “delicate sensibilities” kept certain books from women. One woman described needing a doctor’s certificate to check out a medical book for her son. Not only was women’s access to books restricted, it has been said that they also did not receive the same level of service. A Chicago woman wrote to her paper to complain of slower assistance at the women’s desk. However, as time went on, women gained equal access to materials.⁶

Similarly, children were discriminated against when libraries were first founded. Before 1900, it was not uncommon to see a sign stating “children and dogs not admitted” at the public library. At the Galveston Free library, only citizens over twelve were permitted in 1874, which according to a government report from 1876, is a “most gratifying report”. By 1900, however, almost all libraries had children’s rooms. But attitude change came slowly. In many libraries, including southern libraries like Atlanta and Nashville, children’s rooms were in the basement, with an exterior door, so that they did not interfere with the serene atmosphere of the rest of the library. Gainesville, Texas’s children’s basement reading room was next to the janitor’s room, work room, and “negro reading room”, so that Gainesville’s white, middle-class library users

never had to see them. Nonetheless, children's librarians worked tirelessly to make libraries open and welcome for the young patrons. As time passed, children were more and more accepted as part of public libraries' patrons and community. Today, most public libraries are inclusive to children, with welcoming architecture for them.⁷

Another group that libraries were designed to make a positive impact on and yet rejected in many ways is the poor. The first American libraries were subscription libraries. They required the patron to pay a fee in order to use the materials. In Annapolis, Maryland in 1762 in what may have been the colonies' first circulating library, William Rind charged patrons an annual fee to borrow two books at a time. This allowed middle class people access, but denied the poor. A Bureau Education report from 1876 says "in a library supported by public taxation every resident must have an equal opportunity to use the books." However, it goes on to say that a money deposit should be made in order to secure the safety of the books, and lacking that someone of good stature in the community who can speak toward the applicant's character must sign for him to become a patron of the library. Alternatively, a police questioning of those character witnesses will suffice. Later in the report, it says payment of a small fee is reasonable, and if a person cannot pay the fee, that person can borrow the books from someone who can.⁸

Clearly, this is not equal opportunity for everyone to use the materials. Paradoxically, that same report also states that the public library "is not a library simply for scholars and professional men ... but for the whole community—the mechanic, the laboring man, the sewing girl, the youth, and all who desire to read, whatever be their rank, intelligence, or condition in life...considered simply as a question of political economy, it is better and cheaper, in the long run, to educate a community than to support prisons and reformatories."⁹

Beginning in the 19th Century, people saw a need for the poor to have access to free public libraries as a way for them to better their situation. For example, Carnegie said “I chose free libraries as the best agencies for improving the masses of the people, because they only help those who help themselves. They reach the aspiring, and open to these the chief treasures of the world.” The Price Free Library, established in 1900 by the mayor of Macon, Georgia, was the first free library in Macon, established because “being earnestly impressed with the educational needs of the poor of all ages, he determined to try and open to them the world of books.” James H. Gregory, concerned about the children of the poor (both white and black) established a foundation to provide traveling libraries, known as the Marblehead Libraries, to schools in the poorest areas in the south. These libraries reached some of the poorest citizens from 1910 until about 1930. ¹⁰

People believed that having library access would give the poor of their community an opportunity to change their circumstance. In a letter to the editor of the *Constitution* in Atlanta, Julius Brown wrote “is it not our duty to place the benefits of this (library) within the reach of the whole people of Atlanta? Shall they not all be permitted to come and drink of this clear crystal fountain of knowledge freely, without money and without price?” Today, as Marcum points out, “it is available to individuals of any socioeconomic group... The no-questions-asked policy of public libraries makes it possible for anyone in the community to take advantage of the library’s services.”¹¹

The group most notably restricted from public libraries in the south has been African Americans. Many leaders of the first American libraries were known racists. Melville Dewey was a member of the whites-only Luce Placid Club in New York, and he strongly defended its right to restrict membership. Into the 1880’s and 1890’s, most libraries in the north were

integrated. A few southern libraries, such as Biloxi Public Library in Mississippi, opened in 1893, were never segregated. However, when Carnegie was giving money to build libraries throughout the south, that funding was rarely used for African American's benefit. When the Atlanta Public Library, built in 1902 was opened with Carnegie funds, W.E.B. DuBois vigorously but unsuccessfully objected to the denial of entrance to African Americans, who were one third of Atlanta's population at the time. He stated "I am taxed for the Carnegie Public Library of Atlanta, where I cannot enter to draw my own books." *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896) had codified segregation, and this included public libraries.¹²

There were efforts made toward giving blacks access to books. The Atlanta University, a privately held black institution stepped in to provide library services for black Atlantans. Other public libraries were built across the south for African Americans, such as the Brevard Street Library for Negroes in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the Cossitt Library of Memphis, Tennessee. By 1910, fifteen libraries for African Americans were built in the south with Carnegie donations. Yet these libraries were not equal to the whites only libraries. Materials for Charlotte's Public Library for Colored People came from donations from the public and the discards from Wikesbarre Public Library. In 1938, the white library in New Orleans had 273,683 volumes, while the black library contained only 14,697. Economically, it was not possible to provide separate yet equal libraries, and it was the African Americans that suffered because of it.¹³

The 1920's saw some progress for African Americans. In 1925, a library school for African Americans was established in Virginia, with the goal of providing educated African Americans the opportunity to be librarians. In 1927, the Southeastern Library Association recommended that every public library should serve blacks. However, by the 1940's two thirds of African Americans still did not have public library access, and it was not until 1949 that the

American Library Association requested equal dealings with all people in libraries. In 1959, the Atlanta Public Library was integrated with no public announcement or fanfare. There was an article published in the *New York Times* which stated “A few Negroes visited the main library downtown without attracting attention or causing any disturbance.” Some libraries such as Atlanta were able to quietly integrate, but in other areas it was much more difficult. Public libraries were not completely integrated until the 1970s.¹⁴

One final group that must not be overlooked when discussing lack of access to public libraries in the south is those living in rural areas. The southern United States has many urban areas, but it also has many rural areas. These rural areas have often not been serviced by public libraries. Speaking of libraries in the south, a 1867 government report states: (libraries) “are poorly supported; are conducted on no general or fixed system, and are confined usually to the large cities, while the smaller communities in these States are, for the most part, absolutely destitute of this most necessary means of education and refinement.” Bart Dredge writes about the Southern Textile Industry providing libraries in the 1920s and ‘30s for their employees because no public library existed for them, but these industrial libraries often contained only censored materials that were approved by those running the business.¹⁵

Only seventeen percent of rural Americans had library service in 1920, even though half of the overall population had library access. To address this issue, some libraries, such as Greenville South Carolina and Durham, North Carolina had bookmobiles. In the 1930’s, Kentucky used Federal Emergency Relief Administration money to hire women to ride horseback and carry library books to fifty seven mountain communities and schools. By 1939, the WPA funded 140 bookmobiles across the nation. In 1956 twenty six million mostly rural

Americans still did not have access to public libraries. Today, there are still rural Georgians who must drive forty miles to the nearest public library.¹⁶

Public libraries in the United States make America a stronger democracy by allowing every person access to information, and therefore access to self-guided education. This paper has shown however, that many people have been excluded from this vital institution. As a public library employee in a small southern lower-income neighborhood, I have seen people use the library to better their lives. I lead two story times a week in which I model early literacy practices for children and care givers. I have helped people who did not know how to use a mouse fill out an online job application. I have provided people with study guides for tests they needed for employment. I have helped people visit places online they would never have seen otherwise, such as a woman who found her uncle's name on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington D.C. I gave a man a library card who told me he had just gotten out of prison, where he learned he loved to read novels. Things like this happen in public libraries every day. This institution, which is paid for by American tax dollars, should be available and welcoming to all.

Although there are no longer signs stating "children and dogs not allowed," and there are no longer white libraries and black libraries, some people still do not feel welcome in these public spaces. More research needs to be done about the history of access to libraries, so that we can ensure everyone is being served properly.

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Notes

¹ American Library Association. "ALA Fact Sheet 1." 2015. Wayne A. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* (Oxford: University Press) 2015 p7.

² Deanna Marcum. "Redefining Community through the Public Library." *Daedalus*, Vol. 125, No. 4, (Fall, 1996): 191-205

³ Lowell A. Martin. *Enrichment: A History of the Public Library in the United States in the Twentieth Century*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998 p48. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives*. David M. Battles *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South, Or, Leaving Behind the Plow*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009. Michael Fultz. "Black Public Libraries in the South in the Era of De Jure Segregation." *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 41, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 337-359. James V Carmichael Jr. "Southern Librarianship and the Culture of Resentment." *Libraries and Culture* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 324-352. Jean L. Preer, "'This Year- Richmond!'" The 1936 Meeting of the American Library Association" *Libraries and Culture* 39, no 2. (Spring 2004): 137-160. Michael Kevane, and William A. Sundstrom. "The Development of Public Libraries in the United States, 1870-1930: A Quantitative Assessment." *Information and Culture* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 117-144.

⁴ Abigail A. Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 p 26, p 97. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives* p 50.

⁵ Carmichael, "Southern Librarianship and the Culture of Resentment" p324-352. Kevane, and Sundstrom. "The Development of Public Libraries" p 117-144. United States. Bureau of Education / *Public libraries in the United States of America; their history, condition, and management. Special report, Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education. Part I*. 1876. Fultz. "Black Public Libraries in the South in the Era of De Jure Segregation." p 337-359. *Hand-book of the Libraries of the State of Georgia*. Printed as a Special Bulletin of the Carnegie Library of Atlanta. 1907 p 43. Preer. "This Year- Richmond!"

⁶ Van Slyck, *Free to All* p 41. United States. *Public libraries in the United States of America* p 488. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives* p35

⁷ Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives*: p73. Van Slyck, *Free to All* pp 26, 100, 158-9, 176-181. Oriol Prizeman. "Function and Decoration, Tradition and Invention: Carnegie Libraries and their Architectural Messages." *Library and Information History* 29 No. 4, (November 2013): p 239-257.

⁸ Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives* p11. United States *Public libraries in the United States of America* p498-502.

⁹ United States. *Public libraries in the United States of America* p477.

¹⁰ Martin. *Enrichment: A History of the Public Library in the United States in the Twentieth Century*. p 19. *Hand-book of the Libraries of the State of Georgia*. p 32. Battles *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans* pp 36-37

¹¹ Julius L. Brown, *The Atlanta Consitution* (Atlanta, Georgia) 12 Jan 1899: p 4. Marcum. "Redefining Community through the Public Library."

¹² Battles *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans* pp 19-28.. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives* p84.

¹³ Battles *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans* pp 30-31, 82.

¹⁴ Battles *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans* p 142-144. *New York Times* (New York, New York), 1959.

¹⁵ United States. *Public libraries in the United States of America*. Bart Dredge. “Contradictions of Corporate Benevolence: Industrial Libraries in the Southern Textile Industry 1920-1945.” *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 43, no. 3 (August 2008): 308-326.

¹⁶ Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives* pp 110, 141, 179. Georgia Public Library Service. “All Georgia Public Library Facilities” 2015.