

Spring 2012

# Looking Back: A Heavenly Library in Rural Butler County

Jonathan Jeffrey

Western Kentucky University, [jonathan.jeffrey@wku.edu](mailto:jonathan.jeffrey@wku.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc\\_fac\\_pub](http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fac_pub)

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Repository Citation

Jeffrey, Jonathan. (2012). Looking Back: A Heavenly Library in Rural Butler County. *Kentucky Libraries*, 76 (2).

**Available at:** [http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc\\_fac\\_pub/31](http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fac_pub/31)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in DLSC Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact [topscholar@wku.edu](mailto:topscholar@wku.edu).

**Looking Back: A Heavenly Library in Rural Butler County**  
**By Jonathan Jeffrey**

Sabbath School or Sunday School libraries were once quite popular in the United States. Located in churches of all denominations, the libraries provided a source of chiefly religious-based reading material for children. Occasionally adults were also afforded borrowing privileges. Denominational headquarters, as well as religious publishers, offered prescribed sets of books that churches could purchase according to their curriculum needs or financial resources. The library replaced the old "gift system" in which children who excelled in recitation or behavior were rewarded with a book. The exact origins of the Sabbath School library is not easily determined, but they certainly existed as early as the 1810s. The movement started in the northeast and gradually spread south and west. These libraries were largely the result of the rapid development of Sunday Schools in the early nineteenth century.

Although origins are sketchy, the Sunday School library movement grew in a steady crescendo from the early 1800s. By the 1830s, mention of these libraries was included in standard Sunday School material. In his *Sabbath School Teacher*, Reverend John Todd listed the advantages of such a library:

- It will create a taste for good reading.
- It will interest those with books who otherwise would never use them.
- A Library occupies the vacant hours of the children.
- A Library will create taste and draw out genius.

- A Library will refine and elevate intercourse between parents and children and between the children themselves.
- A Library will attach Scholars to the School.
- The Library will do good where nothing else can reach.
- The Library is a powerful means of convicting the soul, and building it in holiness (Todd, 163).

By the 1830s, Sunday School leaders considered the library a vital component of any church's educational work.

Documented Sabbath School libraries are not common in Kentucky, but one did exist in an unlikely location, the Big Bend of the Green River in rural Butler County. Salem Baptist Church organized in 1838, partially the result of a huge revival that had taken place at the Beaver Dam Baptist Church across the Green River. Several families were granted permission to begin a new congregation in the Big Bend of the Green River, an extremely fecund section of land that unfortunately was also prone to flooding. Although isolated—separated by seven miles of treacherous roads northwest of the county seat, Morgantown, which itself contained fewer than 500 citizens in 1850—the Big Bend was the site of a busy wharf (Borah's Landing) and boasted several ferries. The people had easy contact with the outside world via steamboats on the Green River.

Salem's congregants first met in a log house, but in 1849 they constructed a more commodious structure which accommodated their meetings and a

school. In 1857, the congregation erected a new building that was to be used strictly as a church facility. Knowing that their new building was soon to be ready, the congregation met on October 1, 1856 and resolved to constitute a Sunday School by electing pro tem officers who would conduct a meeting later in the month to officially organize the school. At this organizing meeting, the group recorded its desire to "purchis a \$15 dol Library for the use of said school." (Minutes, 16). Funds were raised by subscription within the congregation. Subscribers' names were recorded in the minute book along with the amount of their donations, varying in size from M. H. Flowers' dollar to G. G. Wilson's nickel. The total amount of subscriptions totaled \$16.25. Extant records for this Sunday School and its library include the period from October 9, 1856 to October 4, 1857 (Minutes, 14).

At the October 26<sup>th</sup> meeting, the group approved a constitution and by-laws. Typical of most by-laws, the duties of officers were recorded. The secretary was sanctioned "to record...the no. of volums (volumes) in (the) Library." As a matter of fact, a significant portion of the by-laws related to the new library's operation:

- Article 5<sup>th</sup> – It shall be the duty of the Librarian to take charge of the Library to charge the Teachers with the Books That there (their) classes may select and others with Books that may be taken from the Library & see that no book is returned in bad condition with out Submiting it to the managers for there reception or expunction(.)He

shall credit the book when returned & if not returned in two weeks it shall be his duty to inquire into the cause & see that it is returned.

- Article 6<sup>th</sup> – The office of recording secretary & Librarian may be vested in the same person.
- Article 7<sup>th</sup> – It shall be the duty of each Teacher (in) charge of a class (to) either select the Books for there class or allow the puples (pupils) to do it & Charge each puple with the Book they may select to interrogate the puple upon what they have been reading & give them such information and instruction as the circumstances may require upon the reading matter contained in those Books & to see that the Books charged to them for there classes are punctuly (punctually) returned at Least in two weeks & also to see that good order is observed in there classes.
- Article 8<sup>th</sup> – Any person receiving a book from the Library receives it as a Lone (Loan) & is bound to return it in two weeks at Lest (least) unless providentially hindered & if not returned in good order with out markes or Pen (or) pencil scrolls of any kind must be kept & paid for or the person failing to do so shall be deprived of the use of the Library for three months.
- Article 9<sup>th</sup> – No person except those that are subscribers will be permitted to vote in the adoptin of the rules & regulations of the

school but every white person who is a subscriber shall be intitle (entitled) to a vote.

- Article 10<sup>th</sup> – The Library & The benefit of the school shall be of free access to all ages, sects, denominations & coler (color) & they are invited to receive them.
- Article 11<sup>th</sup> – Any person becoming a subscriber & removeing from the neighbourhood will not have the privilige of removeing his interes(t)or tranfering it to any other person.
- Article 12<sup>th</sup> – Not related to the library.
- Article 13<sup>th</sup> – Any person violating any of the above rules & being reported to the President may be reprimanded & suspended untell (until) the case is investigated by the managers who may expel so violating (Minutes, 10-13).

These by-laws provide fascinating information about the library's operation.

No accession book exists for the library, but in the front of the minute book a brief summary listing hints at the library's content. The list begins with "77 vol. new Library." This undoubtedly refers to a set of books purchased from any number of religious publishers of the day who profited from the Sunday school library movement. Next the list notes 9 volumes of union questions, 5 of which were specifically listed as "childs." These books undoubtedly contained questions that were asked in recitation fashion, the pedagogical method so familiar to nineteenth century students. The library also contained several

textbooks, including 16 “readers,” 3 spelling books, 1 teacher book, as well as a Union Bible dictionary. The librarian also recorded 44 volumes from the “old library” (Minutes, 2). This entry begs for explication. Perhaps the church had maintained some type of unorganized collection in their former building. The librarian was also in charge of keeping, but not necessarily updating, the Sunday school roll book. Although not large, Salem’s Sunday School library was not much smaller than those known to exist in the United States. Based on information collected from the 1850 census, the average Sunday School library was 120 volumes; this size spiked in 1860 at 335 and dipped back down in 1870 to 249 (*Compendium of the 7<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> Census*, lxiii, 505).

The classification system for the books was elementary with each new book being assigned the next sequential number. From the charge records, the highest number ever assigned was 100. Books were charged according to the class number as seen by the accompanying photograph from the minute book. The maximum number of classes listed in the one-year span covered by the minute book was seven. As noted in the by-laws, the books could be borrowed for two weeks and returned in good condition. Students could be charged the cost of the book if it was returned damaged. Interestingly, no mention of fines is recorded in the by-laws, but persistent offenders could lose library privileges or even be expelled from the Sabbath School. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the library’s circulation policy related to its inclusivity. Individuals of all ages, sects, denominations and color were allowed “free access.” In rural 1857

Kentucky this was undoubtedly a liberal policy. From the minutes, it appears that the teachers made selection decisions for students. Consistently the Librarian noted: "The Teacher(s) then drew Books for the next week for there respective classes" (Minute Book, 23). The minutes never indicate that pupils were allowed to choose their own books. The minutes also do not note when, and if, anyone outside the Sabbath School was granted check out privileges.

Library hours of operation were limited. Books from the Sabbath School library could only be checked out and returned on Sundays. Although not noted in the minutes, exchanging charged books was highly discouraged in the literature. Even if a student didn't like something that they had checked out, they had to wait until the following Sunday and were not to exchange their books with other pupils (Briggs, 170).

The minute book of the Salem Sabbath School contains rudimentary information about library services in a rural Kentucky church setting. We do not know how long the library existed, although a note on page three indicates that it disbanded a few years later. The note, dated July 18, 1859, specifies the "balance of clames (claims) on Salem Sabbath School Library (at) ten dollars and 75 cts. The contributors of the balance either dead or removed and therefore not entitled to any of the library" (Minutes, 3). The note is signed by the Sabbath School superintendent J. M. Forgy. This note seems to imply more than just termination of library privileges, and quite likely the collection's demise.



Although short-lived, the Salem library seems to be rather typical of the period, but appears atypical for its isolated location and its liberal user policy.

**WORKS CITED**

Briggs, F. Allen. "The Sunday-School Library in the Nineteenth Century." Library Quarterly 31(April 1961)

Compendium of the 7<sup>th</sup> Census, June 1, 1850. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1853.

Compendium of the 9<sup>th</sup> Census, June 1, 1870. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1873.

Minutes of the Salem Sabbath School, 1856-1859 (SC 350). Ms. Manuscripts & Folklife Archives, Special Collections Library. Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Todd, John. The Sabbath School Teacher. Northampton, Mass.: J. H. Butler, 1837.