

North Carolina's Special Libraries Revisited

An Optimistic View

When *North Carolina Libraries* published its fall 1967 issue surveying the status of libraries in the state, Dr. Doralyn J. Hickey, an Assistant Professor of Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, contributed "Special Libraries: A 'Coming Force' in North Carolina."¹ She had every reason to choose this optimistic title. There had been a steady rise in special libraries since the North Carolina Library Commission first began to record them in the 1930s, and their membership had seen a substantial increase during subsequent decades. Hickey attributed this growth to the expansion of the state's industries, which needed dedicated repositories and subject specialists to serve the needs of individual businesses and further the state's social and economic goals.² The recent establishment of the North Carolina chapter of the Special Library Association in 1966 added legitimacy to these unique repositories and anchored them to its national parent organization. In this environment, it was easy for Hickey to imagine a world where special librarians across North Carolina would join together, through shared interests and better communication, to achieve "maturity and self-confidence as a profession."³ However, this positivity belied her deep frustration with ongoing challenges yet to be sufficiently addressed within the field. These included the absence of a clear definition of a "special library," problematic methods of statistical documentation, and deficient library staffing. Her concerns were prophetic, as these issues would continue to plague the field for years to come.

What's in a Name

Special libraries have suffered from a crisis of identity since they emerged from under the umbrella of public libraries in the late 19th century. Although the term "special libraries" was already being referenced

in American Library Association (ALA) publications and other professional journals as early as 1876, the name was not officially adopted until 1909 when the Special Libraries Association (SLA) was founded by John Cotton Dana.⁴ Initially, defining a "special library" appeared somewhat simple. Businesses, industries, and organizations maintained these repositories to store relevant material that trained subject specialists could assemble, synthesize, and disseminate to their specific clientele.

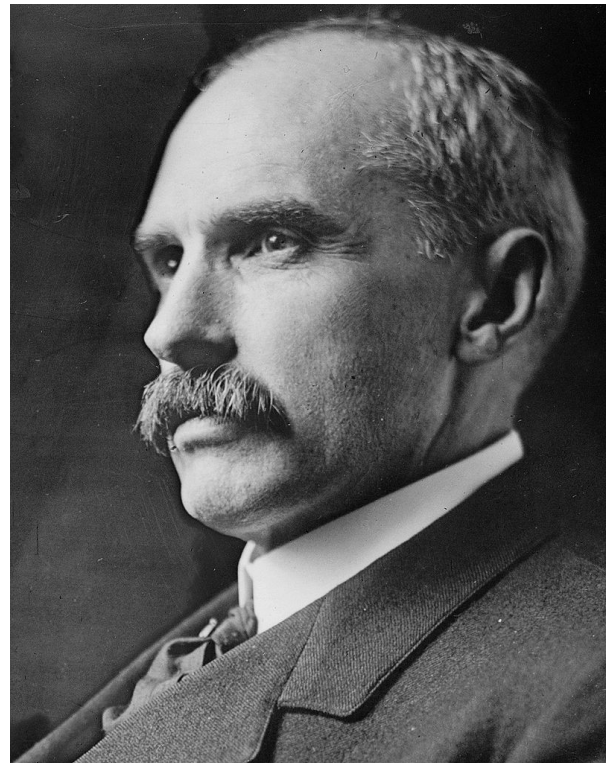


Figure 1: John Cotton Dana, George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress

Although this was theoretically straightforward, confirming which repositories fit this description was challenging. Attempts were made to identify special libraries less by what they were and more by what they were not. For example, it was generally agreed that special libraries contained books like other re-

¹ Doralyn J. Hickey, "Special Libraries: A 'Coming Force' in N. C.," *North Carolina Libraries* 25 (1967): 113–115.

² Hickey, "Special Libraries: A 'Coming Force' in N. C.," 115.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert V. Williams and Martha Jane K. Zachert, "Centennial Reflections on a Name," *Information Outlook* 13 (2009): 16.

positories. However, because special libraries primarily focused on material specific to their parent institution, their books and reference services were unique. It was clear that they were not academic libraries, although departmental repositories of colleges and universities were sometimes grouped with special libraries. During certain periods, some governmental libraries (such as Federal repositories) were considered special libraries, but others were not. These many contradictions prevented the development of a single working definition of special libraries.

Not surprisingly, labeling these repositories as distinctive and unique did not sit well with other librarians in the field. Many wanted the rogue “special libraries” and their subject specialists to fall in line and return to the fold. This growing resentment was evident during the Fifth Annual Special Libraries Association Convention of 1913, when Dr. W. Dawson Johnston, the Columbia University librarian, lamented that special libraries were often small and infrequently used. Worse yet, Dr. Johnston opined that many special libraries were merely “general libraries gone wrong.”⁵

However, not all SLA members agreed with Dr. Johnston’s position. Beaumont Newhall, the librarian at The Museum of Modern Art, considered special libraries as “modern” and embraced their individuality.⁶ Adopting SLA’s motto, “Putting Knowledge to Work,” as his battle cry, Newhall advocated for even more aggressive gathering and dissemination of knowledge generated by the special libraries’ parent organizations. He declared that it was the librarians’ duty “to do more than collect literacy and pictorial data, store it safely, and catalog it so that it is readily accessible to all comers. It means that we should take a militant offensive and *present* the specialized knowledge stored up in our specialized libraries.”⁷

Although there was continued discussions concerning the name and purpose of special libraries, the

field was growing and evolving at a steady rate. They had straddled the “documentation movement” of the 1950s, which advocated for the use of technology for recording source documents and even considered joining forces with the American Documentation Institute.⁸ In 1962, SLA reportedly had a membership of 5,400 librarians across fifteen divisions.⁹ While this was a positive development, the additional repositories sometimes fell outside of the established categories, creating even more difficulty in defining the field. In a futile attempt to be specific, Doralyn Hickey described some North Carolina repositories as “semi-special” if they did not correspond exactly to the currently determined grouping.¹⁰ Further illustrating this predicament, Frank McKenna, president and then executive director of SLA during the 1960s and 1970s, produced five pages of definitions of “special libraries” published between 1910 and 1976.¹¹ Even as the field was gaining momentum, the inability to agree on a simple, unifying definition limited the ability of the libraries to take advantage of these gains.

Problems only became more complex through the years. Issues about the true nature of special libraries and what made them unique still could not be resolved. Recognizing the disconnect between the historical mission and purpose of special libraries and changes in the field, SLA intermittently tried to modernize and rebrand the organization by changing its name to better reflect its evolving functions and responsibilities. The organization updated the name of its professional journal from *Special Libraries* to *Information Outlook* in 1997. At the June 2003 annual conference, a three-year plan was introduced to refocus on what specialists provided, rather than what material was held by the repositories. A proposal was made to drop the word “library” from the organization’s name and instead adopt either just the initials “SLA” or Information Professional Interna-

⁵ Guy E. Marion, “[Special Libraries Association].” *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 7 (1913): 383, doi: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25685194>.

⁶ Beaumont Newhall, “Putting Knowledge to Work,” *Special Libraries* 29 (1938): 72.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Williams and Zachert, “Centennial Reflections on a Name,” 20.

⁹ Myra Ebert, “Introducing Special Libraries,” *North Carolina Libraries* 21 (1962): 2.

¹⁰ Hickey, “Special Libraries: A ‘Coming Force’ in N. C.,” 115.

¹¹ Williams and Zachert, “Centennial Reflections on a Name,” 20.

tional (IPI).¹² These suggestions were defeated handily. The issue was revisited in 2009 when, in response to research gathered for SLA's Alignment Project, it was recommended that the group now be called the "Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals" (ASKPro). This idea was voted down "in record numbers" by a referendum held the same year.¹³ Even now there is an understanding that changes are needed within SLA. Currently the organization is being restructured to include enhanced outreach, renewed relationships, the expansion of programming, better communication and technology, and a financial review.¹⁴ There is no mention of a name change at present.

It's All About the Numbers: Tracking Special Libraries in North Carolina

The difficulties faced on the national stage could not help but filter down to the individual states, and soon North Carolina found itself wrestling with defining and documenting its special libraries. Early statistics kept by The North Carolina Library Commission (the Commission) tend to be skewed because there were no clear demarcations between public and special libraries.¹⁵ Initially, the Commission's annual reports kept statistics of only university and college libraries and public libraries. These were organized alphabetically by town or city and included the name of the local librarian, the number of volumes held by the repository, opening hours, etc.¹⁶ Throughout the 1930s, statistics were generated in the same format. As the number of documented public libraries grew, county libraries and, finally, "special interest libraries," were incorporated. The earliest recorded specialized libraries were those connected with the Veteran's Administration Hospital, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the state Supreme Court.

As North Carolina's economy boomed after World War II, there was an emergent demand for a diverse range of repositories to keep records of the state's de-

veloping business interests and academic expansion. The increase of special libraries in the state directly correlated with the escalating importance of tobacco, textiles, and heavy manufacturing. Soon, repositories appeared in businesses such as R.J. Reynolds and Lorillard tobacco companies, the Ecusta Paper Corporation, Chemstrand Corporation, Cone Mills, and Burlington Industries. Libraries associated with law schools, hospitals, churches, and government organizations were equally represented. More distinctive repositories also appeared, such as Fort Bragg's Psychological Warfare Division Library and the Southeastern Forestry Experiment Station Library. By the mid-1960s, the Commission reported eighty-three special libraries in the state.

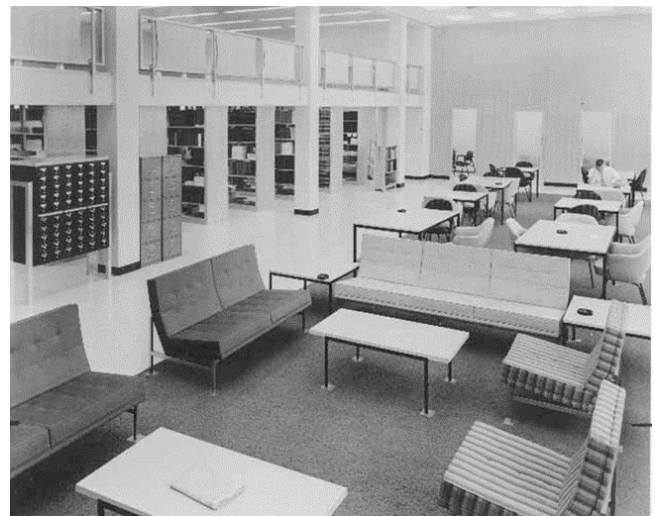


Figure 2: Chemstrand Library at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1970, Courtesy of the Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

This impressive number may have prompted the State Library's decision in 1964 to create a separate annual report solely for special libraries, formally separating them from public libraries and university and college libraries. The 1964 report was the only edition that attempted to define what was considered a "special library" in North Carolina, organizing statistics under the specific headings of industrial

¹² Susan DiMattia and Lynn Blumenstein, "Uncertainty breeds determination," *Library Journal* 128 (2003): 46.

¹³ "SLA Says 'No' to ASKPro." *American Libraries* blog (2009), <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/sla-says-no-to-askpro/>

¹⁴ Seema Rampersad, "Review of the Year," *Information Outlook*, winter (2024): 3-5, <https://www.flipsnack.com/6AF9F9FF8D6/winter-2024/full-view.html>

¹⁵ *Guide to Research Materials in the North Carolina State Archives, State Agency Records* (Raleigh: Department of Cultural Resources Division of Archives and History, Archives and Records Section. (1995.): 223. The Commission was established to expand, support, advise, and supplement collections of local public libraries.

¹⁶ *North Carolina Libraries, 1932-1933*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Library Commission, 1933): 1-3.

libraries, religious libraries, medical libraries, law libraries, U.S. government libraries, and state government agency libraries. It was also the only time a “Foreword” was included. Reading almost like a disclaimer, the Foreword stated that only repositories that had participated in the Governor’s Commission on Library Resources survey or the survey of the Library Services Branch, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, Washington DC, were included.¹⁷

This caveat was essential and pointed to a more significant problem. Historically, statistics pertaining to special libraries depended on the repositories reporting their own data; therefore, those which did not produce an account or did not fit into the current definition, were not counted.¹⁸ This was clarified when the Governor’s Commission on Library Resources was finally published in 1965. Although special libraries warranted their own chapter, only those that identified themselves as such and made the effort to complete the survey appeared in the report. The Commission admitted to having incomplete data in at least some categories.¹⁹

A Leap of Faith: A SLA Chapter is Established in North Carolina

In 1966, the North Carolina chapter of the SLA was founded to great fanfare. Miss Alleen Thompson, the president of the national SLA, traveled to Durham to conduct the installation, and members of the news media were there to cover the event.²⁰ This was an important step forward, which received national attention and recognized special libraries as a growing field in the state. Previously, North Carolina’s special librarians could only join the Washington DC, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, or Georgia chapters.²¹ Joining

SLA was a leap of faith for North Carolina librarians, as an earlier attempt to sustain a special libraries section of the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) was unsuccessful.²² Discussions at the 1955 NCLA biennial meeting resulted in a unanimous vote to disband the special libraries section in favor of a reduced committee because of a general lack of participation.²³



Figure 3: Library Dedication, The Mint Museum of Art, 1976, Courtesy of the Mint Museum Archives

Once officially associated with SLA, the North Carolina Chapter concerned itself with the field’s more compelling issues. These worries were focused mainly on the continued shortage of trained staff, the expanding use of technology, the glut of information descending on subject specialists, and the need for funds to address these issues.²⁴ However, even as special libraries faced significant challenges, the general outlook in North Carolina was positive.

An Almost Imperceptible Change

Even though the 1980 *Statistics of North Carolina Special Libraries* reflected the largest reported special

¹⁷ *Statistics of North Carolina Special Libraries, July 1, 1963-June 30, 1964*, (Raleigh: The North Carolina State Library, 1964): 1. The report divided special libraries statistics under Industrial Libraries, Religious Libraries, Medical Libraries, Law Libraries, U.S. Government Libraries, and State Government Agency Libraries.

¹⁸ Hickey, “Special Libraries: A ‘Coming Force’ in N. C.,” 113.

¹⁹ Robert B. Downs, ed., *Governor’s Commission on Library Resources, Resources of North Carolina Libraries* (Raleigh, The Commission, 1965), 167. The report divided special libraries into five categories: industrial libraries, medical libraries, law libraries, religious libraries, and those associated with the federal government.

²⁰ *Special Libraries Association, North Carolina Chapter, Twentieth Anniversary, 1966-1986*, (1986): 3.

²¹ Richard David, “The North Carolina Chapter of Special Libraries Association - A Team of Special Librarians.” *North Carolina Libraries* 24 (1966): 3-4.

²² Hickey, “Special Libraries: A ‘Coming Force’ in N. C.,” 10.

²³ Myrl Ebert, “Special Libraries Section.” *North Carolina Libraries* 14 (1956): 45.

²⁴ Richard C. David, “The North Carolina Chapter of Special Libraries Association - A Team of Special Librarians,” 3-4.

libraries membership, there was change in the air.²⁵ In this rapidly evolving and collaborative information age, the state's special librarians faced criticism for collecting resources accessible only to staff and specific clientele. In 1981, Judith Purcell, the Research/Reference Librarian at Duke Law Library, published an article in *North Carolina Libraries* in which she sought to simplify the categories of special libraries and determine the availability of access to their material.²⁶ To do so, she streamlined the repositories into three groups, significantly fewer than previously determined: government (federal, state, and local), corporate/research (funded by a profit or non-profit organization, business, or enterprise, etc.), and academic (college or university-affiliated).²⁷ After investigating the libraries that fell within these parameters, Purcell lamented that over half had some restriction or limitation of access to their material. Yet, she also acknowledged the more significant trend of providing information to a broader community by offering interlibrary loans and online services.²⁸

Despite efforts to show their value to the public, there were hints of a general demotion of the status of special libraries among their peers. In 1983, the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, published *North Carolina Libraries: Their Role, Statements of Mission and Purpose*.²⁹ The report was the product of a small advisory group which consisted of representatives from university libraries, community college libraries, and public libraries, as well as the director of school media programs and the state librarian. No special librarians were included on the committee. The publication mainly focused on public libraries, school libraries/media centers, community colleges, technical college libraries, and university and four-year college libraries. Special libraries were included but positioned at the end of the report. They were characterized as relatively small, narrowly focused collections with services related to

businesses, professional or special groups, and government agencies. Although lauded for their unique range of journals and highly trained staff, the report also pointedly mentioned that the specialists were "often the primary user of the library's collection."³⁰ By 1984, special libraries were no longer individually reported, and the statistical focus shifted to public and academic libraries.

An Elephant in the Room

North Carolina's special libraries have certainly advanced since Doralyn Hickey expressed her concerns about their future in her 1967 article, yet issues of name dissatisfaction, inconsistent documentation, and inadequate staffing continue to adversely affect the field.

The troublesome label of "special libraries" and the struggle of defining many types of repositories under one name continues to exist, even though there are periodic attempts to stretch beyond the limitations of the label. This absence of a unified identity has hindered accurate documentation of North Carolina's special libraries. In the mid-1980s, interest in reporting their annual statistics waned and attention began to focus primarily on public and academic libraries. While special libraries statistics continued to appear sporadically in various forums, it seemed clear that their status in comparison with other types of libraries was in decline. This remains true, as there is currently no formal system in place for tracking special libraries in the state. The only method of retrieving information on these repositories is by an advanced search in Data Axle using "special interest libraries," with a North Carolina filter, and navigating a hierarchical tree of choices.³¹ This search reveals sixty special libraries in the state, falling into the same categories as previously described, including religious libraries, medical/health-related libraries, law libraries, etc. The accuracy of this list is questionable and

²⁵ *Statistics of North Carolina Special Libraries, July 1, 1979-June 30, 1980*, (Raleigh: The North Carolina State Library, 1964): 1. The 1980 report also included the size of the primary user group, types of material held, interlibrary loans, online searches, public access, and even salaries.

²⁶ Judith E. Purcell, "North Carolina Special Libraries- Resources and Services for the General Public." *North Carolina Libraries* (1981): 22-29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁹ *North Carolina Libraries, Their Role, Statements of Mission and Purpose*. (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of State Library. 1983). 1-13.

³⁰ *North Carolina Libraries, Their Role, Statements of Mission and Purpose*, 11.

³¹ Data Axle is a cloud-based, real-time data delivery platform, available to libraries in our state through NC LIVE.

reflects a lack of structured in-state documentation that does not benefit a field that desperately needs to be recognized.

Additionally, special libraries face an especially dire staffing threat in an environment where budget cuts are affecting all branches of the library field. Specialized repositories have been continually downsized, operating with minimal staff, sometimes only a single librarian. This is particularly true of corporate libraries, which have significantly reduced numbers. With more access to online sources, special librarians are in constant danger of being eliminated by the industries they helped build.

Generations of North Carolina special librarians have addressed all of these problems. Over the years, they have adapted to a more technologically savvy age, become more public facing, modernized services, and increased collaboration with their colleagues. Yet even though they have met these challenges head on, an elephant has entered the room. Or maybe it has always been there.

When Miss Alleen Thompson addressed the new members of the North Carolina chapter of SLA during its 1966 installation, she praised the group for their passion and excitement. This directly contrasted with other national chapters, which she described as “tired, jaded, and bored,” with “a lack of enthusiasm and vitality.”³² While lethargy may have descended on other states, the North Carolina chapter remained

active for many years, documenting its members, and participating in national events.

However, at some point, a detachment occurred between the state’s special librarians and their professional organizations, and the elephant snuck in. Whether it was indifference, growing attachments to other groups more closely connected to their areas of specialization, or simply exhaustion resulting from years of overwork and under recognition, special librarians began to fade from representation in related professional organizations. With decreasing membership, the North Carolina chapter of SLA formally merged with South Carolina’s chapter in 2017, creating a Carolinas regional group. This community successfully maintains its presence through social media and networking events. Special libraries are currently not represented by a section or committee in the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA).

So, how can special librarians address the elephant in the room? Join the SLA Carolinas regional community and claim a seat at the table in NCLA - get involved and stay involved. It is only by recapturing enthusiasm for special libraries, embracing their uniqueness, and rebuilding the connections between repositories throughout the state, that Doralyn Hickey’s hope for a mature and self-confident profession can be realized. The time is now.

³² *Special Libraries Association, North Carolina Chapter, Twentieth Anniversary, 1966-1986*, (1986): 4.

