

# **A Brief History of Public Libraries in West Virginia**

Charles A. Julian July 2000

The story of the growth and development of public libraries in West Virginia is one with few surprises. Indeed, in many ways, the historical growth in providing library service to citizens of the state mirrors the overall historical economic and political development of the state as a whole.

As early as 1807 (Wheeling Library), some type of library existed in the state. However, these early collections tended to be private subscription, circulating, literary club, lyceum, or library company libraries. The establishment of academies, colleges, and (later) universities provided opportunities for the development of new library collections, but most of these early libraries were tiny collections with little or no professional supervision.

On May 18, 1859, the Wheeling Library Association was chartered by the Circuit Court of Ohio County and became the first established public library. It later became the Ohio County Public Library.

By 1900, the state of West Virginia had one public library in Wheeling, one state law library, one historical library partially supported by the state, and several college and school libraries. Most literary and library company collections were disbanded by this time or merged with other libraries, particularly school and academic libraries.

From 1886 to 1919, Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie Corporation provided slightly more than \$41 million for the construction of public and academic libraries in the United States. However, West Virginia citizens failed to significantly capitalize upon the Carnegie beneficence.

Eight Carnegie grants totaling \$241,500 were approved for communities in West Virginia: Wheeling - \$75,000 (August 12, 1899), Huntington - \$35,000 (December 30, 1901), Parkersburg - \$34,000 (December 29, 1903), Bethany College - \$20,000 (March 1905), Hinton - \$12,500 (April 8, 1907), Bluefield - \$10,000 (April 8, 1911), Williamson - \$10,000 (February 13, 1913), and Charleston - \$45,000 (March 14, 1913). Ultimately, only four grants totaling \$101,500 (42%) were accepted. An academic library was built at Bethany College (1907) and public libraries were completed in Hinton (1906), Huntington (1903), and Parkersburg (1905).

The communities rejecting Carnegie grants generally did so because they could not raise the 10% annual maintenance fee required by Carnegie or could not secure suitable building sites. This was the situation with both Bluefield and Williamson. However, Charleston community leaders believed the city "should have a more commodious library than \$45,000 would erect." A subsequent bond proposal in 1915 to raise more dollars failed after Carnegie refused to modify the award.

The most acrid refusal of an approved Carnegie grant came from Wheeling where labor leaders led the defeat of a municipal bond levy stating that Wheeling was "one place on this great green planet where Andrew Carnegie can't get a monument with his money." Their opposition stemmed from steelworkers' deaths at Carnegie's Homestead, Pennsylvania mill.

In 1914, twelve cities and towns in West Virginia had public libraries of some sort. On October 21, 1914, Sally Scollay Page of Clarksburg organized the West Virginia Library Association at a meeting held in conjunction with the annual convention of the state Federation of Women's Clubs. A primary objective of the newly formed WVLA was the establishment and funding of a state library commission. In 1915, the Federation purchased a collection of books for a traveling library. These collections were shipped around the state, under the auspices of the West Virginia University Library, and represented the first attempt to provide a systematic means of providing library service to citizens of the state.

At the turn of the 20th Century, public library development began to flourish throughout the United States; however, West Virginia citizens remained woefully underserved. After nearly twelve years of effort, finally, on June 8, 1929, the West Virginia Library Commission was established by law. Unfortunately, no funds were provided for the agency until 1941. Twelve years of unfunded inactivity placed the state at a great disadvantage. While other state library commissions spearheaded the growth of development of public library service, West Virginia lagged behind.

In 1940, W. P. Kellam, Librarian at West Virginia University, wrote, "The library facilities throughout the state of West Virginia are woefully insufficient. West Virginia has only .15 of one volume per capita in its public libraries; during 1938-39, the inhabitants of the state read only .46 of a volume per capita from its public libraries; 79% of the people are without library service; and only five cents per capita was spent for library services during the past year."

During the mid-20th Century, the most active library development resulted from the efforts of individual women's clubs and the dogged prodding of the State Federation to publicize the inadequacies of library service in West Virginia. In 1938, the Federation authorized funding for a statewide library survey conducted by Paul A. T. Noon and Mildred Sandoe. The surveyors reported:

The Survey Committee is familiar with many poor libraries, but it does not feel it is an exaggeration to state that with but a few exceptions, the libraries of West Virginia are the worst the Committee has ever visited. Of the 26 libraries listed, only 14 are actually receiving public tax support and would be eligible to receive state and federal funds when appropriated.

The West Virginia Library Commission attempted, with several initiatives and programs, to improve the provision of library service to state citizens, but continued to be hampered by a lack of funds. It was not until the early 1970s that public library development received a major boost with the passage of W.Va. Senate Bill 30, a law that permitted state grants-in-aid to public libraries. This legislation enabled the state to take advantage of federal library construction dollars and library building campaigns were developed throughout the state. However, it would not be until April 1979 that all counties possessed some type of public library.

Inadequate funding, lack of citizen interest, poor economic and political conditions, and a weak state library commission are all reasons for the slow growth of public libraries in West Virginia. In the 1970s, available federal funding dramatically aided library development. Additionally, a dynamic state library commission staff, under the leadership of Frederic J. Glazer, pressed forward with an ambitious campaign of public library development and with savvy political shrewdness significantly boosted the state per capita grants-in-aid library funding. To this day, the absence of permanent, stable funding for all libraries makes provision of adequate services to state citizens a continuing challenge.

Therefore, the successes and achievements in providing the best possible library and information services to West Virginians are often those enjoyed by individual libraries and their patrons from around the state.

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