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# Standing Strong: A History of the Bowling Green Public Library

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# 1

## Birth Pangs

Books have existed in south central Kentucky since the first pioneers walked or rode horses onto the Pennyrile. This precious cargo was often wrapped in paper and placed carefully in saddlebags or packs. Many families only possessed a Bible, while the more fortunate might own additional meditation books or the ubiquitous *Pilgrim's Progress*. These books provided moral and intellectual stimuli and often served as the family archives. Bibles frequently bore the birth, death and marriage records of a family, information that might have been lost otherwise.

A quick survey of Warren County's earliest probate records indicates the types of books our earliest settlers possessed. Upon a man's death, his possessions were inventoried, including his books. Many inventories denoted "an old decayed Bible," "a parcel of books," "eight books," "a shelf of old books," and "three small books." This evidence substantiates the rarity of books during the earliest pioneer days. Some of the inventories listed specific titles such as: *Morse's Geography*, *Confessions of Faith*, *Toulman's Laws of Kentucky*, *Exiles of Siberia* and others. It was still more common to find a slave or a beehive stand listed in an inventory than a book.<sup>1</sup>

The inventories indicate that few of Warren County's earliest settlers possessed more than ten books. Exceptions included men such as William Chapline, Warren County Circuit Court clerk, who amassed



<sup>1</sup> Warren County, Kentucky, Will Book "A", March 1798-April 1814. Typescript copy found in the Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University; hereafter referred to as KL, WKU.

approximately sixty volumes that were disseminated to local friends and relatives upon his death in 1811. Robert Craddock, one of Warren County's earliest settlers, accumulated a large library that enhanced the curriculum of the free school that he and his friend, Peter Tardiveau, operated at Craddock's home, near the Hadley community.<sup>2</sup> Several Warren County individuals collected sizable libraries, but many years of economic and social development preceded the establishment of a public library.

Although never abandoned, Warren County's early intellectual development was stalled by its concentration on economic survival. Bowling Green emerged as the transportation and commercial center for Warren County and several contiguous counties. Flatboats laden with the produce of a fecund countryside left the Bowling Green area annually in the late spring to points southward. The Barren River was made navigable for steamboats by a series of locks as early as 1842. These cargo and passenger carriers departed from Bowling Green for Louisville and Evansville via the Barren, Green and Ohio Rivers. Upon the completion



The L&N Railroad helped link Bowling Green to the outside world.

of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad in 1859, Bowling Green became even more accessible to the outside world. Built to cater to visitors, its variety of stores and hotel facilities made Bowling Green an ideal stop on the railroad.<sup>3</sup> As the city grew, the need for a community library increased

and several groups attempted to establish such a service.

Two early efforts to organize library service in Bowling Green can be documented, but little is known about either. Both organizations were established as subscription libraries, which were quite common throughout nineteenth century America. In these libraries, people purchased a share in the stock company in order to enjoy the organization's privileges which could include circulation of books, newspapers and magazines, as well as lectures and demonstrations. In 1838 the Kentucky General Assembly passed "An Act to Incorporate the

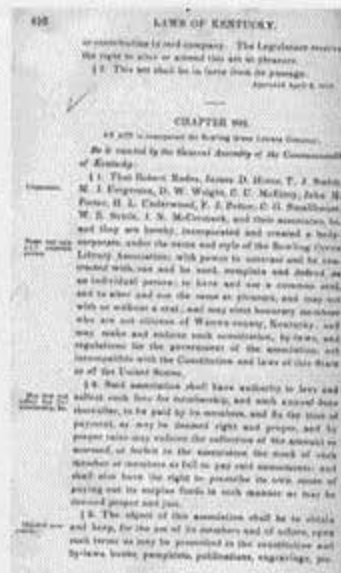
<sup>2</sup> "Craddock," Bowling Green/Warren County Vertical File, KL, WKU.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on Bowling Green's early development see Nancy Baird and Carol Crowe-Carraco's *History of Bowling Green and Warren County* (Bowling Green: Western Kentucky University, 1989).

Bowlinggreen [sic] Library Company." The act's introduction leads one to assume that the organization for this group was already intact: "Whereas, some of the citizens of Warren County have, by subscription of shares of stock of five dollars each, constituted themselves a company...have elected officers, purchased valuable books...and desire an act of incorporation for the effectuation of their laudable purposes." The act outlined the organization of a Board of Trustees and authorized them to "levy a contribution upon said stockholders, not to exceed one dollar upon each share in any one year, for the purpose of increasing the stock of books, or other literary appendages, of said Library." The legislation also noted that the Trustees could "receive a conveyance, by donation or purchase, of a lot of ground within or near said town, for the erection of a Library room, and contract for the building of the same."<sup>1</sup> No other evidence of this organization exists. It is possible that it was this group of "learned" men who formed the Bowling Green Lyceum in the early-1840s.<sup>2</sup>

The second effort to organize a library in Bowling Green took place in 1878 when the General Assembly chartered the "Bowling Green Library Company." This group's incorporators included the city's most prominent professional men. The legislation again outlined the method of leadership for the group. The capital stock was limited to \$100,000, and each share was limited to \$25 with no individual allowed more than five shares. The act contained a specific section outlining the company's purpose:

The object of this association shall be to obtain and keep, for the use of its members and of others, upon such terms as may be prescribed in the constitution and by-laws, books, pamphlets, publications, engravings, pictures, works of art, maps, philosophical apparatus, or other things which the board of directors may direct; and it may employ lecturers, and cause courses of public lectures or other entertainments to be given.



The Kentucky General Assembly incorporated early libraries.

<sup>1</sup> *Acts of Kentucky*, 1838, p. 84-85.

<sup>2</sup> The by-laws and minutes of the Bowling Green Lyceum are contained in the diary of Dr. Lemuel Porter (1810-1887) which is housed at the Filson Club, Louisville.

Again little is known about this organization. No documentation or oral tradition documents if the library's directors fulfilled so noble a purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Soon after the Bowling Green Library Company was incorporated, A.W. Mell decided to move his Southern Normal School to Bowling Green from Glasgow. In 1884, Bowling Green citizens raised \$3,000 in subscriptions to lure Mell to the "Park City" and offered a downtown building to the school for classrooms at a reduced rate. The Normal's library, a tiny room with a small number of volumes, was not a place for children, and undoubtedly townsfolk not associated with the academic community were uncomfortable there. When the college was moved to the old Potter College campus in 1911, the entire library filled only two wagons.<sup>7</sup> Other prominent schools that developed in Bowling Green had similar libraries, particularly Potter College, which housed a fascinating collection specializing in the languages, ancient history and literature.<sup>8</sup>

As Bowling Green grew, it reveled in its reputation as the educational center for south central Kentucky, but it still had no library easily accessible to the public. Well-to-do folks purchased books and popular periodicals in town at T.J. Smith's Book Store or Garvin's Store, and they surely circulated these among their friends. Even children of these



Women's clubs such as the Ladies' Literary Club helped start libraries across the country.

families found delightful stories and games in magazines such as *Saint Nicholas* and *Youth's Companion*. Churches maintained circulating libraries for the edification of their members, but their selections were generally limited to religious tracts and theological tomes.

Near the beginning of the twentieth century, Bowling Green blossomed with intellectual pursuit. Literary clubs formed throughout the community, including the

<sup>6</sup> *Acts of Kentucky*, 1878 (vol. 2), p. 436-459. The incorporators were: Robert Rodes, James D. Hines, T.J. Smith, M.J. Ferguson, D.W. Wright, C.U. McElroy, John M. Potter, H.L. Underwood, P.J. Potter, C.G. Smallhouse, W.E. Settle, J.N. McCormack.

<sup>7</sup> Lowell H. Harrison, *Western Kentucky University* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), p.2-3, 36.

<sup>8</sup> For more information about Potter College's library see Lynn E. Niedermeier's *That Mighty Band of Maidens: A History of Potter College for Young Ladies, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 1889-1909* (Bowling Green: Landmark Association, 2001).

Ladies' Literary Club (1880), the Current Topic Club (1895), the XX Club (1901), the XV Club (1879), the Browning Club (1895) and a host of others. The Ladies' Literary Club began a library in 1891, which after 1895 was cosponsored with the Current Topic Club. This developed into a sizable collection of popular adult fiction and classical literature. Initially it was housed at the home of Dr. Edward T. Barr, a local dentist. When the collection grew too large, nearly 1,400 volumes, it was moved to the home of Mrs. Clarence McElroy at State and Thirteenth Streets. The traveling collection of books was named the "Woman's Library."<sup>9</sup> In 1900 the collection was opened to the public for an annual fee of \$2.00. Within two years the joint library committee was appalled to find that nearly one-third of the books circulated were novels. They felt this trend was "having a very bad effect on the morals of this library...as the baser elements of its composition are being cultivated to the exclusion of the standard and classic virtues."

When the new City Hall was completed in 1908, a room was dedicated for the library. Soon the women began to find maintenance and operation of the library "burdensome." In 1913 the library committee proposed donating the collection to Western Kentucky State Normal School, but the Current Topic Club opposed this plan. The



The library was once located in City Hall.

library was eventually donated to the Bowling Green Board of Education, and the books were installed at Bowling Green High School with the stipulation that the women could retain access to the collection.<sup>10</sup>

Bowling Green's lack of a public library was typical of the plight in many American communities. But during the Progressive Era, a period of social reform which began in the 1890s, a push for public libraries developed across the country. Many cities in the late nineteenth century received their libraries through generous bequests of wealthy benefactors. The New York Public library was the result of three men's bequests: Jacob Astor, James Lenox and Samuel J. Tilden. Baltimore's library

<sup>9</sup> Bill Bolte, "It is an Ill-Wind that Blows Some Good!: The Beginnings of the Bowling Green Public Library," *Kentucky Library Association Bulletin* 42(Fall 1978): 9.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn Niedermeier, "The Woman's Library," *Landmark Report*, 20(March 2001): 11-12.



system was begun with a substantial gift left by Enoch Pratt. Perhaps the United States' greatest benefactor of public libraries was Andrew Carnegie. From 1886 to 1919, Carnegie's iron and steel fortune helped construct 1,412 libraries at a cost of almost 40 million dollars. This money was designated for construction only; communities had to maintain the new edifice and build a book collection in order to receive construction funds.<sup>11</sup>

By 1900, many of Bowling Green's citizens were aware of the need for a public library that would be accessible to all its people. Led by Lena Covington Nye, an active Bowling Green club woman, and Beulah Strong, an art teacher at Potter College, a group of citizens petitioned the City Council for support in applying for Carnegie funds. The Carnegie Foundation required proof of future appropriations before releasing funds for construction. The Council supported the civic idea, yet eventually rejected it, fearing they would be unable to fund the project in the future. Thus, as many Kentucky towns, including Owensboro, Hopkinsville, Covington and Paducah built Carnegie libraries, Bowling Green did without.<sup>12</sup>

Another defeat occurred when the City Council rejected the conversion of a private home into a public library. On May 20, 1904 one of Bowling Green's most cherished spinsters, Victoria Jackson, passed away. In her will she stipulated that her house at 1123 College Street be used as an orphanage. Many people believed Miss Jackson planned that her home be used as a library, but that was really her alternate plan. The will states: "It is my purpose and desire to establish a Cumberland Presbyterian Orphans' Home for white children in Bowling Green, Kentucky...and to this end I vest...the title of the house...being the place I now reside."<sup>13</sup> Prior to her death, Miss Jackson had begun remodeling her home on College Street so it could be used as an orphanage. She had six apartments constructed on the second floor and had sawdust put under the second story flooring to muffle the noise that children's feet would

some day generate. The Cumberland Presbyterian Orphans' Home closed in 1930 after twenty years of operation. Under the stipulations of the will, the city now had the opportunity to utilize the building for a public library. However, according to the will, a tax had to be approved which would provide for

<sup>11</sup> *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, "History of the Public Library," by Frank B. Seess.

<sup>12</sup> Bolte, "Ill-Wind," p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Cumberland Presbyterian Orphans' Home, Inc.* (Bowling Green: Int'l, 1904?), p. 1. Found in the

Special File, KI, WKU.

maintenance of the house. The City Council appointed a committee composed of George T. Massey, John R. Campbell and S.M. Young to study the proposition.

On September 1, 1930 the City Council rejected the offer on the grounds that a clear title to the property seemed unobtainable. The committee reported that conversion of the building into a library would cost the city between \$12,000 and \$15,000 and appropriate equipment and books would be an additional \$25,000. The city would also "be called upon for expenditure attending the operations and maintenance of the library." It was pointed out that Bowling Green citizens had access to the libraries at Bowling Green High School and Western Teachers College. The *Park City Daily News* stated that "it was the opinion of a number of the councilmen that there is no great demand for a municipally operated library." Miss Jackson's home was subsequently sold with the proceeds going to the Mission Boards of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.<sup>14</sup>

Although momentum for constructing a public library did not reappear until the late 1930s, several people in the community did open their private collections for restricted use. Silas Bent, a Bowling Green native who gained modest fame as an author, penned an article for the *New York Times* about a Bowling Green man who had a 2300 volume library he opened to all who wanted to partake. Bent wrote of this anonymous bibliophile:

Anyone who wants a helping from his shelves may have it for the asking. No introduction is necessary. The mere fact that anybody wants to read a good book is a passport to his affection and his confidence. He goes on the theory that persons who can't be trusted don't read this kind of stuff.<sup>15</sup>

Although Bent described the man in full detail, he never gave his name, because this man also made available titles by such "licentious" authors as D.H. Lawrence. There appears to be little doubt that this secret book lover was Carl D. Herdman. Others in Bowling Green such as Max Nahm, Judge John Rodes and Eliza and Major William A. Obenchain maintained libraries of lesser size that were accessible to those who asked. Still, they were not public libraries.

<sup>14</sup> *Park City Daily News*, 2 September 1930. Hereafter referred to as *PCDN*.

<sup>15</sup> *PCDN*, 29 January 1924.