

Madeline C. Miller. The Traveling Libraries of North Carolina. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in I.S. degree. December, 2022. 24 pages. Advisor: Ron Bergquist

This paper presents a qualitative, historical study of the characterization and doctrinal basis of the activities of the North Carolina Library Commission and its Traveling Libraries. It examines service to rural libraries and the delineation and contest between state responsibility and municipal or county responsibility for instituting public libraries.

Headings:

Public Libraries

Traveling Libraries

Rural Libraries

THE TRAVELING LIBRARIES OF NORTH  
CAROLINA

by  
Madeline C. Miller

A Master's paper submitted to the faculty of the  
School of Information and Library Science of the  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in  
Information Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

December 2022

Approved by:

---

Ron Bergquist

# Table of Contents

- Dedication .....4
- Introduction .....5
- Literature Review .....6
- Research Questions .....7
- The History of Public Libraries in North Carolina .....8
  - 1700’s .....8
  - 1800’s ..... 10
  - 1900’s & The North Carolina Library Commission ..... 12
- The Traveling Libraries of the North Carolina Library Commission ..... 16
- Methodology ..... 19
  - Researcher Positionality ..... 19
  - Data Collection Methods ..... 19
  - Data Analysis Methods..... 20
- Research Quality and Ethical Considerations..... 21
- Impact, Limitations, and Conclusions..... 22
- References ..... 23

## Dedication

To seven generations before and after.

## Introduction

Weaponry, transportation, energy, information; information is the foundation of the most formative new technologies in the present century. We rely on human, analog, machine, communication and computational technologies to learn from, to ask, to train and to program. The technology has transformed and intersected with others, spanning cuneiform wedged into clay to heavily mined and manufactured drones. At the beginning of the 1900's, civilian's technology for information had much to do with *books*. With the perfection of printing underway and literacy burgeoning, the people of North Carolina sought to increase access to books by creating *public libraries*. There was a concerted effort to make this the responsibility of the State, as opposed to the County, via the North Carolina Library Commission's *Traveling Libraries*, a program aptly configured to meet the needs of the rural population.

This study presents an inductive, qualitative historical study of the North Carolina Library Commission's *Traveling Libraries* programs. This study relies on historical records and archives to characterize the program, which took place during the Commission's existence from 1909-1956, a formative time for public libraries in the state. This study also pursues the general history of public libraries in North Carolina as context for the *Traveling Libraries* program, and where applicable, seeks out the doctrinal basis of public library and traveling library activities.

## Literature Review

There is a wealth of literature regarding North Carolina libraries. Extensive bibliographies on the subject have been compiled by Wiley J. Williams (2004), Robert G. Anthony Jr. (1992), and Ray Carpenter, Bea Bruce, and Michele Oliver (1971). A focus on the traveling library system, and with specific regard to statutory basis, is not currently present. Significant portions of the literature are in regard to the individual county library systems and to the practices of preservation and archiving. The North Carolina Library Commission's traveling libraries do not appear to be the main subject of previous published research.

A major primary source and guide in this research are the North Carolina Library Commission's biennial reports, published every two years between 1910 and 1956. These reports highlight major statutory activity in the North Carolina General Assembly and also mention publications that describe subjects relevant to the North Carolina Library Commission.

## Research Questions

The focus of this thesis will be a qualitative, historical, and doctrinal study to characterize the traveling library program undertaken by the North Carolina Library Commission, discern its statutory basis for existing and funding, and to characterize pursue reasons for its ending, transformation, or otherwise disappearance from the institutional record.

## The History of Public Libraries in North Carolina

1700's

Although sparsely populated and estranged, the people in the colony of North Carolina created small *private* libraries amongst themselves. Consensus is that the colony's first *public* library opened in 1700 in Bath, North Carolina, considered also to be the colony's first town. The library was chronicled by Stephen B. Weeks, North Carolinian historian and graduate of the University of North Carolina and associate of the U.S. Bureau of Education, in the federally-printed *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1895*. Weeks' report, titled "Libraries and Literature in North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century" begins with the beginning of the arrival of the colonizers, enslaved, and servants in 1650. The colonists were outliers in Virginia and outcasts of the government of Sir William Berkeley. He describes the group's entry wherein "they found the lands in Carolina very fertile" as they "settled on the water courses, for these furnished the best and only means of transportation and communication" (Weeks, 1896, 172). Weeks cites the colony's early population density in Albemarle as less than four persons per square mile. He draws a parallel to the low-density of North Carolina in his present year of 1895, wherein "ninety-five per cent of [North Carolina] population live in the country or in a country town of less than 5,000 people" (Weeks, 1896, 172).

The library in Bath was donated by Rev. Thomas Bray, who funded the venture with assets from the Bishop of London. Bray set up various libraries around the colonies, multiple in North Carolina, via an organization that he created called the *Society of the*



*Propagation of the Gospel*. In general, philanthropy appears in the historical record as a contributor to public library development in North Carolina, although rarely sustainable, efficient, or enthusiastic (Valentine, 1996). (i) The free use of the library for the residents of Bath was encoded into colony law in 1715 (the statute in Weeks' citation: "Sections 19-32, inclusive, of chapter 52, of the Revision of the Laws of North Carolina, made in 1715"). Unfortunately, the Bath library was not long for the century and met demise. The books are believed to have been destroyed, lost, and dispersed to other libraries, likely private ones. Bath ceased to be a populace center after the Indian War (Weeks, 1896, 178-179).

Weeks discusses many private libraries from before the Revolution and scarcely any more public ones. He relays, "The only encouragement given to literature that I have been able to find in the records was the importation in 1771 of 'twelve printed copies of the process used in Sweden for the making of Tarr,' under the direction of Lord Hillsboro, and an allowance of about 2(pounds) a year for the years 1769-1771 to the parish school in Newbern, for books and paper" (Weeks, 1896, 219). After the Revolution, he addresses the subject of public libraries with their own chapter. In addition to the activities of Bray's Society of the Propagation of the Gospel to create "parochial" libraries, Weeks makes note of five distinct "public" libraries, located variously in the City of Wilmington, Mecklenburg County, Iredell County, and Rowan County. Of these, there was still a range from something more like a private debating society (The Circulating Library in Mecklenburg) to something publicly enacted by a legislature (1789, Library of the Center Benevolent Society of Mecklenburg and Rowan Counties) Lastly, the library at the University of North Carolina was founded in 1795 and practiced some circulation with the public. Weeks notes that the University collections were housed in vermin infest cupboards (Weeks, 1896, 220-221).

1800's

The 1800's was a century of an insoluble trinity: construction, destruction, and reconstruction of slavery. The war blighted the southern states and as such literature for the century about the development of public-services, particularly libraries, is sparse. For the time period, concentrating the study of the historical record on private libraries, as a proxy for their public counterparts in relevant instances, may be advantageous and poses a suggestion for further research.

Nevertheless, citations to 1800's libraries appear, particularly for those of colleges, which may have had elements of public access. Of public libraries, NCpedia, a project affiliated with the State Library of North Carolina, cites three in the 1800's, founded in Statesville circa 1840's, in Buncombe County in 1879, and in Durham in 1897 (Case & Agan, 2008). The Durham library is The Durham Public Library, the white counterpart to the Durham Colored Library which was established in 1913 but originated out of library activity at the White Rock Baptist Church, founded in 1866. The first biennial report from the North Carolina Library Commission, published in 1910, provides additional instances of libraries in the 1800's. Of the twenty-seven libraries that it published a record of for the 1800's, most were categorized as from colleges and three were categorized as public: (Mooresville Library (1857), Asheville Library (1879), and the Good Will Free Library of Ledger (1886)) (North Carolina Library Commission, 1910, 25-27).

The century culminated in one significant, though short-lived, legislative Act. The Scales Act passed in 1897 (Chapter 511 of the 1897 Public Laws), which allowed cities and towns of more than one thousand persons to provide public libraries supported by general fund taxes. The Act was effectively repealed by not making it into the Revisal of 1905, the reasons and conditions of which are a suggested topic for further research. Before it was effectively repealed, the Scales Act was in the company of campaigns for more legislation for the creation of public libraries, waged by the State Library Association, an entity that preceded the North Carolina Library Commission. In January 1901, members of the Raleigh Library Association were part of these campaigns and they included programming about the Scales Act. The News and Observer reported:

“In opening the [Library Association] meeting, Superintendent Grimsley discussed the work of the Library committee of the State Library Association. This committee is making an earnest effort to establish public town libraries as well as libraries in the public schools of the State. Superintendent Moses followed, reading the bill which this committee is endeavoring to get through the Legislature, and explained the Scales act, empowering the boards of aldermen in incorporated towns to appropriate part of the town funds to the purpose of public libraries. The association unanimously approved the plans of the Library committee” (“The Library Association’s Work”, 1901).

---

<sup>i</sup> During the course of the research for this paper, it has appeared inconclusive how accurate some attributions of philanthropic contributions are, particularly in the case of the Durham Colored Library.

## 1900s & The North Carolina Library Commission

Despite the effective repeal of the Scales Act by in the Revisal of 1905, most public libraries in the state came to be during this century, some of which continued into the 2000's. The 1900's contains the greatest scope of public library history for North Carolina and as such the focus on it here is narrowed mostly to the activities of the North Carolina Library Commission, appointed by the General Assembly in 1909 and lead by the Louis R. Wilson. The Commission started with a small budget, \$1000 for salaries (paid to the Secretary) and \$500 for miscellaneous needs, conspicuously including the Traveling Library program. The Commission operated until 1956. In their first biennial report, the Library Commission commented on the repeal of Scales Act in a section titled "Library Legislation":

"The Scales library act of 1897 having become inoperative because not brought forward in the Revisal of 1905, there is now no law in North Carolina authorizing towns to establish and maintain public libraries by taxation. That this is the case has worked to the detriment of library growth during the past two years and has greatly handicapped [sic] the work of the Commission. Both subscription and association libraries, the only libraries which can be established under present conditions, are dependent upon the spasmodic [sic] labors of a soliciting committee and the uncertain generosity of the public and, in consequence lead a very precarious existence. The library association is recommended as a satisfactory method of making a beginning simply because it affords an organization for creating library sentiment and through which to work for a tax-supported library. The public library should eventually be supported on the same grounds and by the same methods as the public schools and other municipal institutions.

That the General Assembly will pass a good library law is the hope of all who are engaged in library extension work. Until such a law is passed the Commission can not fulfill its true function and the majority of the citizenship of

the state will be barred from the use of good books” (North Carolina Library Commission, 1910, 19).

In 1910, the North Carolina Library Commission reported fifteen public libraries known to have opened in the first decade 1900-1910 (approximately half of the eighty-six libraries reported on in 1910 did not include data for their opening date) (North Carolina Library Commission, 1910, 25-27). Of those fifteen public libraries, the one with the largest surrounding population was the Carnegie Library in Charlotte, population of 40,000. The smallest surrounding population was attributed to the Cora A. Stone Memorial Library in Montreat, population of seventy-five.

In May V. Crenshaw’s “Public Libraries in the South,” first written as a thesis for the Library School of the New York Public Library in 1915 and updated one year later for publication in *Library Journal*, she postulated that the development of infrastructure, let alone public libraries, in the Southern States was affected by the conditions of three significant entities: the *Black* population(s), the *rural* population(s), and the *destruction* of the Civil War, still experienced half a century later. Her characterization of the South and its queries as rural *or* Black aligns, almost, with sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, who characterized the South as rural *and* Black. Between the lines, Crenshaw comments on the challenge of public libraries being the greatest for the dispersed rural, poor, and often Black populations in small municipalities. Libraries for private groups and universities (sometimes serving the public) were the more common instance, but the Traveling Libraries get an honorable mention in association

(the ones from “state”, inferred to be the ones of North Carolina Library

Commission and focus of this paper):

“For the slow awakening of the South to the educational privileges due her citizens thru [sic] public libraries, there have been many reasons assigned. Climatic causes have been cited, together with the general conservatism of her people, the poverty resulting from a devastating war and the length of time always required for recuperation. That statistics for the South show a decrease of 24.28% of illiterates in 1900 to 16.45% in 1910 is an encouraging sign of improvement in the schools, which it is hoped may gradually extend to public libraries; and the progress made in other civic matters in recent years, the general good roads movement, for instance, is perhaps a sign of the dawning realization that increased taxes, if properly used, are apt to bring increased benefits. Since the poverty is gradually being overcome, it is safe to say that, at the present time, it is a general lack of interest, resulting from the failure to understand the possibilities and opportunities of the public library, that is the retarding [sic], not so much the growth of the library movement, as its inception, in the South.

There are two main features wherein the South differs from other sections of the country— its negro [sic] population and its vast number of country people in comparison with its few large cities. Both of these conditions are slowly being recognized.

From Colonial days the southern states have been blessed with many excellent private libraries. Subscription and association libraries are of long standing, and even in the former it is now the general rule to circulate free of charge the books received in the state traveling collections.

College libraries in many places are open to the public, sometimes even circulating books.”

The North Carolina Library Commission was created by an act of the North Carolina General Assembly and operated from 1909 to 1956, before merging with the North Carolina State Library. At the time of its inception, North Carolina joined twenty-five other U.S. states that had established library commissions, the first of which was Massachusetts. The North Carolina Library Commission modeled both its function and purpose on the development of public education in the state. The first lines of the first biennial report of the Commission established the relationship between the institutional organization of schools and libraries:

“The public school system of North Carolina having been brought to its present efficiency through state supervision and encouragement, the General Assembly of 1909 created the North Carolina Library Commission to render a like service to the library interests of the state. Such action was striking recognition of the fact that the library has become not only a necessary part of the equipment of school and college, but that the public library is itself an educational institution of the greatest importance to every community” (North Carolina Library Commission, 1910, 2).

While the North Carolina Commission took the position that libraries and schools were closely related in their purpose and function, libraries and schools were considered still separate entities and occupied distinct political positions when it came to their legal, codified development and funding. About half-way through the tenure of the North Carolina Library Commission, in 1941, the North Carolina General Assembly approved funds for public libraries for the first time, with an initial amount of \$100,000 such that each county library received \$900. The funding program, referred to as State Aid, continues today and is administered by the Library Development unit of the State Library (*State Aid To Public Libraries*, n.d.).

## The Traveling Libraries of the North Carolina Library

### Commission

The Commission may have circumvented some of the legal constraints for library creation and funding by implementing the traveling library program, which distributed boxes of books to communities both with and without already existing library services.

And this was to the specific benefit of the rural population:

“North Carolina is an agricultural state, the great majority of her people live in the country and for the most part do not have access to good books. There being no public library law on the statute books, towns can not establish libraries to be supported by taxation; and most of the libraries already in existence are small and limited as to funds for buying books... There is, therefore, a fertile field for the traveling library in this state- the schools and small libraries need them to supplement their own collections, the towns without library facilities of any kind need them to pave the way for a public library, and most of all, the farmers need them” (North Carolina Library Commission, 1910, 17).

Furthermore, it seems the Commission was able to operate the traveling library system, at least at the outset, without a specific, designated source of funding:

“In a number of states a separate appropriation has been made for the traveling library work. This should be done in North Carolina. If the Legislature would appropriate \$1000 annually to be used for the establishment and operation of traveling libraries, it would only be a matter of time until free books had penetrated every nook and corner of the state” (North Carolina Library Commission, 1910, 17).

By 1938, the NC Library Commission orchestrated a traveling library program with 1,158 collections of books, consisting of 53,845 volumes, and 305,851 instances of circulation (North Carolina Library Commission, 1938, 20).

In 1912, shortly after the North Carolina Library Commission’s inception, Louis R. Wilson took to the newspapers to publish a romantic and intellectual opinion piece about the Traveling Libraries. The piece is revealing of Wilson’s political and moralistic perspectives on the Traveling Libraries program (with a reference to



Prohibition, already underway North Carolina at the time), as well as a comment on the limits and promise of state-funding (as opposed to county). He published “Why Not Traveling Libraries?” in the *Progressive Farmer* (a newspaper published in Raleigh by a young Populist editor) with the subtitle “Farmers and Their Families in Twenty-Nine States Now Have Such Advantages, but Few in the South – A Good Reform for the Farmer’s Union and All Farmers to Help Along – The System Explained.” He depicts the traveling library as a way to make an intellectual, worldly, and sober way of life out of country living, while quoting Emerson. Lastly, he confesses that the program relies on the unpaid labor (of women, or, those who work with children), while aspiring for the state to cover the material costs:

“Emerson once said that one could remain within the limits of a modest country seat and yet be much traveled and widely cultured... To him the two means of traveling abroad in thought and of acquiring a wide knowledge of the facts and things common to his every day world, were books and nature. Through these he became familiar with the facts of life and came to recognize back of all natural objects and of life itself a divinity shaping them and unifying them into a satisfactory whole.

In order that home life – home life in the country especially – might be enriched and the outlook of the country fireside extended beyond the bars... the traveling library has been established and is being operated in 29 States.

The traveling library system is a very simple thing. A State creates a special commission by legislative enactment. Ordinarily it is composed of teachers, librarians, and others who have demonstrated marked ability in directing the reading of children and communities. They serve without pay, but are empowered to employ a trained library secretary and assistants to carry on the active work necessary in operating the libraries.

...In the South States the very great benefits to be derived from this system have not been generally enjoyed, primarily because the people have not known that books could be supplied in this way and at very little expense to the State. They have not realized that a part of the State’s revenues can be legitimately used in providing a public library of this nature for the citizens of the State at large as the revenues of a city may be in the maintenance of a library for its citizens” (Wilson, 1912).

It is not entirely clear what statutory basis exists for Wilson's claims in the article, but it is clear from it that he was compelling the idea of State funded [traveling] library services. At the conclusion of the NC Library Commission's operation in 1956, when it was subsumed by the North Carolina State Library, the traveling library system was left out of the year's biennial report, though other programs such as bookmobiles and inter-library loan are mentioned. Although not explicitly stated, it seems that the Traveling Library program was technologically updated for other programs (such as the bookmobile) and also replaced by the general advent of stronger local programs, which now received funds from the State Aid program.

## Methodology

The methods for this study are qualitative, archival and historical, using archival materials for primary and secondary sources. This study follows a long precedent of qualitative, historical study about the library systems in North Carolina, many of which are cited in this paper.

### Researcher Positionality

As a researcher, I occupy a relatively close proximity to this subject. I have preconceived familiarity or fluency in the popular language, culture, and geographic location that characterizes the research. I have geographic proximity to the relevant archives, although their true accessibility varies. I attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which has significant institutional relationships with many of the people featured in this research. I live in Durham, North Carolina, home of the first county-tax supported public library, where I am a participant in city government as a board member of a quasi-judicial board that pertains to building and housing code. I am interested in studying and participating in municipal programs that have high levels of discretion, autonomy, and resources.

### Data Collection Methods

Data for this study is collected from what is available in the archives. The data is qualitative, historic, and doctrinal, with some references to quantitative and statistical information throughout. The research materials consist of doctrinal materials (state statutes), agency documents, theses and dissertations, and books. Archives have spanned online-access, in-person only access, and digitization upon request. The greatest archival

resource has been that of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, especially the archives of the Wilson Library and the School of Information and Library Science. Research with newspapers has been confined to those that are digitized with optical character recognition and available to the researcher online.

### Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis method for this study is an inductive, thematic analysis of the material found in the historical record(s) and archive(s).

## Research Quality and Ethical Considerations

The conduct of this research does not pose any ethical threats or problems. The research quality of historical study is largely subjective and determined by conceptual and political preferences. This study aims to conduct quality research such that a reliable narrative is inductively formed from the archival holdings available to access.

The content of this historical study incorporates the humble organizational activities of people during semi-literate eras, spanning centuries with domestic wars. Its pursuit, in terms of what is left in the archive, is both elusive and yielding. The amount of material available, if and when found, that applies to this research is vast and goes beyond the scope of this initial study. In some areas, it is quite rich with depth, as librarians and libraries have espoused penchants for recording. The activities of looking and finding in the archives are never over even if the queries stay the same, due to the ever changing and advancing of our technology for categorizing and sorting. Thus, this work may be of quality though never complete.

## Impact, Limitations, and Conclusions

This study is intended to create a robust depiction of the context and activities of the traveling library program orchestrated by the North Carolina Library Commission. This study relies heavily on the construction and availability of materials that are held in archives. Stakeholders in this study include the people, organizations, and institutions relevant to public librarianship in the state of North Carolina. While this study does not explicitly aim to make policy suggestions, it does attempt some degree of doctrinal and legislative history.

The research quality and research limitations consist of largely the same thing: the infinity of archival work, wherein the materials archived may be sorted and thereby read in so many ways. In addition, the research study is limited by time, and as such there is more material to report on the research than what is included in this paper. This paper leaves several specific legislative history questions for further research.

## References

- Case, S. & Agan, K. (2008, January 01). *North Carolina Library History*.  
NCpedia. <https://www.ncpedia.org/ncdc/library-history>.
- The Library Association's Work. (1901, January 20). *The News & Observer*. 5.
- The North Carolina Library Commission. (1910). *Biennial report of the North Carolina Library Commission 1909-1910*. State Printers.
- The North Carolina Library Commission. (1938). *Biennial report of the North Carolina Library Commission 1936-1938*. State Printers.
- Valentine, P. M. (1996). Steel, Cotton, and Tobacco: Philanthropy and Public Libraries in North Carolina, 1900-1940. *Libraries & Culture*, 31, 272-298.
- Weeks, S.B. (1896). *Libraries And Literature In North Carolina In The Eighteenth Century* in the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association For 1895*. Government Printing Office.

Wilson, L. R. (1912, March 9). *The Progressive Farmer*.

State Library of North Carolina. (n.d.). *State Aid To Public Libraries*. Retrieved December 6, 2022 from <https://statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/services-libraries/grants-libraries/state-aid-public-libraries>.