

A History of the Mint Hill, North Carolina Library

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Mint Hill is a small town within the Charlotte metropolitan area served by a branch of the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County. With the threat to close the branches in 2010, new attention has been directed to their role in the lives of citizens, but how did these branches become so important? Little has been published about the history of branch libraries but their establishment and growth say much about the need people have for library service, not just big downtown business and research libraries but more intimate local libraries closer to where people live. Branch public libraries are not just downtown libraries writ small but important local institutions and meeting places with their own ethos, purpose and community support. There are three main historical types, the branch that started off as its own library and then was incorporated into a larger, more metropolitan, county or regional system; the African-American library, originally independent but absorbed into an integrated system, and the branches built to satisfy a growing and moving population. The history of Mint Hill, set within a larger context of library history, will illustrate the third type of branch.

The land where the library now sits used to be farmland. For many years before that, the Catawba Indians had villages in the Mint Hill area. The temperate weather and the available water in nearby Clear Creek and Rocky River provided necessities to the people who lived here. When the town was established in 1750, books were not a "necessity." As Patrick Valentine points out, during this period, "most white North Carolinians were subsistence farmers living in scattered communities with minimal need to read extensively."¹ However, a half-day journey down mostly dirt roads at that time led one from Mint Hill to Charlotte, where Liberty Hall Academy, begun around 1771, had one of the first "subscription community" libraries.² Certainly, the history of the Mint Hill Library is rooted in the development of both Charlotte and the main library there, while it is also a creation of the Mint Hill community itself.

Little appears to be known about local families, if any, who may have shared their libraries, but informal social libraries were surely in use in Mint Hill and Charlotte, long before they can be documented. Social libraries in America, beginning with Benjamin Franklin's in 1731, "expressed the concern of people to better themselves, to obtain access to useful knowledge and classic literature, and to spread that knowledge and reading taste among a wider citizenry."³ The Cape Fear Library Society, founded in Wilmington in 1760, was "the first secular subscription library in North Carolina before the Revolution."⁴ In Charlotte, Patricia Ryckman reports, "soon after the Revolutionary War . . . a debating society . . . had established a collection of books they circulated among themselves."⁵ Concrete evidence from around 1820 reveals formal lending rules for its members.⁶ Also, church groups, such as the Providence Presbyterians near Charlotte, operated libraries from as early as the late 1700s.⁷

However, public tax support for schools and libraries was resisted until the Boston Public Library opened in 1854. Boston, "the leading social and intellectual center in the country," exerted an "inordinate influence" over other cities, which always "quickly followed its lead."⁸ In addition, during this time, an idea began "to take hold that books should be available to the middle class as well as the wealthy."⁹ Rising literacy rates and technology advances, which included changes in printing and communications, supported "the production of less expensive books and printed materials as well as their distribution across the continent."¹⁰ For workers, "leisure time, even if only at first a Sunday afternoon, slowly but surely increased."¹¹ Around 1890, leading Charlotte citizens were meeting at the Law Library and forming the Charlotte Literary and Library Association. Bylaws were published in January of 1891. For a subscription of \$.50 per month, a person could read at the rooms the association rented and borrow from the collection of books they put together. However, for the first few years, without any public tax support, dues trickled in and debt accrued to the group.¹²

By 1898, the first tax-supported public library in North Carolina was founded in Durham. In 1900, Charlotte's social library, in a desire to get the same support from public taxes, became the Charlotte Public School Library. In addition, an application was made, and a grant was received from the Carnegie Foundation, making Charlotte the first recipient in North Carolina of a Carnegie donation.¹³ Historian Michael Harris considers Carnegie's library philanthropy possibly the "most immediately obvious impetus to public library development" in America.¹⁴ The Carnegie grant certainly served "as a focusing device which helped bring the resources of a community together to develop the public library."¹⁵ The agreement in Charlotte was that the foundation would contribute \$20,000, as long as a public tax provided \$2,500 a year for library operations. On May 6, 1901, the tax was approved. Construction began on the corner of 6th and Tryon in downtown Charlotte. Chartered in 1903 and dedicated in July of 1903, Charlotte Carnegie Public Library opened with a collection of only 2,526 volumes; however, there were many events planned: "lectures, children's book programs and benefit concerts."¹⁶ By the end of the first six months, 1,480 of Charlotte's 18,000 citizens had registered with the library.¹⁷

Significantly, the library charter and agreement with Carnegie contained a requirement that the city must provide a library for its black community as well, which was unusual for this time. However, Charlotte had a vibrant and vigorous African American community and in 1904, six blocks away, at the corner of Brevard and East 2nd, the first public library for blacks in North Carolina opened. In the typically separate but unequal approach, it had only 2,500 square feet of space and was apportioned just \$400 for its first year of operation. Managed by leaders of the black community, the Brevard Street Library was independent of the Charlotte library until 1929, when it would become the system's first branch.¹⁸

At the larger facility a few blocks away, Annie Smith Ross had become the first librarian when the Charlotte Carnegie Library opened. Reportedly advanced for her time and very involved in state and national library associations, she energetically implemented modern ideas for the early 1900s, such as setting up separate areas in the library for children. In the first five years, receiving only the same yearly allotment of \$2,500, the collection grew to 5,350 books. By 1915, a request for additional money was made to Carnegie, and the library received a \$15,000 gift, which built an annex on the rear of the building, providing, among other things, a separate Children's Department of 1,200 square feet.¹⁹

This expansion of the library came with a growth in national awareness. World War I brought 50,000 soldiers to a training camp near Charlotte. Increasing its hours, the library became a very popular place to study and read when off-duty.²⁰ By 1919, the city and the county school libraries became branches of the public library, and the 1920s brought rapid growth. In 1925, "Carnegie" was dropped from the name, and the institution became the Charlotte Public Library with an annual operating income of \$19,800. This was supplemented by a grant of \$80,000 over five years from the Rosenwald Fund that was intended to expand services to all county residents, both black and white. By 1930, there were branches in each of the five towns in the county. The entire collection by this time was 106,000 volumes, with 28 staff on the payroll.²¹

Though the Depression resulted in severe cuts, including the loss of funding from Rosenwald and the layoff of 17 of these staff members, by the mid-1930s the library was moving ahead again. The main library building was being refurbished to allow for new services, such as upgrading electrical outlets so the new "talking book machines" could be used by the blind.²² In late 1937, a bookmobile was given a two-month trial, the service continuing with the purchase of two library cars. In some ways reminiscent of the medieval "armariums," which carried books along on trips by church officials or the wealthy, these bookmobiles were, instead, making books transportable in order to widen access to include as many people as possible. By 1938, deposit "stations" had been established in 37 homes, stores and county locations; library staff visited these regularly to provide new books.

A temporary and very strange delay in the growth of the library occurred with the outcome of a legal ruling in 1938. The North Carolina Supreme Court determined in the case of *Twining v. Wilmington* that libraries are not "necessary expenses;" therefore, no tax funds could be utilized "without authorization by popular vote."²³ So, to abide by this rule, a public vote was held in Charlotte, and funding was not approved! The Charlotte library was closed on June 30, 1939. No one had seemed to realize what this vote actually meant. People soon realized their error, the public was educated, and another election was held. This time it passed. However, one year had gone by before the library reopened on July 1, 1940.

The 1940s and 1950s brought more predictable changes and growth. In 1942, the library began lending educational films. In 1945, the name was changed to its current one, the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. ABC Liquor Funds bought the system two bookmobiles. Passage of a new bond in 1952 allowed four branch libraries to be built; Mint Hill was still not one of these. The bond did, however, fund a new main library building at a cost of \$1.1 million. Writers said the design of the building seemed "to draw people off the street," appearing, as many libraries at the time were described, to be a "university for the people."²⁴

The citizens of Mint Hill, only ten miles away, were depending on the bookmobiles during this time. A local resident, who would soon become quite influential in Mint Hill's library history, reported that in 1950 a bookmobile came to Mint Hill for one hour every other Friday. When she and her family were a few minutes late, she "learned how to chase the bookmobile to Allen, the next stop."²⁵ Patrons could order books that would be available on the next visit of the bookmobile. During the summer, the book supply would be "quickly depleted when many children tried to win a certificate for reading a predetermined number of books."²⁶

The Mint Hill bookmobile stop was discontinued when the very first Mint Hill branch location of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library opened in a storefront on October 21, 1958. It was at this time that county systems across the state were emphasizing the need for branch services to reach out to the people. The 1958-

59 Annual Report of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County notes the following:

"The past year saw the addition of a small, community sponsored branch in Mint Hill. Through diligence and effort, the people of the community secured space and furnishings for a small branch as a part of their prize winning community development activities. The Public Library supplied a book collection, and volunteers under the leadership of Mrs. T. M. Higgins keep the branch open eight hours per week."²⁷

Statistics in the same report show that the Mint Hill branch lent an average of 16 books per hour during those eight hours. The donated location in Mint Hill Square was approximately twelve feet deep; the library's neighbors were a drug store, a hardware store, a clothing store and a grocery. Residents, including Sara Wyche Higgins and Viola Hough, had petitioned the Piedmont Area Development Association (PADA), sponsored by Piedmont Gas Company and other businesses, and received a \$100.00 grant.²⁸ They then encouraged their husbands to build the bookshelves that they themselves stained and painted. Each class of the students at the local elementary school visited the library regularly, since "it was within walking distance of school, about a mile away."²⁹

During the next decade, with circulation growing, the Mint Hill Library made plans for growth. A memo from the Director of the Library, Hoyt Galvin, to the Library Board, dated November 8, 1960, reported that Mrs. Higgins of Mint Hill had come to see him requesting a true library branch in Mint Hill. Pressures on the main library are evident in this memo.³⁰ Galvin, only the second male public library director in the state, reminds Higgins of another town that wants a library too and that decisions would have to be based on census figures coming out soon. In his notes to the board, Galvin suggests funding branches based on whether the branch can provide a satisfactory site for a library; he goes on to point out errors in judgment in their locating of a Pineville branch that was infrequently used. He also tells the board of the additional expenses the main library will face with a new branch, such as processing and cataloging new acquisitions for them.

Turned away at this time, but not deterred, Mrs. Higgins continued her work. *The Mecklenburg Times* reported in November that “for the third year, the branch library has made steady progress under Committeewoman Mrs. Thomas M. Higgins. More than 500 volunteer hours have been contributed and 600 persons registered for library cards.”³¹ When the fire department expanded to a new building, it was proposed that the library rent the old 30 x 50 foot fire station. A letter in April 1962 from library director Galvin to the Chief of the Mint Hill Volunteer Fire Department indicates he has visited the location; he details a plan to make various changes, pointing out in his frugal way that the library “has some fluorescent fixtures which might be lent for the project,” these fixtures being “about 15 years old” and having been removed from another library that had been torn down.³² Though note was made in the minutes of the Board Meeting in July 1962 that the rent was “too high,” the decision was moved, seconded, and unanimously approved to sign a five year lease on the building at \$75 per month rental.³³ The Mint Hill Branch Library was now official, the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County furnishing a rented space and making Viola Hough a salaried librarian.

However, contributions from the community were needed to complete the renovations. In September of 1962, *The Charlotte Observer* published a sketch of the planned renovation to the fire department building and reported that Mrs. Thomas Higgins was leading a drive “to raise \$2,500 for a community library.”³⁴ The library committee sent a letter to all Mint Hill residents that it was time to do “something big in our community” and that “a volunteer worker will call at your home Monday night, Oct. 1, to give you an opportunity to take part in this endeavor.” Besides the door-to-door solicitation, parents received letters sent home with their school children. At the same time, volunteers painted the inside concrete walls yellow and collected used shelves, a sofa, and chairs. Window boxes on the outside were filled with ivy and shrubs donated by the Mint Hill Book Club. All this activity testifies to local concern for the branch library.

Over the next few years, while technology was advancing at the main library, Mint Hill at times felt like an outpost. On August 30, 1968, a Mint Hill librarian writes to the Main Library: “Lest you forget we are out here, we thought we would stand up and be counted!” She goes on to report on the effects of the hot weather combining with the “snakes in the air conditioner.” The staff has had to move books around since “our airconditioner (sic) only cools a spot about as large as the front desk.” However, the work continues; “upcoming projects include a book drop and a bulletin board.”³⁵

Technology in the main library was certainly moving along a little more quickly. During his thirty year tenure beginning in 1940 of Hoyt Galvin as head librarian, the checking out of books went from “ink pad to mechanical charger to an audio system to keysort cards and, finally, by the 1970s, to computers.”³⁶ The November 14, 1979, Board minutes mentions such new services as the DIAL-A-TEACHER project, soon averaging 120 telephone calls a day. In the summer of 1980, the library introduced ALIS, its new Automated Library Information System, representing a critical component of any modern library. By 1989, an addition to the main library opened with a \$1.5 million computer system that would “provide online access to the library system’s collection of close to one million items.”³⁷

Meanwhile, the Mint Hill branch was not forgotten. Arial Stephens, the Director of Libraries from 1971 to 1982, sent a memo dated May 31, 1979, to the County Commissioners reporting that the Mint Hill space was inadequate.³⁸ Library use had increased in the growing community, and the branch was now open 69 hours a week. Two new locations were being considered, and, with the move, rent would increase dramatically from the current \$900 per year to between \$16,000 and \$20,000 per year. The November 1979 Minutes note that a lease had been signed for a new 5,000 square foot facility in the same shopping center where the original storefront library had been and that \$20,000 had been transferred to renovate this new location for Mint Hill “above amounts previously allocated.”³⁹ A successful opening was reported on January 4, 1980, “attended by approximately 200 including local officials and library staff past and present.”⁴⁰

As time went on, however, this space was outgrown as well. Fifteen years later, plans were being made for the Mint Hill Branch Library to have its own facility, built from the ground up. A 1995 bond was passed that included the new Mint Hill library. With an estimated cost of \$1.4 million, the agreement was for the Town of Mint Hill to provide the land and raise \$120,000 for furnishings.⁴¹ The town purchased the land from a local prominent family, and the community exceeded the goal for the interior renovations, raising 145,000.

Groundbreaking was on January 11, 1998, and the 12,000 square foot library opened May 17 with over 50,000 books, CDs and tapes.⁴² The Mint Hill Library now had 21 librarians, aides and associates on staff, a community room with 50 seats, 20 public access computers, and ongoing book discussion groups, special events, and story times. It was a full branch that would enjoy all the privileges of being a part of the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County, which in 2009 received the highest rating from *Library Journal*, one of just three in the southeast to earn this ranking.⁴³

“It is easy to become so accustomed to blessings as to grow unconscious of them until we consider what life without them would be,” Mrs. Jasspon wrote in 1916 of the Charlotte library, then only thirteen years old.⁴⁴ In the spring of 2010 Charlotte residents again had to rally to protect their local branches from the ax of budget cuts engendered by the recession. Although plans had been published only the previous November of turning the busy Mint Hill location into a regional library,⁴⁵ March saw a proposal to close half the branch libraries within two weeks because of budget shortfalls. This list of twelve libraries included Mint Hill’s. Immediate rage resulted in protests on the street, petitions, communication to commissioners, and donations exceeding \$300,000. Within the week, an emergency meeting of the library board reversed the closing decision although other measures, including staff layoffs and reduced operating hours, have taken place and more were planned. Citizen action, nonetheless, definitely revealed that people still see their library branch as an important “place” in the community and that they will rally to support it.

References

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- ³ Patrick M. Valentine, "America's Antebellum Social Libraries: A Reappraisal in Institutional Development," *Libraries and Information History* (forthcoming).
- ⁴ Valentine, "Libraries and Print Culture," 320.
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- ¹⁹ Ryckman, *Public Library of Charlotte*, 10-11.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 15.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ²⁵ Sara Wyche Higgins, "History of the Mint Hill Library," August 30, 1986, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, "Vault – Library Branches – Mint Hill" folder, 2.
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- ³¹ "Three Times Winner, Mint Hill Repeats," *Mecklenburg Times* (November 17, 1960), 1B.
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- ³⁴ "Mint Hill Starting Library Drive," *The Charlotte Observer* (September 27, 1962), 5C.
- ³⁵ Henrietta McKay's letter to Rex Weist, August 30, 1968, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, "Vault – Library Branches – Mint Hill" folder.
- ³⁶ Ryckman, *Public Library of Charlotte*, 25.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ³⁸ Arial A. Stephens' memo to County Commission, May 31, 1979, Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, "Vault – Library Branches – Mint Hill" folder. Ironically, it is said that Stephens' lack of drive in building branches would be the cause of his dismissal. The new director, Robert Cannon, vigorously pursued the expansion of the branch system along with the building of a new headquarters library downtown.
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