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# Looking Back: Public Library History Outlined in Article

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**Looking Back: Public Library History Outlined in Article  
By Jonathan Jeffrey**

Lena B. Nofcier penned the following article, "History of the Public Library Movement in Kentucky," for the Kentucky Library Commission's *Biennial Report*, volume 13, 1933-1935. In it she chronicles the slow development of public libraries in the Commonwealth. Nofcier was a dedicated advocate for libraries, serving as state chairman of the PTA's library service committee, as secretary of the Library Extension Division of the Kentucky Library Commission, and as president of the Kentucky Library Association in 1939.

“No agency or department in Kentucky was charged with the responsibility of gathering, compiling and publishing library information or statistics until the Kentucky Library Commission was established in 1910. For earlier information it is necessary to consult the Acts of the General Assembly, state, county and city histories and the minutes of library companies, associations, clubs and boards. As these records differ it is rather difficult to secure accurate information.

In 1796 (some records indicate 1795), 4 years after Kentucky became a state, some citizens of Lexington "proposed the formation of a library for the benefit of the students of Transylvania University--who has no sufficient library of their own--and for further pleasure and instruction of the citizens of Lexington, far removed at that early time from the centers of culture and learning in this country." These citizens formed the Lexington Library Company selling shares at \$5.00 each [and] subject to an annual contribution of \$1.50. About \$500.00 was raised by the first subscription with which 400 books were purchased. Thus the first public library west of the Allegheny Mountains came into being.

With the spreading of the news of the establishment of this library, library companies were formed at Danville and Georgetown. An act was passed by the General Assembly in 1800 incorporating the three library companies on November 29, 1800 (Littell, William, *Statute Law of Kentucky*, Frankfort: Johnston and Pleasants, 5 v[ols.], 1809-1819, v. 2, p. 375-77).

From 1800-1817, 14 similar companies were incorporated by Acts of the Assembly. They were as follows, named in order of incorporation: Lancaster, Paris, New Castle, Shelby, Winchester, Washington, Versailles, Washingtonian (Shelby County), Frankfort, Mt. Sterling, Hopkinsville, Louisville, Stanford and Henderson. It will be noted that all but four were in Central Kentucky--Washington, Mason County, in the Northeastern section, Hopkinsville and Henderson in the western part of the State and Louisville on the Ohio River. The movement for a library was started in Louisville in 1811, 5 years before the Library Company was incorporated.

In 1820 the *Acts of the 29th General Assembly* records the first act, "To establish a public library at the seat of the government." This act was approved November 9, 1820. The library was to consist in the main of the acts, journals, court records, and archives of the State. The Secretary of State was made the librarian and the material was to be house in the Secretary of State's office. This act was revised several times resulting in the present statute governing the present state library and library of the Commonwealth.

During the remainder of the 19th century there were continual changes in the names, locations and rulings governing the library companies and libraries.

In 1894 the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs was organized in Lexington. During the first year of its existence calls came from workers in the mountains for books.

The first traveling library was taken by Miss Katherine Pettit of Lexington to eastern Kentucky where the books were distributed. She had announced she would bring books when she returned. A teacher had his pupils prepare pine knots so they would have bright fires to read by. In a few days all the books she had brought were in circulation.

In 1900 there were 11 public libraries, 15 college and university libraries and 2 law libraries in the State. The public libraries were Lexington, 1796; Mt. Sterling, 1870; Maysville, 1878; Danville, 1893; Campbellsville and Taylorsville, 1897; Hopkinsville and Nicholasville, 1899; Covington, Bowling Green and Newport, 1900. Four of these were no doubt, the libraries established by the library companies previously mentioned. The Louisville Library Committee in 1878 passed into the hands of the Polytechnic Society of Kentucky, which society maintained a subscription library and a free reading room. It had 50,000 books and a valuable museum collection.

The library companies, and libraries established by clubs, associations, etc., operated under Incorporation Acts, passed by the General Assembly or, without any legal status, until 1898. Then a legislative enactment enabled cities of the 1st class (Act of March 15, 1898, Section 3210) to acquire and conduct a free public library.

In 1881 Andrew Carnegie began his program of founding and aiding libraries. The Covington Public Library, organized in November, 1900, received a gift of \$85,000 for a library building from Mr. Carnegie. The city voted a tax of \$8,500 for its maintenance. This seems to have been the first Carnegie grant to Kentucky for public libraries.

During the first decade of the 20th century, the library laws governing libraries in cities of the 1st and 2nd class were revised. Laws governing libraries in (1) 2nd and 3rd

class cities, (2) 3rd-6th class cities, (3) 4th class cities, (4) county and district libraries, and (5) the Library Commission law, were enacted.

June 27, 1907, the Kentucky Library Association was organized with William F. Yust, Librarian of the Louisville Free Public Library, as President. Through the cooperative efforts of the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs, the Kentucky Library Association, Mr. Yust and Miss Fannie C. Rawson, the Library Commission bill was successfully engineered through the General Assembly.

Kentucky was the 35th state to undertake library extension work. Massachusetts in 1890 was the first State to establish a department to foster public library development.

In 1910 there were 12 public libraries and 2 college libraries housed in Carnegie buildings. Louisville, in addition to acquiring the main library (about 1904), also secured money for a number of branch library buildings, 5 of which were built and, the 6th established in rented quarters, during this decade. One branch library was for colored people. The library was organized into the following departments: order, cataloging, circulation, reference, children's and a system of branches and deposit stations, totaling 226 centers. There were 41 members on the regular staff, pages and janitors swelling the total number of employees to 58. Admission to the staff was by examination and a 12 weeks' course in instruction and apprentice work. The open shelf room, art room, museum, lecture and classroom were interesting features of the system. A collection of 600 music scores was available for circulation.

The Lexington Public Library had separate reference, children's and open shelf departments. It also established little book stations at several points about town.

Henderson opened a branch for colored people in 1904. In 1909 it was named a depository for public documents for the second congressional district.

The public libraries at Maysville and Lexington were receiving both city and county support. Nicholasville, Maysville and Versailles had endowed libraries.

The next decade, until the entry of the United States into the European War, was a period of rapid library development.

As soon as the Kentucky Library Commission law went into effect June 13, 1910, the organization of the department was begun. The 5,000 books and 100 traveling library cases given to the department by the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs were assembled from the 100 stations and prepared again for circulation. Questionnaires were sent to all the libraries in the state. The data was compiled and, the first printed report of library conditions and sketches of libraries, was published December 1, 1911. A handbook of Kentucky libraries and other circulars of information were also issued during the first 14 months of the department's history.

The second biennial report, 1911-1913, records the following data:

- 41 public libraries in 37 counties (91 counties in Kentucky then)
- 17 college and special libraries (some of these located in 6 additional counties)
- Book collections in about one-third of the graded schools
- 4,950 rural schools without libraries
- In 48 of the 91 counties, there were no libraries except the traveling libraries loaned from the Commission office

- From 1910 to 1917 there was a constant increase in number of books loaned and circulation of materials from the Commission office. The period of 1917-1920 showed a marked decrease (War period).

At the end of the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were 58 public libraries, 21 of which were wholly or partially supported by public funds; 1 was maintained by an endowment; 20 supported by women's clubs; 16 were subscription libraries, 2 of which received some public funds and one an endowment. Thirteen of these libraries were free to citizens of the entire county. Forty-two library buildings had been built or purchased. Twenty-seven of these were housed in Carnegie buildings. In 62 counties (120 counties at this time) there was no library service except traveling libraries from the Commission.

In 1920, the library law governing cities of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> class was revised and enacted and the county library law was passed. The public library work, interrupted by the war, was resumed and went steadily forward. During this decade the appropriation of the Commission was increased three times. During the first 10 years \$6,000 annually was appropriated. The Assembly granted an increase to \$7,500, then to \$9,000, and to \$12,000. The work was expanded and increased until 1928. At that time, due to a combination of circumstances—difference in counting statistics, a decided increase in general loan activities, substituting family groups and smaller groups of books for traveling libraries, wider field activities- the number of volumes loaned and circulation showed a decided decrease. During the last two years of this 10 year period, the amount of materials lent and the circulation increased.

The adoption of the standards of the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary schools resulted in increased library activities in the secondary schools and institutions of higher learning.

The demands for organization of school libraries took almost the entire time of one field worker from the Commission office. In addition to high school collections, Rosenwald libraries for grades and high schools for colored children were organized.

The period from 1930 to 1935 has been teeming with library activity. Several library buildings have been constructed; a number of public libraries enlarged their area of service to include the county; several club libraries were established; courses in library science were offered at the University of Kentucky, three of the State Teacher's colleges, University of Louisville, Berea College, and Nazareth College, Louisville. A full time school library supervisor was added to the staff of the Department of Education. Courses in the use of books and libraries were offered in the high schools. High school librarians were required to secure library training. Courses in children's literature were made a requirement for elementary teachers.

From 1930 to 1933 the services from the Commission were expanded, resulting in a greater service. July 1, 1933, due to a 42% reduction in appropriation, the Commission staff was reduced 50%; services were curtailed; and field activities, especially organization work, were practically discontinued. With the restoration of a part of the budget, as many services as possible were re-established, beginning September 1, 1934.

In addition to the regular services--general loan and traveling library--the Commission cooperated with the Civil Works Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and other governmental agencies, in the utilization of the unemployed to



restore discontinued library services; repairing of books. Books were loaned to the Civil Conservation Corp Camps and Federal Emergency Relief Administration educational workers.

A reading course for homemakers was inaugurated in cooperation with the State Leaders of Home Demonstration Agents, College of Agriculture, University of Kentucky. Two hundred and fifty-one rural women are reading books for fun. A reading certificate is to be granted to those who have read six books between July 1 and December 1, 1935. This project may not reach the goal set because rural women do not have much time to read during these months in the year. Much better results would no doubt be realized had the reading project been inaugurated during January through March. This was not possible due to heavy demands from other sources for reading materials during these months.

During the last three years many exhibits of children's books, the model school library, Reading with a Purpose series, as well as special and general books, have been sent to various parts of the State.

An intensive public library informational program has been carried on by the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs, the materials for which were secured from the Commission.

During the last year special work has been done with Parent-Teacher Associations and other civic and educational groups, which activities were being continued.

Book service from the Commission office has been given to every county in the State except six, during the last two years. Traveling libraries were loaned in 86 different counties, and general loans, since September 1, 1934, to July 1, 1935, were made to 97

counties. Over 1,000 people from within and without the State came to the office for service from October 1, 1934, to July 1, 1935. Many calls were received by telephone and telegraph.

One of the most important field activities has been the meetings of the Secretary with various library boards and citizens groups.

The Kentucky Library Association Survey Commission, appointed in 1933, has reported its findings, recommendations and program, which will be found in the Kentucky Library Association Bulletins of April 1934 and 1935.

This is a sketchy account of the public library movement in Kentucky from 1795 to July 1, 1935.”