

# Born Again: Rebuilding the North Carolina State Library, 1834-1847

by Maurice C. York

A devastating fire in 1831 destroyed the North Carolina Capitol in Raleigh, and with it most of the books in the twenty-year-old State Library. Established in 1812 by the General Assembly as a small assortment of published documents, the collection had grown to include over twelve hundred volumes that reflected the legislature's commitment to developing a well-rounded library. Aware of the importance of the library to the work of state government, the General Assembly soon authorized officials to develop a new collection. Led by three progressive governors—David Lowry Swain, John Motley Morehead, and William Alexander Graham—the directors of the Literary Board and, later, the State Library's board of trustees carried out this charge. Between 1834 and 1847 these bodies patiently guided efforts to build a balanced collection that mirrored the intellectually enlightened policies of the Whig Party in North Carolina during the antebellum period.

Prior to the fire the development of the State Library had closely paralleled that of other state libraries. Although the library collections of Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia originated in the colonial period, formal development of state libraries in most states did not occur until the nineteenth century. The movement grew out of the states' desires to build working collections of laws and legislative journals for use by legislators and departmental officials. The growth of such libraries was stimulated by exchanges of published documents with other states and with the United States government. Massachusetts passed a law in 1811 requiring its secretary of state to correspond with officials in other states for the purpose of exchanging statutes. In 1813 Congress directed the government to send one copy of every journal and other documents to each state. Partly in response to these actions, such states as New Hampshire,

New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, New Jersey, Vermont, Virginia, Indiana, and Missouri formally established state libraries during the next twenty years.<sup>1</sup> State libraries often were managed by the secretary of state for the sole use of state officials. Reflecting the indifference or lack of knowledge of persons responsible for their development, the libraries often grew haphazardly.<sup>2</sup>

North Carolina was among the first states to respond to Massachusetts' initiative. A law enacted by the General Assembly in 1812 directed the secretary of state to collect, preserve, and manage a variety of published documents for the use of government officials. Five years later the General Assembly clarified its intentions for the library. Legislators required Secretary of State William Hill, in his role as state librarian, to label and number books, prepare catalogs of holdings, and maintain circulation records.<sup>3</sup>

Legislators, on the advice of their Senate, House of Commons, or joint-select committees on the library, appropriated funds for the State Library and continued to create guidelines for its operation.<sup>4</sup> In 1816 the General Assembly set aside an annual sum of \$250 for the purchase of books for the "public library" by the joint-select library committee. The annual appropriation was doubled in 1821. Even though funds were not always expended, these generous appropriations allowed the state to build a collection much broader in scope than originally intended.<sup>5</sup> By 1827, when Lauriston B. Hardin completed a catalog of the library in response to a request from the General Assembly of 1826-1827, the State Library consisted of over twelve hundred volumes in twenty categories. In addition to legal materials and documents, the collection included liter-

ary works and books in the fields of history, geography, agriculture, biography, travel, and science.<sup>6</sup> The library, which originally had been housed in a single bookcase in the office of the secretary of state, now occupied special quarters, probably on the third floor of the Capitol.<sup>7</sup>

This location soon proved to be an unfortunate one. When the Capitol burned on June 21, 1831, volunteers concentrated on removing important state records from the building's first floor. Only about 117 volumes, most of which had been out on loan at the time of the fire, escaped the State Library's fiery fate.<sup>8</sup>

The destruction of the library nearly coincided with the beginning of a progressive era in state government. Spurred largely by demands from citizens of the

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western part of the state for better representation in the legislature as well as for internal improvements and better educational opportunities, the General Assembly in 1834 voted to allow the people to decide whether to call a convention to amend North Carolina's outdated constitution. Voters approved the concept. Members of the convention, which met in 1835, produced an amended constitution that led to a variety of democratic reforms. A strong two-party rivalry emerged. The Whig Party, which dominated state poli-

tics from 1835 until 1850, initiated a progressive program that fostered improvements in transportation, created a system of public schools, and provided assistance for the poor and insane.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising, then, that three Whig governors during the 1830s and 1840s administered plans not only to replace essential legal materials, but also to provide the state with an important literary resource.

Soon after the fire that destroyed the Capitol, the General Assembly initiated efforts to rebuild the State Library. Legislators appointed Joseph Gales, editor of the *Raleigh Register*, to acquire by gift or purchase one or more sets of North Carolina's legislative journals and public laws.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently the legislature required two boards to purchase books for the library. Led by Governors Swain, Morehead, and Graham, the Literary Board and the board of trustees of the "Public Library" carried out the instructions of the General Assembly.<sup>11</sup>

The Literary Board<sup>12</sup> received its charge from the General Assembly of 1833-1834. Lawmakers gave the board the authority to spend funds from the approximately \$3,500 in unexpended appropriations for the State Library.<sup>13</sup> Meeting for the first time in January, 1834, the directors authorized Governor Swain "to open a correspondence, with such gentlemen at the north, as he may deem advisable, in order to procure catalogues of the best editions of the works proper to be placed in the State Library and to ascertain the terms upon which they can be procured."<sup>14</sup> Later that year, however, Swain informed the General Assembly that the board had chosen to delay most purchases. Rapid improvements in the book trade, he thought, would allow the state to "procure better editions than can be had at present, at diminished prices."<sup>15</sup>

Swain lost no time, however, in executing the board's desire to purchase from the estate of Archibald DeBow Murphey a portion of the former legislator's library.<sup>16</sup> From May until September, 1834, the governor negotiated with Murphey's friends and his son, Victor, for the purchase of 103 volumes comprised of periodicals and works of history, biogra-

phy, and travel. Included in the collection was John Brickell's *The Natural History of North-Carolina* (1737). The acquisition of this book was of particular interest to the Literary Board. Victor Murphey expected to receive a handsome price for it, but was disappointed. Raleigh booksellers Turner and Hughes appraised the entire collection at \$148.25 and considered the Brickell to be worth a mere \$5.<sup>17</sup>

With the assistance of this company and Supreme Court Justice William Gaston, Swain guided the state in making addi-

leaving office to "lay the foundation of a respectable library for the State, and more particularly for the Supreme Court."<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, in the fall of that year he instructed William Gaston to purchase law books for use by the court. During a trip to New York Gaston spent over \$1,300 for books supplied by Gould, Banks & Co.<sup>20</sup>

During the 1830s, Swain and his colleagues on the Literary Board were hampered by the lack of suitable quarters for the new library.<sup>21</sup> The state completed a commodious new Capitol in 1840, however, and the State Library occupied the east-wing room on the third floor of the new structure.<sup>22</sup> Like lawmakers in other states, members of the North Carolina General Assembly realized that their new library needed closer supervision. Reflecting a national trend, they passed legislation during the sessions of 1840-1841 and 1842-1843, that created a board of trustees composed of the governor and justices of the Supreme Court. Legislators provided for the appointment of a full-time state librarian, but gave the board the authority to purchase books.<sup>23</sup> Governors Morehead and Graham guided the board in exercising this responsibility.

The board in 1841 hired Joseph Green Cogswell, a well-educated teacher and librarian who was in the process of purchasing books for what would become the Astor Library, to help them develop a balanced collection.<sup>24</sup> Corresponding regularly with governors Morehead and Graham, Cogswell worked patiently and with an eye for strict economy as he carried out his assignment. In return, he received a small commission on his purchases.

He began by preparing a systematic catalog of titles that could be purchased for the \$4,000 to \$5,000 appropriated for that purpose.<sup>25</sup> In March, 1842, he compiled

a purchase list based on auction and half-price catalogs and sought the titles during a trip to London.<sup>26</sup> Later that spring he purchased part of the catalog in New York City for about ten to twenty percent less than the books' market value. Included were twenty-one volumes of the works of English poets, elegantly bound, for half



The restored State Library Room on the third floor of the North Carolina Capitol is an interpretation of the library's appearance in the 1850s. Books purchased for the library after the Capitol fire of 1831 were housed in this room from the early 1840s until 1888.

Photo Division of Archives & History, Raleigh, N.C.

tional purchases. The Literary Board in August, 1834, authorized the governor to advance Turner and Hughes funds for the purchase of books for the "legislative department" of the State Library. Late that year or in 1835 the state gave the company \$500 for this purpose.<sup>18</sup> Swain wrote in August, 1835, that he was anxious before



the amount the original owner had paid. He informed Governor Morehead that he was going to Boston to attempt to "do better" on the remainder of the list: a delay, according to Cogswell, would be preferable to paying higher prices. He went to Boston from New York, purchased books at a discount of ten percent, and charged the state only \$12 for expenses.<sup>27</sup>

During Governor Morehead's term of office, Cogswell selected works of biography, history, philosophy, geography and travel, science, poetry, and fiction, among others. Patronizing such firms as Wiley & Putnam of London, Alexander V. Blake of New York, and Little & Brown of Boston, he spent over \$3,500 for the State Library.<sup>28</sup>

Later, under the direction of Governor Graham, Cogswell sought two important works that would crown his efforts. Prior to September, 1845, the library board authorized their agent to procure a copy of John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, a collection of 435 hand-colored plates in four volumes, published between 1827 and 1838. At Cogswell's request, Governor Graham sent him \$750 in October so he could purchase the Audubon set if one became available.<sup>29</sup> Leaving no avenue unexplored, Cogswell even approached six of the original subscribers. In April, 1846, he proudly announced the purchase of a copy of "Audubon's large birds" for \$650—a full \$200 below the lowest amount for which the set had previously sold. He enlisted the aid of the artist himself in locating the set, agreeing in return to subscribe to Audubon's next work, the quadrupeds, at \$300. This purchase pleased Governor Graham, but his excitement probably abated when Cogswell informed him later in April that he had discovered three or four creased plates among the Audubon work. When he noticed the flaws he reduced the state's offer by \$20 and convinced the seller to provide new title pages to replace the ones that had been folded.<sup>30</sup>

Cogswell recommended the purchase of another important work, *Description de l'Egypte*, which had been published by the French government between 1809 and 1828. Containing over twenty volumes of text and immense plates, it describes and illustrates not only Egyptian antiquities, but also the country as observed by scholars who had accompanied Napoleon I during his expedition in 1798 to conquer it.

According to Cogswell, the set sold originally for \$800.<sup>31</sup> Securing the set—at the right price—presented as much difficulty as had *Birds of America*. Cogswell located a set in the effects of a bankrupt, but when the owner discovered a merchant from

also to defer when necessary to the advice of a knowledgeable professional. In doing so, three chief executives and their colleagues fulfilled Governor Swain's desire to "lay the foundation of a respectable library for the State . . . ."



John James Audubon's monumental *Birds of America*, purchased in 1846 by Joseph Green Cogswell for the State Library, includes this plate, "Carolina Parrot." The collection of 435 hand-colored plates was transferred in 1974 to the North Carolina Museum of Art. Photo courtesy Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C.

Canton also was interested in purchasing the books, he raised the price from \$300 to \$450.<sup>32</sup> The state's slowness in sending funds caused their agent in December 1846 to miss a set that was to be auctioned in New York.<sup>33</sup> After an unsuccessful attempt to purchase the Egypt work in Paris, Cogswell finally acquired it in December 1847, paying \$255.88 at an auction in New York. By this time Governor Graham had warned the state's agent that nearly all of the funds accumulated for the library, with the exception of the \$500 annual appropriation, had been exhausted.<sup>34</sup>

The North Carolina State Library now contained about 3,000 volumes, far fewer than in the collections of most states.<sup>35</sup> It is likely, though, that officials in North Carolina considered their library to be a useful source of information and an important cultural asset. It reflected the patient work of leaders who were willing not only to exercise their judgment, but

## References

<sup>1</sup>Wayne A. Wiegand, "The Historical Development of State Library Agencies," in *State Library Services and Issues: Facing Future Challenges*, ed. Charles R. McClure (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986), 1-3; A. J. Conant, "The Evolution of the State Library," *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 20 (September 1926): 330-333; Henry A. Homes, "State and Territorial Libraries," in *Public Libraries in the United States of America; Their History, Condition & Management, a Special Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Education. Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876), 292.

<sup>2</sup>Wiegand, 4.

<sup>3</sup>*Laws of North Carolina, 1812*, c. 16; *Journal of the Senate of North Carolina, 1817*, pp. 118-120. The title of session laws and legislative journals varied frequently, hence the use of these abbreviated citations.

<sup>4</sup>For examples of committee reports, resolutions, and laws pertaining to the State Library, see Appendix II in Maurice C. York, "A History of the North Carolina State Library, 1812-1888" (unpublished master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1978); for an indication of the regularity with which library committees were appointed in the early years, see *Legislative Committees, 1821-1838*, General Assembly Session Records, Allowances, Calendars, Etc., 14, State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina. Hereafter, this institution will be cited as State Archives.

<sup>5</sup>Resolution in *Laws of North Carolina, 1825-1826*, p. 90; "Comptroller's Reports": 1822, p. 7; 1823, p. 11; 1826, p. 10, Treasurer's and Comptroller's Papers, Accounts, Comptroller's Statements 1815-1844, State Archives.

<sup>6</sup>The catalog was entered in the rear pages of the following volume: *North Carolina-South Carolina Boundary: Report of Commissioners, 1805-1815*, Secretary of State, General Records (S.S. 1042.1), State Archives. The Legislature of 1826-1827 appointed Hardin, a nephew of Secretary of State William Hill, "Librarian to the State Library" and keeper of the Capitol. Resolution in *Laws of North Carolina, 1826-1827*, p. 87; and Lauriston B. Hardin to William Hill, January 8, 1831, Secretary of State, General Records, Correspondence (S.S. 30), State Archives.

<sup>7</sup>Built in 1794, the Capitol had been renovated and expanded during the early

1820s. The State Library probably was moved to its new quarters in 1825. York, 66-67.

<sup>8</sup>Charles Holloman, "The Day the Capitol Burned," *We the People*, March 1965, 51-52; H. G. Jones, *For History's Sake: The Preservation and Publication of North Carolina History, 1663-1903* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 85; "Report of the Committee on the Public Library," January 13, 1832, in "Resolution Concerning the Public Library," Senate Resolutions (Dec. 24-Jan. 13), General Assembly Session Records, Nov., 1831-Jan., 1832, 4.

<sup>9</sup>William S. Powell, *North Carolina through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 267-299, hereafter cited as Powell, *North Carolina*.

<sup>10</sup>Resolution in *Laws of North Carolina, 1831-1832*, p. 144; resolution in *Laws of North Carolina, 1832-1833*, p. 100; Jones, 89.

<sup>11</sup>Swain (1801-1868), a native of Buncombe County, served as governor from 1833 until 1836. One of North Carolina's most progressive chief executives during the nineteenth century, he was instrumental in the success of the movement to revise the state's constitution. Morehead (1796-1866) resided in Greensboro. An avid proponent of improvements in transportation and educational reform, he was elected to two-year terms as governor in 1840 and 1842. Graham (1804-1875), a lawyer from Hillsborough, advocated internal improvements and humanitarian causes during his two terms as governor, from 1845 until 1849. Powell, *North Carolina*, 256, 277, 279; William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* [projected multivolume set] (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979-), 2: 337-338, 4: 321-322; Samuel A. Ashe, ed., *Biographical History of North Carolina*, 8 vols. (Greensboro: Charles L. Van Noppen, 1905-1907), 1: 447-450; R. D. W. Connor, *Ante-Bellum Builders of North Carolina*, Studies in North Carolina History, No. 3 (Greensboro: North Carolina College for Women, 1923), 70.

<sup>12</sup>This board, created in 1825 with the governor as president and the state treasurer as treasurer, was designed primarily to provide public schools for the state. The Literary Fund, administered by the board, included proceeds from state-owned stock, excise taxes, sales of public land, and legislative appropriations. Hugh Talmage Flesher and Albert Ray Newsome, *North Carolina: The History of a Southern State*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 332.

<sup>13</sup>Charles L. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina: A Documentary History, 1790-1840*, 2 vols. (Raleigh: North Carolina Historical Commission, 1908), 2: 689-690; Resolution in *Laws of North Carolina, 1833-1834*, p. 197.

<sup>14</sup>"A Meeting of the President and Directors of the Literary Fund ..." January 13, 1834, Governor's Papers, David L. Swain, 68, State Archives. All records of North Carolina governors cited in this paper are a part of the State Archives.

<sup>15</sup>Coon, 2: 694.

<sup>16</sup>Murphey (1777?-1832), a lawyer and planter from Hillsborough, represented Orange County in the North Carolina Senate from 1812 until 1818. His idealistic, visionary proposals for internal improvements and public education did not meet with success until after his death. Murphey was frequently in debt. His heirs offered his valuable library for sale to help meet his obligations. Powell, *North Carolina*, 253-266; Jonathan Worth to Swain, May 12, 1834, Governor's Papers, David L. Swain, 69.

<sup>17</sup>Jonathan Worth to Swain, May 12, 1834, Swain to Jonathan Worth, May 29, 1834, Victor M. Murphey to Swain, July 9, 1834, July 30, 1834, August 25, 1834, Governor's Papers, David L. Swain, 69; Victor M. Murphey to W. R. Hill, September 20, 1834, Governor's Papers, David L. Swain, 70; "Valuation of the following books purchased for the State from V. M. Murphey[,] by Henry Turner of the Firm of Turner & Hughes," September 10, 1834, Governor's Papers, David L. Swain, 70.

<sup>18</sup>Coon, 2: 721; "Comptroller's Report," 1834-1835, p. 21, Treasurer's and Comptroller's Papers, Accounts, Comptroller's Statements 1815-1844, State Archives.

<sup>19</sup>Coon, 2: 727.

<sup>20</sup>Coon, 2: 728-729.

<sup>21</sup>Coon, 2: 693-694.

<sup>22</sup>York, 69. The library of the Supreme Court was separated from the State Library in 1843. *Laws of North Carolina, 1842-1843*, c. 54, ss. 1-2.

<sup>23</sup>Homes, 298; *Laws of North Carolina, 1840-1841*, c. 46; *Laws of North Carolina, 1842-1843*, c. 68.

<sup>24</sup>Cogswell (1786-1871), a native of Massachusetts, studied at Phillips Academy and at Harvard College. During the mid-1830s he served as headmaster of a school for boys in Raleigh, but returned to the North because of the backwardness of North Carolina. After building the collection, he served as librarian of the Astor Library from 1848 until 1861. Anna Eliot Ticknor, ed., *Life of Joseph Green Cogswell as Sketched in His Letters* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1874), 2-7, 184-187, 204-205, 239-241, 288, 343.

<sup>25</sup>This writer could not locate legislation that specified how much the General Assembly in 1841 appropriated for book purchases. The firm of Turner and Hughes mentioned the figure of \$5,000, but Cogswell worked under the assumption that he would spend \$4,000. Turner &

Hughes to Governor Morehead and Justices of the Supreme Court of North Carolina, February 3, 1841, Letter Books of John M. Morehead, 1841, G.L.B. 34, p. 13; Joseph Green Cogswell to Morehead, December 10, 1841, Governor's Papers, John M. Morehead, 99.

<sup>26</sup>York, 34-41; Cogswell to Morehead, March 15, 28, 1842, Governor's Papers, John M. Morehead, 99.

<sup>27</sup>Cogswell to Morehead, June 15, 22, 1842, Governor's Papers, John M. Morehead, 101.

<sup>28</sup>Cogswell to Morehead, June 22, 1842, [August 14, 1842], Governor's Papers, John M. Morehead, 101; Cogswell to Morehead, November 14, 1842, Governor's Papers, John M. Morehead, 102; Secretary of State, General Records, Miscellaneous Papers, 1750-1902 (S.S. 906), State Archives.

<sup>29</sup>Cogswell to Governor Graham, September 3, 1845 and Graham to Cogswell, October 1, 1845, Letter Books of William A. Graham, 1845, G.L.B. 36, pp. 324 and 325, respectively. Hereafter, this source will be cited as Graham Letter Books.

<sup>30</sup>Cogswell to Graham, January 19, 1846, Governor's Papers, William A. Graham, 113; Cogswell to Graham, April 4, 21, 1846, Governor's Papers, William A. Graham, 114; and Graham to Cogswell, April 10, 1846, Graham Letter Books, G.L.B. 36, p. 496. The edition of viviparous quadrupeds was purchased. O. H. Perry, *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the North Carolina State Library, Prepared by O. H. Perry, Librarian* (Raleigh: Nichols, Gorman & Neathery, Book and Job Printers, 1866), 6; Cogswell to Graham, January 6, 1848, Graham Letter Books, G.L.B. 37, p. 492. The State Library's copy of *The Birds of America* is now in the possession of the North Carolina Museum of Art.

<sup>31</sup>Cogswell to Graham, January 19, 1846, Governor's Papers, William A. Graham, 113. For a description of this publication, see Robert Anderson and Ibrahim Fawzy, eds., *Egypt Revealed: Scenes from Napoleon's Description de l'Egypte* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1987).

<sup>32</sup>Cogswell to Graham, January 19, 1846, Governor's Papers, William A. Graham, 113; Cogswell to Graham, April 4, 1846, Governor's Papers, William A. Graham, 114.

<sup>33</sup>Cogswell to Graham, December 21, 1846, Graham Letter Books, G.L.B. 36, p. 118; Cogswell to Graham, December 23, 1847, Governor's Papers, William A. Graham, 119.

<sup>34</sup>Graham to Cogswell, April 20, 1847, Graham Letter Books, G.L.B. 37, p. 301.

<sup>35</sup>"The Educational Interest of the United States," *American Journal of Education* 1 (August 1855), 369. A table in this article lists the number of volumes in various state libraries in 1850.