

Part I

1755-1905

Private Collections



From the library of Edward Moseley

“I give to my Dear wife *Blomes History of the Bible* in folio...and all the Books of Physick.” So willed attorney Edward Moseley at his death in 1749.

Moseley housed a collection of 400+ volumes between libraries at his residence in Rocky Point and his office in Brunswick Town.

Moseley and other book collectors such as William Hooper, Wilmington Revolutionary statesman and signer of the Declaration of Independence, maintained libraries for private use.

Volumes from both their collections are housed in the rare book collection at the New Hanover County Public Library.

Church Collections

“Indeed, my Lord,” the Reverend Richard Marsden, rector of St. James, wrote in 1735, “it would be a great act of charity without delay to supply this part of the province at least with good books.”

In 1755, the first shipment arrived for the St. James and St. Philips Parishes from the English Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

Religious treatises, Bibles and prayer books made up the bulk of the collection, although it probably included some volumes on philosophy, law, history, literature and grammar.

An Early Lending Library

The only pre-Revolutionary circulating library in North Carolina was the Cape Fear Library, which operated from 1760 to 1780. Little is known about the library, but it was probably supported by a group of educated men who shared in the purchase of books of interest to the group.

One volume remains at the New Hanover County Public Library: *Rollin’s History of the Arts and Sciences of the Ancients*. The book, bound in leather, has **Cape Fear Library** stamped in gold on the cover.

Reading Rooms

During the first half of the 19th century, reading rooms established by newspapers, book stores, coffee houses

and debating societies became very popular.

Borrowers paid a yearly fee for the circulation of books, pamphlets and newspapers.

Wilmington’s first known reading room was opened in 1808 by William Hasell, owner of the *Wilmington Gazette*.

In 1833, Thomas Loring, editor of the *People’s Press & Wilmington Advertiser*, boasted of having 150 newspapers from 20 states in his reading room, which stayed open until 9:00 pm.

In 1836, William C. Jackson advertised that he would rent volumes from his bookshop for 6¼ cents per week.

Harper’s Weekly



19th century reading room

Literary Groups

With the completion of the railroad in 1840 and improved access to the port, residents arrived from all parts of the United States as well as from other countries.

Debating societies, also known as lyceums and chatauquas, were in vogue. The groups provided a forum for their members to read, speak, write and debate about the scientific, moral, religious and political issues of the day.

First Library Association

In 1849, the Wilmington Mercantile Library Association was created as a club to which members paid a yearly fee, purchased books and circulated them among themselves.

In 1855, the club was absorbed into the Wilmington Library Association. Organized before the Civil War, the Association became the town’s leading literary center for the remainder of the 19th century.

In 1856, the city provided “lecture rooms” for a Public Library and Reading Room in the governmental complex which included City Hall and Thalian Hall. In 1858, the Wilmington Library Association moved its collection there from a building on Water Street and stayed open throughout the Civil War.

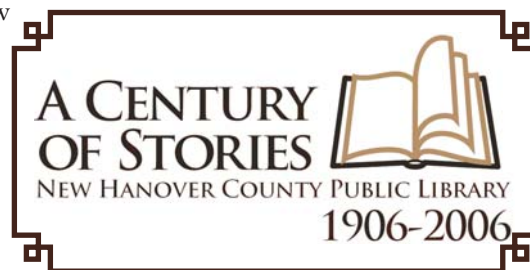


Wilmington City Hall c. 1870s

Civil War and Reconstruction

With the fall of Fort Fisher to Federal forces in January 1865, the future of the library became uncertain. The Freedman’s Bureau appropriated the library rooms for its operations. Two years later, however, the books were back, and a complete catalog of the contents listed 1300 titles.

The move was short-lived. During Reconstruction it was decided that the Association, lacking a legal charter, had no right to exist on city property. By July 1872, the



Watercolor by Clayton Giles

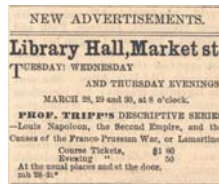


An artist’s conception of the colonial St. James Church

Association members were seeking a new home for their collection

Finally, in 1874, the group took a 10-year lease on the second floor of the Masonic Hall building at 125-127 Market Street and remained there until 1895.

It was the heyday of public speaking. The Association sponsored numerous reading clubs, debates and musical entertainments. Orators from across the globe were heard by eager Wilmingtonians.



Wilmington Morning Star
March 28, 1876

A Tale of Two Cities

While the Wilmington Library Association's members were white citizens, Wilmington's African-American community had its own literary societies, lyceums and libraries.

As early as 1870, there were organized groups of black Wilmingtonians whose leaders were principally ministers and free blacks educated in the North.

One such group was the Colored Literary Society, which provided night school for men.

Some of the larger African-American churches had libraries. St. Stephen's AME Church provided a community library in its annex building.



AN INTERESTED LISTENER.
Harper's Weekly
December 6, 1873

Forums for public speaking were promoted by groups such as the Benjamin Banneker Literary and Library Association in the 1880s and the Daniel A. Payne Lyceum in the 1890s.

Frederick Douglass, world famous abolitionist, author and civil rights leader, spoke in City Hall on August 1, 1872.

It was not until 1926 that the city began supporting a free public library for African-Americans.

The First Librarian

Despite the popularity of its programs and collection, the Wilmington Library Association, headed by extraordinary bibliophile Dr. Thomas Fanning Wood, could not raise enough money for rent, new books and a librarian's salary. Finally, in the 1880s, the group decided to give its extensive collection to the newly formed Young Men's Christian Association Library.

A public outcry ensued, and one generous man saved the library for another decade.

Captain William H. Bixby was the first Wilmington District Engineer for the US Army Corps of Engineers from 1884-1891. Bixby volunteered to manage the library,



Thomas Fanning Wood
1841-1892

and he donated over \$1,000 to update the collection.

Wilmington's first professional librarian was hired: Miss A. L. Sargent of Lowell, Massachusetts. Miss Sargent employed the latest library standards of cataloging and collection development.

Captain Bixby had electric lights installed and extended library hours. By the time he left Wilmington in 1891, there were 4100 volumes in the collection. Membership had increased dramatically and circulation doubled.

With Bixby's departure in 1891 and the death of Dr. Wood in 1892, the Wilmington Library Association finally relinquished their holdings to the YMCA in 1893. The Association continued to meet there until it dissolved at the end of 1899. Many of the Association's records are in the historical collection of the New Hanover Public Library.



Wilmington YMCA 1895

A Determined Group of Women

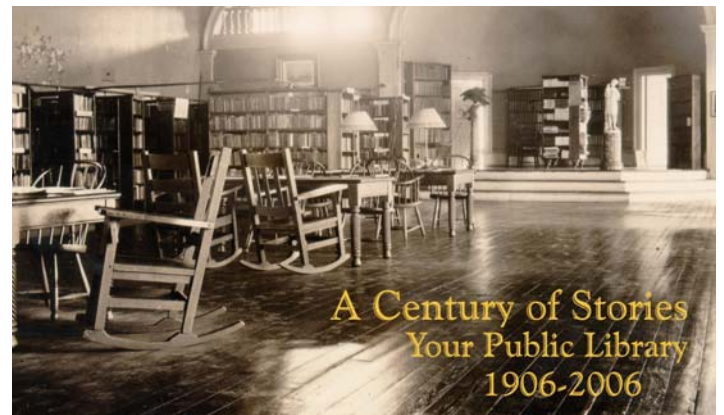
After the demise of the Wilmington Library Association, the North Carolina Sorosis, the oldest federated women's club in North Carolina, took up the cause for a Free Public Library.

In 1901, Miss Margaret Littlejohn Kingsbury introduced the idea of petitioning the city government to provide space for a public library.

In the meantime, the Board of Aldermen turned down the offer of a free Carnegie Library, considering the required annual appropriation of \$2500 to be too much of a burden to taxpayers.

Sorosis Club members persisted in their efforts. They opened a temporary library in the Masonic Temple on Front Street and later in the new Odd Fellows building on South 3rd. In 1904, they relentlessly pressured the city aldermen for a permanent location. "It is a shame and a disgrace," they argued, "that the largest and wealthiest town in the state has not an institution of this kind."

In 1906 their dream came true.



Captain William H. Bixby
US Army Corps of Engineers