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Keeping the Faith: A History of Library Services in Versailles, Kentucky
By Jonathan Jeffrey

In 1962 The Macmillan Company published the popular little memoir of Virginia Cary Hudson entitled *O Ye Jigs and Juleps*. It is a delightful little tale of a ten year old's memories of growing up in Versailles, Kentucky. Fortunately she includes a blistering four-page chapter on "The Library", a reference to Versailles's Logan Helm Memorial Library. In a fresh childlike way, she introduces us to Miss Simmons who posts library signs that demand silence, but "talks the whole long day" herself. She also notes that the "library is never busy" and contains three types of book: those people like to read, those people don't like to read, and those people will never read. In ending her innocent diatribe, Hudson notes: "The library is a memorial. A memorial is something that somebody says or gives or builds after you are dead and can't hear it or get it or see it."¹ The Woodford County – Logan Helm Library was indeed built as a memorial—a memorial to a much loved nephew.

Little did Ms. Hudson realize at the age of 10 that Versailles had been home to various library endeavors over the years. The first effort in this vein was a subscription, circulating library known as the Versailles Library Company which received a charter from the General Assembly in 1812, only twenty years after Versailles was established. Joseph Kincaid, William B. Long, John McKinney, Jr., Nathaniel Hart and William B. Blackburn comprised the first library board. Their charter did not specify the subscription charge or the maximum number of shares to be allowed like similar documents of the time period. The Company could accept "gift, grant or bequest of money, books, goods or chattels...to be laid out in books, maps, charts, etc. for the benefit of said corporation, agreeably to the intention of the donors."² No extant records for this group survive, but it

is certain that it was gone by the time of the Civil War. Another brief scheme developed in 1875, when a Mr. Ulysses Turner obtained \$400 in subscriptions for a library but it failed after some bitter infighting. The local paper blamed the debacle on “rivalry, jealousy and a still worse spirit.”³

Reverend W.G. McCready, the minister at Versailles’s St. John’s Episcopal Church, led the next movement to bring public access to books in Versailles. In 1886 he and a parishioner held fund raising parties to pull together the necessary money for a library. The Woodford Literary Association, incorporated on March 3, 1886 “for the purpose of establishing and conducting a library and reading room, purchasing books, periodicals and papers and giving or procuring others to give lectures, concerts and public entertainments of a literary character.”⁴ This effort melded perfectly with the Lyceum movement in the United States that combined library services with other cultural activities.⁵

The Board of Directors, “the best element of society”, set up the library in the Woodford County Courthouse with the help of librarian Miss Wasserboehr, a refined organist of Versailles.⁶ By August it was receiving four weekly papers, including one for children and owned “the standard works of fiction, history, travel and humor.” Requests were made for “active, intelligent men and women to become subscribers” and for reading materials. The appeal was a splendid one:

Citizens of Woodford county, especially you who profess to believe in practical Christian effort for the betterment of your County and State, will you not aid those who are seeking to place Woodford county in [the] forefront of intellectual and moral progress? Will you not in your day and generation help lay the

foundation for a better future, that the children yet unborn may rise up and call you blessed.⁷

How could anyone in good conscience ignore such a noble effort? Although well intentioned and initially successful, the effort was eventually taken over by the Woman's Club. When W.J. Lampton, a writer with the *Courier-Journal*, visited Versailles in 1893, he noted: "There's a public library of 400 or so books which is rather weak on its pins."⁸

The library was indeed weak on its pins. In 1901, the local paper bemoaned: "The Versailles Public Library which we consider one of the most important institutions in the town, will close its doors this month unless there is substantial evidence from its friends and the public that its continuance is desired." The pledges made by concerned citizens in 1897 expired in 1900, and insufficient numbers renewed. Subscribers were urged to send their annual dues of \$2.50 to librarian Miss Sarah Graddy.⁹ The library continued to eke out an existence over the next several years.

Then, a miracle happened. Miss Margaret C. Logan, of Orlando, Florida, died on 21 May 1903 and bequeathed that a memorial library be built in Versailles to honor her nephew, Logan Helm, who "died in his prime." After granting several other bequests, the executor announced that there would be approximately \$35,000 for the library—\$20,000 for a building and equipment and \$15,000 as an endowment for sustaining the institution. We actually know little about Miss Helm, except that she was a Woodford County native and had been an invalid her entire life. She bore her suffering, which included being "confined for many years to her bed and a darkened room", with "remarkable fortitude, and even cheerfulness." The local paper described her as "naturally generous" and that

“nothing gave her so much pleasure as when ministering to the necessities and comfort of the poor and the afflicted.”¹⁰

The 1870 census indicates that Margaret resided in the house of her sister, Mary Helm. Mary’s husband, J.D. Helm, was a wealthy Woodford County farmer, owning real estate worth \$50,000 and personal property worth \$20,000. Interestingly, the census taker indicated that Margaret also had personal property worth \$20,000, quite a considerable sum for the period.¹¹ Also listed in the household is sixteen year old Thomas Logan Helm. In the 1880 census Mary is widowed and Margaret is no longer in the house, but Logan is unmarried and still living at home at the age of 25.¹² The exact cause and circumstance of Thomas Logan Helm’s death are unknown, but he died on 19 November 1890 and is buried in the Lexington Cemetery.¹³ The only other thing known about him is that he had a doting aunt who believed he was struck down in the “prime of his life.” The Lexington paper—in a rather self-righteous editorial—applauded Miss Logan’s generosity but berated prosperous communities for applying to Andrew Carnegie to finance their libraries. The Carnegie name is not mentioned, but it is certainly implied in the following diatribe in which the Logan gift is acknowledged as...

...the proper way for a rich community to get a free public library...[they should] not solicit and accept a donation from a wealthy stranger as if they were mendicants. Nothing does more to degrade and destroy the self-respect of individuals and communities than to come under pecuniary obligation and while it is legitimate for individuals to accept from relatives pecuniary donations and for communities to receive from its citizens donations and legacies it is hideously contemptable to take the attitude of supplicants and beggars to rich strangers.¹⁴

Not much time passed before different people began to proffer their opinions about where the new library should be located and what it should look like. The local paper seemed to sum up most people's feelings on the matter: "The library ought now to have a dignified and suitable building in some central location."¹⁵ The library was incorporated in early 1904 and five trustees selected: three were appointed by Thomas Seller, the executor of Miss Logan's will, and two by the County Court. Afterwards the trustees would be appointed by the court. The trustees considered four different sites for the location and settled on the Scott property opposite the O'Neal House on Main Street, where the present building is today.¹⁶ The trustees hired local contractors, John and Fred Rump to construct the building. Like many building projects, this one was not completed on time, so the library opened 5 February 1906 with 1,550 books. It was a two-story building with the library on the second floor; storefronts were located on the first floor to help generate funds to fund the library.¹⁷ The library opened under the guidance of its new librarian, Mrs. Margaret W. Edwards, who the trustees had hired after seventeen ballots at a salary of \$35 per month.¹⁸

The library had a stupendous first year. It added 339 volumes to the collection and had 619 registered patrons—474 adults and 145 children. Circulation for the first year was 11,141, while the library counted 13,038 visitors. Amazingly the librarian reported only one book and four magazines lost during the year. Then disaster struck. Shortly after midnight on 13 June 1907 the clerk from the O'Neal House—a local hostelry across Main Street—happened to notice smoke curling from the cellar grates in front of Rout's drugstore on the first floor of the library building. The fire was put out, but hot spots remained and during the night the fire aroused itself with a fury and shot straight up the

elevator shaft. The next day Versailles awoke to find that the conflagration had left only the façade and south wall standing. The fire caused \$16,000 in damages to a building that had cost \$20,000 to erect. The library had insurance to cover \$10,500 of that loss; it lost \$4,000 in books and furniture and had insurance to cover \$2,000 of that loss. The drugstore suffered a loss of \$9,000. Despite the scope of the fire, 500 books were saved and the library reopened on 18 November 1907 in the home of librarian Margaret Edwards.

Only one week after the fire, citizens eagerly informed the library board about what it should do. A group of “prominent ladies” began circulating a petition seeking support for their ideas. The ladies had several requests related to the new building. First they wanted to move the location of the library to “an attractive situation as to avoid in future all danger from fire originating from business carried on in the same building or adjoining houses.” They also suggested that a lecture room be included in the building that “could be rented for dances and other entertainments.”¹⁹

Despite the petitions of Versailles’s well meaning citizenry, the library board decided to rebuild on the same location, which it already owned. The board hired the architectural firm of Copland and Dale of Lexington to design a new building; the general contractor was John B. Brown. They created a lovely Beaux Arts façade that still lends an air of elegance to Main Street. Once again the library was located on the second floor with storefronts on the first. The library collection, circulation and attendance remained rather static for the next twenty years under the leadership of Mrs. Edwards, who retired in 1923. After that date service gradually declined to the point that the library was only open to the public from 2:30 to 5:00 p.m. five days a week. As a matter of fact little

occurred at the library to shake things up until 1954 when during a statewide campaign to purchase bookmobiles led to the donation of a vehicle for service in Woodford County.

The Keeneland Foundation donated a bookmobile to Woodford County for library service to its rural citizens. The Fiscal Court established the Woodford County Library Board to oversee the program. Agnes Owsley Walcutt was hired as the first bookmobile librarian. The program's collection was initially housed at the Versailles Elementary School, which it outgrew in 1960. Interested parties held a meeting in April 1960 to determine a course of action. Under the leadership of General Field Harris, the Citizens Group for Improving Library Service successfully petitioned the Logan Helm Library Board for space on the first floor. At that time the two library boards hired a graduate student in library science, Theresa Fitzgerald, on a part-time basis to handle the collection and train bookmobile personnel. The county school system and the Midway School Board contributed financially to the bookmobile program for service to their schools. The library staff was assisted by a number of community volunteers.

A few interested individuals dared to dream of the two collections merging. Margaret Willis of the Kentucky Department of Libraries, reviewed the idea with the two boards and determined that the plan had merit. She also extended an offer of assistance to apply for Library Services and Construction Act funds to renovate the entire building for library use. These monies had not been available to Woodford County before, because it did not have a library taxing district. Recent legislation, however, had allowed libraries to receive this funding if there was an annual appropriation from a municipality or fiscal court. The Fiscal Court passed an appropriation of \$10,000 per year to support the library. The leases on the downstairs storefronts to Western Auto and Versailles Laundry

and Dry Cleaning Company were set to expire which made the decision timely. To facilitate the project, the Logan Helm and Woodford County libraries officially merged in April 1965, although the two separate library boards were retained. Three months later the library joined the Capitol Regional Library System, which also included Franklin, Scott, and Anderson counties. Renovations to the building began in November 1966 under the supervision of Dudley Kelly and Paul Kissel of the Lexington based architectural firm of Cravens and Cravens. During the renovation the library operated out of the Carter house on Morgan street.

The \$91,827 renovations included new fixtures, shelving, heating, air conditioning, and an elevator shaft (the elevator was added later). The façade was also returned to its former Beaux Arts glory. The library resumed service in its building at 115 Main Street in August with a full-time professional librarian. The dedication ceremony took place on 5 September 1967 with Governor Edward T. Breathitt giving the chief address. A costume ball was held in the Library Assembly Room from 8:00 p.m. to midnight. Proceeds from the \$5 tickets went toward reducing the \$2,000 overrun on the renovation project. With improved services and a gorgeous facility, patronage and circulation increased dramatically, circulation alone jumped thirty percent. All the library's books were now on shelves; previously some had been boxed up in storage areas.²⁰

In April 1967 a Friends of the Library organization was established. Its purpose was to help educate the public about the library, provided library volunteers, and to assist in fundraising activities. Over the years they have sponsored art exhibits, furnished a

piano for the library, equipped the building's kitchen, and volunteered for special projects.

The Friends group was also instrumental in helping to get a library taxing district established in Woodford County. By the mid-1970s those interested in the library recognized that the fiscal court's contribution—although generous—was not adequate to maintain and operate the Logan Helm-Woodford County Library. In 1977 the Friends newsletter announced that a petition was being circulated to allow for a tax levy of three cents of every hundred dollars of real and personal property. The justification for the tax was a need to increase library and bookmobile hours and to expand programming and services. The petition was turned in on 23 July 1977 with the names of 3100 registered voters on it, 100 more than necessary. The Fiscal Court unanimously accepted the petition and the tax was included on the 1978 tax statements. At that time the Woodford County Library District Board was appointed with Helen Hicks as chairman.²¹

Since the taxing district was established, the Logan Helm Woodford County library has enjoyed steady growth. Today it has an automated catalog and offers a variety of library services and programming for the community. In defining a library, former librarian Margaret Raybould poignantly described the institution as “an act of faith in people—faith in the dignity and importance of individuals in our society.” Keep up the faith!

¹ Virginia Cary Hudson, *O Ye Jigs & Juleps!* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962): 30-33.

² *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twentieth General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort, Ky.: W. Gerard, Printer for the State, 1812): 128-

134. The Washingtonian Library Company of Shelbyville was chartered at the same time and it specified that shares (or subscriptions) in the company would cost twenty dollars, and the number of shares was limited to 150.

³ *Woodford Weekly*, 8 January & 12 March 1875. From the vertical files of the Woodford County Historical Society Library, Versailles, Ky. Hereafter WCHSL.

⁴ “Notice of Incorporation” dated 8 March 1886. From the vertical file of the Logan Helm Woodford County Library. Hereafter referred to as LHWCL.

⁵ Ray, Angela Gail, “Pupils, Spectators, Citizens: Representations of U.S. Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century Lyceum,” (Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2001).

⁶ The Board of Directors of this library effort included: Rev. W.G. McGready, W.O. Davis, J.J. Hayes, E.M. Wallace, and James M. Graves.

⁷ *Woodford Sun*, 6 August 1886.

⁸ Quote from Helen Franklin, “The Origins of the Logan Helm-Woodford County Library, 1812-1977,” a college paper from Fall 1997. Found in the WCHSL vertical files.

⁹ *Woodford Sun*, 5 September 1901.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28 May 1903. The obituary indicates that Miss Logan was buried next to her mother in the Richmond, Kentucky, cemetery. Thomas Seller was appointed executor of Miss Logan’s will, with Theodore Harris and S.W. Landsberg serving as sureties. The will was dated 9 August 1901 and was witnessed by D.L. Thornton, Miss Fanny Turner and Mrs. Lucy M. Thornton.

¹¹ Besides the census information, follow-up articles on the library bequest indicates that Margaret was a woman of means. Her estate was “wisely and securely invested”

including a substantial amount of Florida real estate. *Woodford Sun*, 28 May & 11 June 1903.

¹² 1870 & 1880 U.S. Federal Census for Woodford County, Kentucky.

¹³ This information was provided by Kathy Wright of the LHWCL via e-mail 9 May 2002.

¹⁴ *Woodford Sun*, 11 June 1903.

¹⁵ *Woodford Sun*, 28 May 1903.

¹⁶ The sites considered were: the Amsden lot on the east side of Main, the old Dean House on the southeast corner of Main and Morgan Streets, and the Steele property on the southeast corner of Main and Green Streets.

¹⁷ *Woodford Sun*, 16 November 1978.

¹⁸ The other candidates for the job were: Miss Sara Graddy, who had been librarian for the Versailles Public Library; Miss Louise Web; Miss Enna Thompson; Miss Inez W. Thomson; and eight others. The ladies listed are the ones who received at least one vote in the proceedings.

¹⁹ *Woodford Sun*, 20 June 1907.

²⁰ *Woodford Sun*, 7 September 1967.

²¹ Frankllin, "The Origins of the Logan Helm-Woodford County Library."