Libraries and Print Culture in Early North Carolina

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While there has been much recent discussion about print cultures and the history of the book, little attention has been given to the colonial South.¹ In particular, the role played by the presence (or absence) of printed materials in North Carolina has been neglected.² Scholars have focused more on the production and significance of texts than their availability and use in rural colonial America. This article will study the evidence for the presence or absence of printed materials, especially in the form of books collected in libraries, and what such print collections can suggest about literate coastal and backwoods culture in colonial and Revolutionary North Carolina until 1800.³ Were books largely


absent and unimportant in the South as generally believed, and what does this indicate about the level and importance of literacy and education? Libraries, whether communal or private, were signifiers of the cultures prevalent in an area, and therefore a study of libraries and the presence of books and other print materials is a means of recovering "the construction of different print cultures in particular historical circumstances." 4

North Carolina was one of the original thirteen colonies but hardly the most literate or most interested in books. Settled relatively late compared to its northern and southern neighbors, it differed from them in lacking large numbers of prosperous plantations or centralized commercial activities. Some Virginia planters amassed large and varied private libraries and probably led the South in reputation and the display of high culture. In addition, William and Mary College, opened in 1693, considered its library "a common Library" open to the public. Yet the transient nature of Williamsburg's population—when the legislature was in session, its streets and taverns were full, when it was not, the planters rushed home—precluded it becoming as rich a cultural center as Charleston. 5 Coastal South Carolinians had books, newspapers, and a relatively literate urban life. Charleston, renowned for its wealth and leisure society, was the South's largest city, but even there, learning was limited to a few. "Its native sons knew little

Haynes McMullen, American Libraries before 1876 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000) is valuable but largely limits itself to statistics.


Latin, less Greek, and seldom read books," despite the generosity of a local merchant in leaving his books to the Charles Town Literary Society.6

Virginia tobacco and South Carolina rice and indigo, worked by slaves, allowed a wealthy few to support literate, semi-aristocratic cultures. Early colonial North Carolina did not have large numbers of cultured plantation owners, merchants, and lawyers. In the seventeenth century, North Carolinians were more like the poorer folk of the South Carolina and Virginia backcountry who were barely able to read or write and had only limited access to newspapers and printed books. New Bern and Wilmington might envy Charleston and Williamsburg but could hardly emulate them.7

News from Britain often took over three months to reach coastal North Carolina and another two weeks or longer to reach settlements in the farther Piedmont.8 Ethnic and religious differences increased class, economic, and geographic animosity. The web of print communication was weak in North Carolina and made governing all the more difficult.9 But one should not belittle those who had small chance or need to read. As a coastal slave pointed out, Indians and blacks "learned many things from the book of Nature, which were


unknown to white folk." Most white North Carolinians were subsistence farmers living in scattered communities with minimal need to read extensively. Carolina was only a minor part of the Atlantic-Caribbean world, although smuggling sometimes became a way of life. North Carolinians early learned to oppose a government, whether near or far, that they saw as unhelpful and unduly restrictive. As the earliest recorded North Carolina poem put it, their contrary character echoed the nature surrounding them: "As blustering Winds disturb the calmest Sea / And all the Waters rave and mutiny/ . . . So Tyrants drive the People to Extreams. . . ."

Books were not unheard of in the first half century of European settlement, but they were not plentiful. George Durant, who left England in 1658, was only one of many who brought a Bible with him. When Thomas Miller, the collector of customs, was "put in Irons & in a cruel & barbarous manner shut up" during Culpepper's Rebellion in 1677, he most missed "his owne Bookes." But books and even the Bible were rare enough. Of those dying intestate before 1700, only William Foster, in 1692 with one "bibell" and "7 hundred waight of Tobacko," and Dr. James Besly, in 1695 with "1 Surment [sermon] books," seem to have had books at all. Colonial white Americans, whether of the ruling group or the much more numerous farmers and traders of the interior, had much to occupy their


minds and small inclination to read beyond the Bible and a few other Christian books, almanacs, and practical self-help books, or the stray newspaper that might come their way. Even after the Revolution, a young plowboy complained of the “great scarcity of books” while reading and rereading the one he had. Yet apprentices and destitute orphans were expected to be taught how to “Reed.” Imported books, magazines, and newspapers “were lifelines of identity, and they were direct material links to a present and past European culture.”

Bath, a hamlet of only six to nine houses, became the home of one of the earliest “public” or community libraries in colonial America and certainly the first library in North Carolina. That it did so was because of an Englishman, not a North Carolinian. Thomas Bray, founder of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), was “convinced, That... a LIBRARY, is what will best induce a Learned and Sober Minister to go into the Service of any part of the Church in the Plantations;... considering that few Men of Fortunes, who are able to purchase Books of themselves, will go into such remote Parts.” Dr. Bray believed that a priest and his parish should have access to more than just religious books, so he sent a series of libraries to the colonies, especially to Maryland.

Bray posted the Reverend Daniel Brett to Bath with 166 books in December 1700 and sent a “layman’s collection” in 1704. As the legislature only incorporated Bath in 1705, it was one of the few towns in the world to start with a library already in place. The books were most likely housed in a private home or


Thomas Bray, founder of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), believed that priests should have access to both secular as well as religious books. Toward that end, he sent a series of libraries—"layman's collections"—to the American colonies, including North Carolina. Portrait of Thomas Bray from W. K. Lowther, A History of the S.P.C.K (London: S.P.C.K, 1959), frontispiece.

homes. Unfortunately, some parishioners considered Brett "ye Monster off ye Age," and he left before the second collection even arrived. The particular importance of Brett's library is the list he made of the first collection in 1703. Forty-eight volumes were secular in nature, including a French grammar, a medical book, and various histories and classical authors. 16 This was a diverse

collection designed to fill the needs of a literate and respectable leader of local
society.17

Oddly enough, the SPG layman’s libraries were more sectarian in nature than
the collections that they entrusted to the ministers. These collections,
nonetheless, were “public” in the sense that community members could borrow
books and were expected to return them. Each parish that received a library was to
maintain it, but by 1712, one observer reported that the Bath books were “all
dispersed and lost by those wretches that don’t consider the benefit of so valuable
a gift.” Another minister complained that the books were being used “for waste
paper.” Many of the books apparently survived but were moved from Bath. The
Society sent similar layman’s libraries to Currituck Precinct in 1708, Chowan
Precinct in 1712, Edenton in 1723, and Wilmington at an unknown date. Other
small donations were also made, each layman’s collection including religious
tracts to be given to the faithful as well as to the unchurched.18 Nonetheless,
North Carolina received relatively few SPG donations compared to Maryland,
South Carolina, and Virginia.

In 1715, the North Carolina Assembly enacted a law concerning the SPG
libraries that, among other things, endorsed Bray’s views on book preservation and
personal lending privileges. That such an extensive law was passed indicates that
there was concern for the public’s right to use the books. Unlike South Carolina,
however, North Carolina contributed no money to maintain or increase these
libraries. And because there was no practical authority to control the lending of
books, the SPG books quickly or slowly dispersed. Some Bray collections appear to
have moved with the ministers. In Currituck Precinct, the people, “pretending the
Books belonged to them,” refused to give the books to the next missionary unless
he would stay with them. Virginians seized one collection meant for North
Carolina—which, if nothing else, demonstrates popular interest in books. Clearly,
there was confusion over ownership of the libraries. Bray inspected the situation

17. Only one volume from the Bray library at Bath is known to have survived: Gabriel Towerson,
*Explication of the Catechism*, part 1 (1685) is in the custody of the St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Bath,
Diocese of East Carolina. As late as 1770, the Society might have sent a set of religious books to Rev. John
18. Saunders, *Colonial Records*, 1:860 (first quotation), 2:128 (second quotation); for more on Bray and
the library at Bath, see 1:572, 601, 715, 884-885; 2:54, 75-76, 119-120, 123, 130, 144, 285-286, 310-311;
North Carolina,” *The Episcopal Church in North Carolina*, 1701-1959, ed. Lawrence Foushee London and
In 1700, Bray sent missionary Daniel Brett to St. Thomas Parish in Bath with a diverse collection of 166 books, both religious and secular. In 1704, he sent another set of books, one of the SPG “layman’s collections.” This book from the Bray library in Bath, now in the collection of St. Thomas Episcopal Church, is the only volume known to have survived. Photograph courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

in Maryland in 1700, but neither he nor anyone else in the SPG ever went to North Carolina. Although the Society stayed active, its libraries never had the impact Bray had hoped for. A few other ministers, Anglicans and otherwise, had

personal collections, but on the whole, religious leaders in these early decades did little to promote extensive collections of books.²⁰

Edward Moseley, raised in an orphanage in London but a man of great political and social skills, planned to donate a selection of his own books to Edenton in 1723. Perhaps Moseley's intention was to stimulate the SPG into greater generosity, but apparently, the Society never acknowledged him, and it is unlikely that Edenton ever received his collection. When Moseley was a young man new to America, he had cataloged the Bray library in Charles Town, South Carolina. He meant for his donation to be available to the public, but almost all the books were theological, most were in Latin, and some were in Greek or Hebrew. While reading tastes were more religious than today, this collection was hardly suitable for Edenton. Rev. Charles Pettigrew, an Episcopal clergyman from Edenton, observed, "The people in this part of the state do not seem to be very Bookish."²¹

The SPG had trouble raising funds to fully support Bray's ambitious library plans, and his grand design never materialized. As one historian has noted, "Without the addition of new materials, any library soon ceases to hold the interest of its users." The few books from Bray collections remaining today are "silent molding symbols of an idea in advance of its time."²² When the Associates of Dr. Bray, an offshoot of the SPG primarily interested in Negro and Indian education, later inquired about sending books for the education of blacks in North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.


²². In 1755 and 1770, the SPG sent a number of religious books to St. James Parish in Wilmington and in the 1760s, sixty-eight books to Brunswick. Parishioners, apparently, could borrow from the St. James Parish library. Laugher, Thomas Bray's Grand Design, 30-33 (quotations, 33), 68, 86 (table 4); Weeks, "Libraries and Literature," 180-183; Barbara Beeland Rehder, "Development of Libraries in the Lower Cape Fear," Lower Cape Fear Historical Society 7 (February 1964), unpaginated; "Library Chronology," unpaginated, undated typed report, archives, New Hanover Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.
In 1703, Edward Moseley, a London attorney, politician, and book collector, cataloged books in Charles Town, South Carolina, for Thomas Bray and the SPG. In 1723, Moseley possibly donated part of his own book collection to Edenton through the SPG. Bookplate from Moseley's library, courtesy of the North Carolina Collection.

Edenton, the town refused. The organization still had not yet learned that libraries cannot be thrust onto communities; communities must spend some effort in securing and maintaining them.

With the 1720s, as European emigration increased and the Indian threat retreated, books began appearing more plentifully in wills and inventories. Richard Marsden, the first rector of St. James Parish in Wilmington but something of a wandering—even "wayward"—minister, exaggerated North Carolina's lack of books in 1735 when he claimed, "There are very few Bibles, common prayer Books, books of devotion &c in this Province." For example, in 1734, Edward Salter of

Bath County had a library large enough to divide into sections—divinity, law, history, mathematics, and other—although no list of the actual titles survives. Seth Pilkington in 1754 had forty-seven books covering navigation, surveying, religion, arithmetic, and dictionaries, and Henry Snoad of Beaufort County had both a French and a Latin grammar, along with several volumes of the British journal *Tatler*. Most people, however, had at most only a Bible or a small parcel of books.  

From the 1730s on, the population steadily increased, and a certain number of wealthy rice-growing grandees prospered. The white population grew from just over 10,000 in 1700 to 30,000 thirty years later, to 100,000 in 1760 and almost 300,000 whites and over 100,000 blacks by 1790. Immigration from Scotland, for instance, was heavy enough for books to be printed in Gaelic in North Carolina. But schools in North Carolina, whether inland or on the coast, were usually brief subscription affairs. Most of these schools or their headmasters would have some books, although records remain sparse. The Newberne Academy, for


In those communities with layman's libraries, members could borrow both secular and religious books from the collections. But because there was no central authority to control lending, books were often lost or dispersed. First page of the catalog for one of the SPG layman's libraries in North Carolina, reproduced courtesy of the North Carolina Collection.

instance, was considered a public institution, so Congress deposited a folio copy of Bishop Thomas Wilson's donated works at its library until the University of North Carolina could be opened. Informal teaching by parents to children, masters to


apprentices, and scattered clergy to their equally scattered charges, using what books were at hand, probably provided the real basis for what education there was, but unfortunately, such practices leave little evidence for the historian. Families who owned seven or eight books in the backcountry in the 1750s possessed a large collection.

Especially interesting is the case of Liberty Hall Academy in Charlotte. Denied a charter because of Anglican and Royalist fears of Presbyterian democracy, it operated outside the law in the early 1770s as a public forum with an attached library. The debates that led to the anti-British Mecklenburg Resolves were held there. Its library seems to have been founded in 1771, when Waightstill Avery, a lawyer and trustee, bought fifteen books from Matthew Troy of Salisbury. The collection soon grew to forty-three books and may have been the second subscription community library in the colony. Diligent research by Stewart Lillard has also uncovered a number of other small to middling collections in Mecklenburg County.

Germans also settled in the Carolina Piedmont beginning in the mid-1700s. They brought books with them and quickly founded churches and schools. The Reverend Andrew Loretz, for example, came to America from Switzerland in 1784 with “a fine library of theological works, which, however, after his death, was sold in an unappreciative community for a trifle.” The same year that Loretz


emigrated, the legislature authorized Liberty Hall to open in Salisbury with "suitable and convenient Houses for the same, providing a philosophical [scientific] apparatus and public library."33

German and French settlers overwhelmingly could write their names, something that could not be said of all British Americans. A leading student of the history of books in the South claims that French "appears to have been read with relative ease [by elites] from Maryland to Georgia." He considers southerners at that time to have had a fairly high level of literacy.34 Thirty-seven of thirty-eight officials in Granville County (east-central North Carolina, near the Virginia line) in 1754-1755 could "write their names in a bold, strong hand, and only one signed by mark." However, almost 40 percent (thirty-one of seventy-nine people) who left wills in that same county between 1750 and 1772 could not sign their names. People leaving wills were generally wealthier and more prominent members of society, or at least landholders, whereas the ability to write one's name did not mean that one could read a newspaper, an almanac, or the Bible. Indeed, as historians of literacy have pointed out, writing and reading are different skills, with writing only taught later, and often separately. There are also some indications that the earliest settlers were more literate than their children. This is a story hard to quantify until the nineteenth century, when better statistics are available, but does illustrate that male literacy, while widespread, was far from universal.35

33. Bill for the Encouragement of Learning in the District of Salisbury, November, 13, 1784; T. H. McCaule, petition, September 21, 1784, both in Farlin Q. Ball Collection, Private Collections, State Archives.
At the time of the American Revolution, "most white women in the southern states were probably incapable of even signing their names," notes historian Cynthia Kiemer. James Iredell, later a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, claimed, "For my own Part, I know of no Character more pleasing than a sensible Woman who has read elegantly and judiciously." Most signs, indeed, point to substantial growth in female literacy over the eighteenth century. Literacy, however defined and measured, undoubtedly varied but decreased the more one traveled away from towns and into the backcountry. A book survives from the center of the colony inscribed, "David Kennedy his Book he may read good but God knows when." Indeed, because of the fear of semiliterate juries and judges, North Carolina continued the practice of "Benefit of Clergy" long after most states discontinued it. "Clergy"—anyone who could read and write—could have cases removed to a higher court. All this leads to the conclusion that reading was not a necessity of life for common folk.36

It was not that frontiersmen and settlers were against reading, but rather that they were absorbed in the practical business of life. Nor were many books directed toward their interests. What books they did have they probably read closely and discussed with others. Oral communication was more important than reading, even for the transmission of national news. Long-distance communication and rural transportation remained poor and uncertain. On the eve of the American Revolution, it could take a month for mail to be transported from Charleston to Virginia by land through North Carolina. Books were correspondingly expensive and libraries rare in North Carolina, even by the standards of colonial America.37


James Davis of Williamsburg, Virginia, established the first printing press in North Carolina in 1749. Because books and periodicals were difficult to print and sell, Davis produced shorter works such as broadsides, almanacs, pamphlets, and the colony's first newspaper, the *North-Carolina Gazette*, from 1751 to perhaps 1761, and again under this title from 1768 to 1788. Front page of the *North-Carolina Gazette*, November, 10, 1769, from the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.
The history of printing and newspapers is important in the development of a literate culture that would encourage and support the growth of libraries. Yet nine colonies had a printing press before North Carolina. The colony eventually recognized that it needed a resident printer to publish its laws and proclamations, so it levied taxes on wine, rum, distilled liquors, and rice in the 1740s to pay for a printer and printing press. James Davis, a printer from Williamsburg, Virginia, set up North Carolina's first press in New Bern in 1749 and finished printing the laws within two years. Davis also published in 1753 the first nonlegal book compiled by a North Carolinian, Clement Hall's A Collection of Many Christian Experiences, Sentences, and Several Places of Scripture Improved. An Anglican priest, Hall compiled his short Collection mainly from the Bible and Book of Common Prayer but included some original aphorisms. Hall meant for it to "be of some Use to others . . . instead of Drinking, Gaming, or telling of an idol or slandrous Tale." Such publications helped spread a public sphere of elite readers across North Carolina. Officials and lawyers, merchants and farmers increasingly immersed in commercial transactions wanted and needed to know about laws and events not easily transmitted or referenced by oral culture.

Books and periodicals were nonetheless difficult to print and sell, so American printers typically produced broadsides, almanacs, pamphlets, and newspapers; sold stationery; and, like most if not all printers, bound books. Even so, James Davis published ninety-nine titles over thirty-three years, mostly of a legal or legislative nature. However, one of his books, The First Book of the American Chronicles of the Times, was humorous. It was "to be sold at the Printing Office, and by most of the storekeepers in town and country." In addition, Davis wrote and printed the colony's first newspaper, the North-Carolina Gazette, from 1751 to perhaps 1761, and under various titles from 1764 to 1778. Symptomatic of the comparative literary backwardness of North Carolina, there already was a Maryland Gazette in 1727, a South Carolina Gazette in 1732, and a Virginia Gazette in 1736 (which Davis had probably helped print). Davis also became the colony's postmaster in 1755 and published another newspaper, the North Carolina Magazine, from 1764 to 1778. A Patriot acquainted by business dealings with Benjamin Franklin, Davis

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was active in North Carolina's movement toward independence. His printing press proved especially useful in spreading news and opinions about the deepening quarrel with Britain. Although the number of his paying subscriptions, mostly near New Bern, has been estimated at less than one hundred, his and other newspapers carried advertisements directed at rural folk, and he printed letters from as far away as present-day Tennessee. Newspaper would be passed from person to person, while stores kept them as drawing cards for locals to read and discuss.

Andrew Steuart, originally of Belfast, Ireland, also published a newspaper. He established the *North Carolina Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy* in Wilmington in 1764. Less of a Patriot than Davis, Steuart ran into trouble with fiery local citizens over the Stamp Act while almost simultaneously annoying the royal governor by printing "inflammatory Expressions." "What Part," Steuart complained, "is he now to Act?—Continue to keep his Press open and free, and be in Danger of Corporal Punishment, or blockade it up and run the Risque of having his Brains knocked out?" Steuart soon sold his equipment and type to Adam Boyd. Boyd, born in Pennsylvania and trained as a Presbyterian minister, ran the *Cape Fear Mercury* from 1769 until 1776. The *Mercury* was more literary than Davis's *Gazette*, although even the latter often had a poetry corner for local effusions. Significantly, both Boyd and Davis, unlike Steuart, aligned their newspapers with the colonial revolutionaries and helped cement the independence and importance of print in American culture.

Newspaper printing appears to have ceased in North Carolina during the latter part of the American Revolution, although Lord Charles Cornwallis had a press when he passed through with fire and sword in 1781. Soldiers—both Tories and Patriots—destroyed or sold off a number of private libraries, and the turmoil

Other printers joined Davis in publishing North Carolina newspapers, including Andrew Steuart and Adam Boyd. Boyd, a Presbyterian minister from Pennsylvania, published Wilmington’s *Cape Fear Mercury* from 1769 until 1776. Portrait of Boyd courtesy of the North Carolina Collection.

continued well after Cornwallis moved the bulk of his troops to Yorktown. Massachusetts printer and Patriot Isaiah Thomas, according to himself, was “burnt in effigy by the royalists of northcarolina [sic].” British soldiers destroyed several libraries, including Guilford County clergyman David Caldwell’s “log cabin” library, which held medical and agricultural as well as religious books. The Liberty Hall library in Charlotte was probably also among the collections destroyed, while British troops or Tories apparently left William Hooper of Wilmington his law books but “shamefully injured” the rest of his library. It is only fair to add that the Patriots dispersed or destroyed the governor’s library and others owned by Tories.45

If the quantity of original publications in North Carolina was not great before 1800, the literary quality was equally low, according to all students of the field. A few poets expressed themselves, occasionally in German and Gaelic, with the American Revolution inspiring a number of verses and some songs. Thomas Godfrey, a transplanted Pennsylvanian living near Wilmington, wrote the first play acted by a professional troupe in America.

Print culture, including original works, had come to North Carolina, but there was meager ground in which to grow literature. As publishing venues were so thin, books were generally obtained overseas or from other colonies. The general retail markup for books was 300 to 400 percent, and much of the paper used for printing also had to be imported. Newspapers begged for clean rags. "Writing," states a close historian of literary New England, "was the least widely practiced major mode of cultural expression in early America." The paucity of towns and the lack of easy communication and transportation between them were major obstacles to the growth of libraries in North Carolina.


Libraries had a long tradition in western culture, but it was a tradition that heavily inclined toward classical and religious learning beyond the reach of pioneers, scattered farmers, occasional tradesmen, and isolated planters. Libraries had always been for the educated leisure class, more for the "learned" than the "common" reader. Latin and French were the languages preferred, or English with a heavy admixture of erudite vocabulary. Edward Gibbon, for instance, first wrote *Essai sur l'Étude de la Littérature* in French before penning *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. James Davis himself published an introduction to Latin grammar.

As mentioned, many settlers brought books with them from their native land, whether Britain, France, or Germany. They also purchased books during trips home or ordered them through factors (business agents) and relatives—although this could create problems through the carelessness of the agents. While colonial South Carolina had fourteen bookstores—not all of them successful, by any means—North Carolina had few before the Revolution. Charleston's Robert Wells, a Scot, claimed to be the biggest supplier of books for both Carolinas. General stores and peddlers did carry books, although James Iredell, for one, thought it "impossible to purchase books in the southern colonies."

The records of book sales at a general store near Hillsborough, North Carolina, have survived from the 1770s. They show that the overwhelming majority of the books it sold were religious or spiritual self-improvement. Simple texts such as spelling books were also popular, as were histories and children's books called battledores. One set of Sir William Blackstone's legal commentaries, in six volumes, also sold. From Blackstone's known popularity in the colonies one may assume that other copies were ordered directly from Britain. In 1772, the store owners over-estimated potential sales by ordering various "Small Histories," a half dozen Aristotle, and an equal number of a history of England. Nothing


daunted, they bought more histories and even novels like *Tom Jones* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*. This ambitious attempt to broaden the reading and minds of the backcountry went unrewarded: “Not one of the new items left the shelves.” Bookstores became a flourishing business in Charleston, Williamsburg, Baltimore, and Annapolis, but not in North Carolina.53

But the “great scarcity” of bookstores and libraries did not mean that North Carolinians were totally ignorant of the world. Literate people would read aloud to their families and neighbors who could not read. Slaves listened, too, and sometimes turned literacy to their advantage.54 Reading was often a collective, communal, and verbal practice, and people closely scrutinized newspapers such as those of Davis or Steuart. They often read the same text—the Bible or perhaps an almanac or religious tract—“again and again.”55 Some historians believe that people read with more intention in the eighteenth century than they do today and


that this difference in reading styles is of great importance in how people interpreted texts.66

As housing improved, homes provided more space for introspective and personal reading.57 Lists of books advertised in the Wilmington press indicate that in the eighteenth century, people "read not so much for pleasure, as for practical purposes."58 Certainly, if one intended to read only a few religious works, one hardly needed a library. One historian theorized that as books became more plentiful, readers dipped into different texts for specific information rather than reading all the way through. The practice of "sequential" as opposed to "segmented" reading may have accompanied the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: one read a novel from the beginning to the end to follow the narrative flow. Nonetheless, in speaking of German reading societies at the end of the eighteenth century, Jürgen Habermas makes the telling point that "the people were brought up to the level of culture, culture was not lowered to that of the masses."59

Any catalog of surviving books would show that religious works predominated in early North Carolina. Such books would often be preserved and handed down through the generations and noted in wills, perhaps as tokens of piety, while more secular or illicit books and ephemeral publications would be discarded or sold. In other words, people kept the serious and religious books, while removing ones that later generations might think irreligious, illicit, or of little consequence. Books on the occult and magic may have been as popular with planters as less prosperous folk, but readers were more likely to preserve books by famous or respected authors.60 "This book belonged to Pa," one woman recorded about the family copy

60. This does not imply that those making the inventories necessarily discarded the publications. David Cressy, "Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England," in Libraries, Books and Culture, ed. Donald G. Davis Jr. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986): 92-106; Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), esp. 535-583. Executors were legally bound to inventory a deceased person's complete possessions, but "a parcel of books" may cover many sins. See also, for example, the Michaux-Randolph Papers, and, for a contrary example of
of Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, “& has a few words written by him on the margin of a leaf, towards the end.”

Secular titles, as listed in wills, probably increased in number and proportion by the time of the Revolution. A backcountry South Carolina lawyer and judge whose mother was from North Carolina left an extensive library of 1,145 books, revealing that he was deeply interested not only in law, practical books, and history, but also novels (among them, The Sorrows of Werther) and heroic tales. Or consider the bilingual Moravian missionary early in the nineteenth century who had more secular, even scientific, books in his library than religious ones. Nonetheless, the primacy of the Bible and Christian books accords well with what is known of colonial times. Any increase in secularism should not be taken too literally, as Christian revivals swept British America at regular intervals. People did not view religion and secular life as opposites.

According to one detailed analysis, during the eighteenth century there were in North Carolina at least eleven private libraries holding over one hundred titles each and eighteen smaller but still significant collections, including the SPG libraries. Three of the larger collections belonged to governors, and almost all libraries were near the coast. The only exceptions were James Milner of Halifax and Alexander McLeod or MacLeod, a former Highlander and son-in-law of Flora MacDonald. McLeod lived near the Upper Cape Fear River and owned 324 books but lost them while fighting for the British early in the Revolution. Milner had collected perhaps a thousand books, including a number of belles lettres, political philosophy, astronomy, and music books. “This was a sophisticated library of a sophisticated gentleman.” “Especially in the New Bern and Cape Fear regions,” continues historian Richard Beale Davis, “an inquisitive mind in search of historical information, theological doctrine, voyages and travels, and many other

preserving what some might consider ephemeral, The Racing Calendar Abridged, 1709-1750 (London: Charles Weatherby, 1829) in Nathaniel Macon Papers, both in Private Collections, State Archives. It must be admitted that Carolinians admired their horses more than their libraries, as almost any issue of the Raleigh Register—edited by literate and liberal Joseph Gales—would show in the next century.


subjects might find answers on his own shelves or those of his neighbors. Yet library shelves or “Book Stands” only occasionally appear in colonial inventories.

Gabriel Johnston (governor, 1734-1752) and his nephew Samuel Johnston (governor, 1787-1789) amassed the largest private library in North Carolina, which grew to perhaps 4,500 books early in the nineteenth century. Professor Weeks called it “a library for profit and use, not the collection of a mere bibliomaniac,” and it clearly was unusual in size and scope. Secular works far overshadowed religious titles. Gabriel Johnston had been a professor of Greek and Hebrew languages at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland before coming to the colonies and so was a man of considerable culture. A close examination of South Carolina private libraries, even in the backcountry, also shows more books and a wider range than might be expected. There were obviously more books and newspapers, whether homegrown or imported, than in earlier times. The possibilities for creating libraries and engaging in print culture were much greater in 1775 than in 1675.

Probably almost all private libraries of any size contained some medical books, although most people depended more on folklore and herbs than “scientific” medicine. Doctors and others practicing medicine relied on such books and training as they could obtain. Dr. William Ussher of Windsor, whose library is considered representative of the times, owned almost twenty medical books when he died in 1780, while in 1769, John Eustace, a Wilmington physician, possessed 118 medical books (out of 292 volumes). Dr. Calvin Jones is especially noteworthy for not only practicing medicine in the immediate post-Revolutionary period, but


In the eighteenth century, two North Carolina governors, Gabriel Johnston (1734-1752) and his nephew, Samuel Johnston (1787-1789), amassed the largest private library in the state. The collection numbered about 4,500 volumes by the early nineteenth century. This bookplate is from Gov. Gabriel Johnston’s copy of George Stanhope’s A Paraphrase and Comment upon the Epistles and Gospels..., courtesy of the North Carolina Collection.

also for writing about his professional experience and being among the first in the South to inoculate against smallpox.  

Persons who had private libraries were probably willing to loan books, as did the merchant and politician William Little. In his 1734 will, he stipulated “that my books lent out, be got in, & all my books sold.” The money obtained was to buy two slaves. The surviving records do not indicate whether all the books that he lent were returned. In a similar fashion, the Reverend James Hall let members of his Bethany congregation and perhaps others borrow his books. Sarah Allen of

Wilmington warned her grandnieces not to lend books, as some were always lost. And a judge complained that his wife had stolen some of his “valuable collection” of law books and that a book “lent D. Brown 1799 [was] never returned.” Samuel Young of Rowan County was particularly cautious with his collection of about a hundred books. Young stipulated in his will, in 1793, that his five sons were to share the books with each other, “but no book . . . was to be loaned, hired, or otherwise disposed of, under the penalty of forfeiture of all claim to the library.” The books would then be sold and “the proceeds paid over to the two daughters.”

Private library owners might well be cautious. The primary problem with regarding private libraries as potential public libraries is that borrowers had to have good relations with the owner, while the public had little or no influence over what books were purchased, how they were organized, or who had access. While there are numerous stories of gentlemen allowing a visitor or a promising young neighbor to use their libraries, the relationship required generosity and charity on the owner’s part and probably subservience from the borrower.

Attorney and reformer Archibald D. Murphey, for one, complained of the lack of books in 1795. For two years after leaving David Caldwell’s prewar log cabin school—itself now possessing no library beyond a few textbooks and Greek and Latin classics—Murphey had no access to any books “except some old works on theological subjects . . . There were indeed very few [books] in the State, except in the libraries of lawyers who lived in the commercial towns.” In addition, many of the personal libraries in the backcountry were ill suited to serve the public. Bray’s premature donation to Bath exemplifies this problem.

Most book owners were male, although there is some evidence that women read and owned books as well. In addition to Sarah Allen, mentioned above, one Frederick Jones, a wealthy merchant and landowner originally from Virginia, in 1772 willed “all my Library of Books, Except those books commonly used by my wife, which I have ordered to be put into her Closets: which books I give to my

69. Jethro Rumple, History of Rowan County, North Carolina . . . (1881; reprint, Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 1999), 121. Note that it was assumed that the daughters would not be interested in having the books.
70. See, for example, A. Meilan to Thomas Ruffin, October 1814, in Hamilton, Papers of Thomas Ruffin, 1:149. Cf. also Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 129.
72. For the distinction between types of libraries, see Carlton Bruns Jockek, The Government of the American Public Library (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935); x; Thompson, Evolution of the American Public Library, 1-2, 28, 74-79; and McMullen, American Libraries before 1876, 168, 170. McMullen excludes private libraries from his survey.
Daughter Jane.” Among many other offices, Jones had served as commissioner of the SPG library at Bath. In 1755, the merchant and royal councilor James Craven gave his wife Penelope the right to select fifty books from his library as part of her legacy, while twenty years later, Jean Corbin, the widow of Judge Francis Corbin, died owning seventy-one books and ninety-seven slaves.73

The poet-dramatist Thomas Godfrey praised a Wilmington literary circle in which he participated for several years. This was probably the Cape Fear Library Society, founded in 1760, the first secular subscription library in North Carolina before the Revolution. It is tempting to assume that Godfrey had some hand in starting the library. He was from Philadelphia, home of America’s first subscription library, the Library Company of Philadelphia. Benjamin Franklin and a group of young tradesmen, the junto of which Godfrey’s father had been a member, had started pooling their money for a library in 1731. Any “civil gentleman” could read the books on the premises, but only members could take them home. While membership was therefore essentially private and restrictive, this type of social or proprietary-subscription library may be considered public in the context of the times. Only men were members, but presumably they brought books home for their family and friends. Similar types of libraries soon spread from Philadelphia to Connecticut and other northern states.74

Wilmington planters were also aware of the founding of the Charleston Library Society in 1748, which became a significant cultural influence on coastal South Carolina. That books were both valued in themselves and expensive to purchase is indicated in the Charleston selection process: titles were proposed, voted on, and accepted at one meeting but not ordered until approved at the next quarterly meeting. The result was a balanced collection, rather than a selection skewed to one person’s tastes. The books the Society bought did not generally duplicate those in private collections. The Cape Fear Library probably emulated the

Charleston Library Society in allowing membership and borrowing privileges to those living outside of town. One provision not generally followed today permitted a member an extra day to retain a book for every six miles he lived from the city; nor do present-day libraries generally loan money to the government, as the Charleston Library Society did to support the American Revolution. Visitors of social standing from North Carolina, like John Gray Blount's son William in 1814, were "politely offered . . . the use of any books in their library."

Presumably several individuals together started the Cape Fear Library Society. They would pay dues and then purchase books that could be borrowed and read by any member. When the British occupied Wilmington in 1781, Archibald Maclaine took charge of the library. Maclaine was a prominent, if irascible, Scots-Irish attorney and conservative Patriot who had married into the local gentry. No doubt Society members believed that the collection would be safe from the British under his care, and indeed it was, as he turned it over to his Tory son-in-law, George Hooper. But the library was dismantled when the Patriot state militia regained control of Wilmington and took the books from Hooper. This marked the end of North Carolina's first indigenous public library. A few books stamped "Cape Fear Library" in large gold lettering and inscribed "loaned to the Library of St. James Church by A. M. Hooper" still survive in the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The concept of a circulating free library, with books provided by the government and open to all, had been tried in Scotland early in the eighteenth century, and the idea was carried to North Carolina. The Reverend James Hall of Rowan County, for instance, lent books from his home starting in the late 1770s. The nineteenth-century historian William Henry Foote called this a "circulating library," although it would seem more the generosity of a high-minded and well-educated Presbyterian divine who operated a classical school. Samuel Eusebius McCorkle also founded an academy in 1785 near Salisbury. He and some of his


Thyatira parishioners kept what has been called a circulating library. Karl Storch, an experienced and highly respected Lutheran minister and schoolmaster, wrote a friend in 1796 about a subscription "Library Society here in Salisbury consisting of about fifteen members. . . . Their collection of books is good and during the years has become rather large. Every month the members meet to discuss the books they have read." Near Charlotte, the Providence congregation of Presbyterians also operated a library in conjunction with the debating societies so popular with the Scots-Irish. The main contributor to this library was evidently Ezekiel Polk. When the more evangelical New Side Presbyterianism grew in influence and attacked the practice of providing a collection containing "deist" and Enlightenment writings, Polk responded by leaving for Tennessee. In a similar fashion, a nineteenth-century Lutheran pastor, A. L. Gränber, castigated early donations of German books as "a miserable, worthless collection of rationalist or near-rationalist literature . . . better had they been dumped in the ocean."

Possibly other collections, similar to those established by Hall and McCorkle, also declined as Evangelicalism spread. Hall ended by giving much of his collection to the new university in Chapel Hill. Whatever the exact nature and extent of these libraries, their existence was a testimonial to the Scots-Irish regard for education and literate culture and an example for the future. Poor boys growing up in the Presbyterian Piedmont, like Andrew Jackson, were more likely to be taught reading and writing than poor boys like Andrew Johnson in Raleigh.


81. Robert E. Caeden, A Social History of the German Book Trade in America to the Civil War (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1984), 7. Many of the books sent by such luminaries as Goethe were highly academic and hardly seem appropriate for the social conditions in North Carolina. This example illustrates the difficulties of relying upon donated materials rather than thoughtful selection and market forces to procure suitable books.

Only after the turn of the nineteenth century is there evidence of a renewed and spreading interest in libraries.\(^3\)

Does the description of print culture in early North Carolina provide any theoretical guidelines about libraries and book collections? The scarcity of examples and the lack of historical documentation make such prescriptive demonstration unconvincing. Where a particular individual assembled and organized a substantial collection of books, then there was a “library.” The size needed for a “library” as opposed to a mere assemblage of books varied with time, economic and social conditions, and purpose. A school collection, for instance, could be quite small but still considered a library. If an individual opened a personal, church, or school library to public reading or circulation beyond the immediate bounds of his family, then in a very limited sense, a “community” library was established.\(^4\) If arrangements were made for the library to have an institutional life of its own, then it was beginning to operate as a true community library. Such libraries usually circulated books. Other factors certainly affected the establishment and development of community libraries, perhaps most importantly, the availability of books and the example of similar libraries in Scotland and other American colonies.

There could not be large book collections without sufficient funds to buy books or easy transportation to places where one could read books. But people and communities in one area established libraries, while men in another area of comparable size, wealth, and status did not. Women at this time had little influence in creating libraries, although, as the Edenton Tea Party indicates, they did participate in and influence the cultural and political climate to a limited degree. The isolated nature and small size of North Carolina communities certainly retarded the growth of schools, discouraged the spread of literacy, and dampened the growth of public forums for intellectual and print culture. Geographic isolation discouraged individuals and social groups from forming or maintaining viable community libraries. Geography affected transportation and economics, while the poverty of commerce slowed the development of transportation, the growth of population, and the quantity and quality of schools. The provision—or rather, lack of provision—for education obviously affected the cultural level and limited the potential audience for books, which then affected the supply and cost of books. Some religious attitudes promoted education, but, as noted earlier, the rise of Evangelicalism may have curtained the choice and circulation of books.


\(^4\) Although the term “circulating” library was widely used in North Carolina, or at least by the early historians who made some mention of them, modern historians restrict its use to bookstores that loaned books for profit. See, for example, Kaser, A Book for a Sixpence; and Paul Kaufman, Libraries and Their Users: Collected Papers in Library History (London: Library Association, 1969).
The SPG libraries became the prototype for the first public libraries in North Carolina. Books circulated among members of the community, but little effort was made to preserve or augment the collections or to involve the community in the selection of books. Photograph of the SPG seal from the State Archives.

Gender, ethnic origin, and degree of servitude obviously influenced levels of literacy and access to print.

Economics, geography, social and ethnic demographics, population density, gender, cultural attitudes, education, and politics, therefore, all played roles in the creation of libraries but do not appear to have been determining factors for these early community and private libraries. These factors obviously interacted in a variety of ways, which would be difficult to quantify, while their relative importance varied with time and location.\(^5\)

The SPG libraries may be considered the first community or public libraries, as they circulated books among what was considered the public community, but little provision was made for responding to public desires and no provision for augmenting the collections. Other than a state law without teeth, preservation and governance were left to chance. The later Cape Fear Library apparently did make provisions for selecting and increasing its collection and was probably available to any adult white male of local standing. It may be considered the first secular public library in North Carolina, but it disappeared during the Revolution.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, political developments promoted independent printing presses; they in turn probably encouraged the growth of a wider literate culture, but the American Revolution destroyed a number of libraries and set back education. Neither political leaders nor the common people believed in government aid for libraries. At the end of this period, for example, the legislature explicitly refused public funding for schools in Raleigh and New Bern. And although the legislature authorized library societies in Fayetteville and Williamsboro (Granville County) in 1794 and 1799, nothing apparently came of these efforts—a far cry from the successful launching of the community libraries in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1794, and in distant Lexington, Kentucky, the following year.

Print culture was not developed enough in North Carolina during colonial and Revolutionary times to encourage the permanent establishment of either private or community libraries. Despite the wide prevalence of print culture, its roots were shallow. Still, North Carolina, like other southern states from Maryland to Georgia, was much more immersed in print culture and accustomed to printing, buying, storing, and using books and newspapers at the end of the colonial period than at the beginning.

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