

Part IX

1990-2005

In 1990, the long awaited Interstate 40 was connected to Wilmington, and the region began an era of unprecedented and sustained growth. New Hanover County became one of the fastest growing areas in the state and nation.



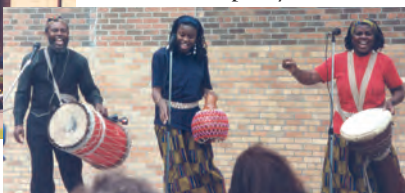
Retirees found the climate, beautiful beaches, good medical facilities and a growing University of North Carolina at Wilmington very attractive. They also considered good library services a welcome draw to the area. In 1991, the library checked out as many books in four months as it did during the entire year of 1987.

Building a Park

The library's goal of opening branches in the growing areas of southern and northeast New Hanover County was put on hold as a more urgent problem was addressed—the planned construction of a gas station and convenience store next to the entrance of Main Library.

Concerned library aficionados, as well as downtown businesses and residents, formed the Urban Park Downtown Advisory Committee. County Commissioners were amenable to buying the property for a park if the group could raise \$150,000 to help in the effort.

In February 1993, grading began on the park when Carolina Savings Bank and Branch Banking & Trust Company donated



Performance in the Carolina Courtyard

\$100,000 to the cause. Al Frega's sculpture, *The Chalice*, was chosen for the Carolina Courtyard water feature.

The park and urban sculpture were welcome additions to intercity revitalization. The park also allowed the library to move programming outside. Guest storytellers, book signings, volunteer luncheons, music in the park and other happenings became common.

Myrtle Grove Library

Meanwhile, in 1991, John Sawyer was chosen as architect for the Myrtle Grove Branch Library, which would be located at Monkey Junction to serve the southern end of the county. A state/federal grant for \$231,238 helped

move the project forward. Clancy & Theys Construction Company was awarded the contract in May 1992.



The Myrtle Grove Branch Library was dedicated on September 2, 1993. The new branch was an instant success, especially with children.

Nearby residents flocked to the library for popular reading and for children's story times. Statistics show the New Hanover Public Library system grew exponentially.

Plaza East Branch Opens

For many years there had been talk of a branch in the Wrightsville Beach area of the county as well. Landfall, an enormous gated community, began development nearby in the mid-1980s and Porters Neck, another nearby residential community, was expanding. By the 1990s the rapidly growing population wanted branch library services. On February 7, 2003, the Plaza East Library, an urban

branch in a shopping center with the same name, was dedicated; and the College Square Branch was closed.

An unfortunate but necessary result of the new branch was the termination of bookmobile services. It was obvious that New Hanover

County was becoming too urban for the traditionally rural service. The library's mobile outreach, however, continued to serve hundreds of homebound residents.



Plaza East Branch Library

In all, four lasting changes in the library system took place in 1993: Carolina Courtyard became a reality, the Plaza East and Myrtle Grove branch libraries opened, and bookmobile service ended.

A Time of Growth

During the mid-90s, demand for library services grew by leaps and bounds. In 1995, 3,000 children participated in the Summer Reading Program. Both adult and children's programming reached all time high turnouts. "War & Remembrance," "The 21st Century" and the "Let's Talk About It" series, as well as "The Civil War" and other local history weekly programs, were very popular. The next



Summer Reading Program at Main Library

year, the library system checked out over one million books for the first time! Reserves for current bestsellers reached into the hundreds. The Friends of the Library stepped in to help by purchasing

bestsellers to use as rentals in order to save the library book budget for other titles.

Technology Moves Forward

While county residents were visiting their library more than ever, technological advances gave them new reasons to come. Internet access became available in 1997 and the next year, NC LIVE, a statewide licensing of a myriad of informational databases, went online. The same year, the library's catalog became available through the library webpage.

Within a few years, the library was offering downloadable electronic books (e-books) and music through its catalog and webpage.

Smart Start

North Carolina's Smart Start program and the New Hanover County Partnership for Children provided funding to extend storytelling services to child daycare centers. Smart Start caused an increase in the children's department's juvenile programming from 2,100 participants in 1996 to 5,000 participants in 1997.



Local History Preserved

In 1998, the Friends of the Library and the library's local history room published *Strength Through Struggle: The Chronological and Historical Record of the African-American Community in Wilmington, North Carolina, 1865-1950*. About the same time, the library posted over 1,300 local history photographs from the Robert M. Fales Collection online, one of the first large digital projects in the state.



Continued Expansion

By the end of the 1990s, the Plaza East Branch Library could not sustain the demand for services in the northeast region of the county. The Northeast Library Action Committee was formed to raise awareness



Raising \$1 million for Northeast Library



Volunteers set up Northeast Library

and funds for a full-service regional library branch in that part of the county. In October 1997, the county commissioners approved the purchase of an abandoned supermarket building for a new library. They asked the community to contribute \$1 million toward the effort.

While Smith Gage Architects drew renovation plans for the Northeast Regional Library project, fundraising

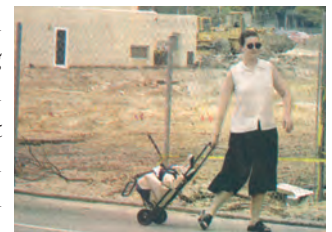
was long and arduous. In February 2000, goals were met and construction began. The grand opening, attended by 400 enthusiastic supporters, was held on September 29.

The library, with its spacious bookroom, computer lab, meeting rooms and original artwork was a dream come true for area residents. At the same time, the Carolina Beach Library underwent much needed renovations.

Crisis Averted

In the meantime, the city informed the county that they had to build a parking deck before they could construct a new county courthouse annex. The site chosen for the deck was the Main Library's parking lot. With plans in hand, the Library Advisory Board addressed the loss of the parking lot with a proposal to renovate all three floors of the Main Library building. When the library opened in 1981, it had been predicted that expansion would be necessary in 25 years. It was time, and the Library Advisory Board pointed out that the cost of renovations would be cheaper if done simultaneously with the parking deck.

The County Commissioners first agreed to the plan but changed their minds in the middle of construction. Mold problems had been found in the county annex building and the commissioners voted to move employees from that building to the library's third floor. A firestorm of concern from library supporters ensued, and the commissioners found alternative housing for the annex workers.



Library staff take to the streets during parking deck construction

Reason to Celebrate

On June 5, 2003, an open house and celebration was held at the renovated Main Library. Nicholas Kristof, New York Times columnist, was the keynote speaker. Third floor offices and meeting rooms, an expanded North Carolina Room, Children's Room and Audiovisual Room were featured, as well as updated first floor amenities. A new addition was the Consumer Health Library which had been moved from the New Hanover Regional Medical Center to the public library.

Thankfully, Some Things Never Change

During the latter part of the 20th century and early part of the 21st century, library technologies, buildings and services have grown along with the region's expanding population. Through it all, the library's primary objective—



READ—has been the same for the past one hundred years.