
Although much has been written on the efforts of the State Library of North Carolina and other organizations to deliver library services to citizens living in rural areas, little has been written about the availability of library services in northwestern North Carolina. In this exploratory study, some factors affecting the development of library services in Watauga County are considered.

Information gleaned from State Library publications, the local newspaper, works about the Extension Service and the Citizens’ Library Movement, and other historical sources documenting library services in Watauga County not only adds to the scant body of knowledge about the evolution of library development in this county but, more importantly, enriches our understanding of community life in the region during the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, a richer understanding of a community’s history is the happy consequence of researching the history of its library.

Headings:

Libraries and rural areas

Libraries and society -- United States -- History -- 20th century

Public libraries -- North Carolina -- Watauga County

Watauga County (N.C.)
THE WATAUGA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY: A HISTORY

by
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# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... 1  
INTRODUCTION......................................................................................................................... 4  
WATAUGA COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA: A BRIEF HISTORY ................................. 9  
METHODS .................................................................................................................................. 11  
HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: ..................................................................................................... 17  
LIBRARIES IN RURAL AMERICA, THE SOUTH, AND NORTH CAROLINA .......... 17  
  Public Libraries in Rural America, the South, and the Appalachian Region ............ 17  
  Public Libraries in North Carolina .................................................................................... 21  
THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN WATAUGA COUNTY ................................................................. 35  
CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................ 43  
REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................ 45  
  Watauga Democrat Articles ............................................................................................... 50
INTRODUCTION

In his address to librarians gathered in Richmond, Virginia, for the American Library Association’s conference in 1936, North Carolina Governor Frank Porter Graham spoke of the “great need for books and libraries” in the southeastern United States, “where there is, in one sense, a race between the boll weevil and the library” (p. 988). Libraries are fewest, he noted, in the areas where “farm tenancy in the cotton kingdom and along the tobacco road” (p. 988) is worst.¹ Presiding over the American Library Association (ALA) and its meeting in Richmond was Louis Round Wilson, who had left the University of North Carolina four years earlier to serve as dean of the University of Chicago’s library school. By the time ALA met in Richmond, Wilson and other leading librarians had published widely on the South’s profound struggles to expand library services.

That the public library movement progressed more slowly in the rural South than in other areas surprised few; that the President’s Research Committee on Social Trends, preparers of Recent Social Trends in the United States (1933), failed to acknowledge libraries in its broad study of American life dismayed ALA president Gratia Alta Countryman, who asked her fellow librarians “What have we done or not done that this can be so? Why is it that we have not impressed ourselves, as an important and essential institution, upon the governing body or upon intelligent authors and scholars? Is it in the

¹ For more in-depth analysis of this conference’s proceedings, see Preer, J.I. (2004). “This Year—Richmond!” Libraries & Culture 39(2), 137-160.
very nature of our work that it should be so, or is it in ourselves?” (Preer, 2001, 62).
Worse, have librarians collected resources that support scholarly inquiry into many aspects of development and “progress” in both urban and rural communities while relying upon others to chronicle the contributions of libraries to these communities?

Nearly seventy years after the publication of Recent Social Trends, Robert Putnam published Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (2001). As Preer (2001) has observed, “libraries are notably absent” (p. 60) in Putnam’s work. Preer’s lament seems to echo Countryman’s: “Many aspects of the halcyon days of American community described in Bowling Alone also characterized the best of the American public library. That Putnam could miss the connection is a distressing reminder of the way in which libraries are simultaneously ignored and taken for granted” (p. 62).
Reflecting on Putnam’s participation at ALA’s 2001 meeting in San Francisco, immediate past president Nancy Kranich (2001) remarked, “Putnam was taken aback when he discovered the extraordinary level of social capital resident in the room. His picture of America left out a key community institution, one whose history paralleled the findings of his research” (p. 40). As president, Kranich focused on libraries as the cornerstone of democracy (Preer, 60).

This exploratory study of the development of a public library in Watauga County, North Carolina, began with a similar lament within a series of questions (silently) directed at Richard A. Couto, whose Making Democracy Work Better: Mediating Structures, Social Capital, and the Democratic Prospect2 (1999) introduced me to the concept of “social capital” ten years ago. Couto is one of many authors whose writing

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2 The title of Couto’s book clearly builds upon one of Putnam’s earlier works, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (Princeton University Press, 1993).
about Appalachian communities completely overlooks the role of libraries in the region. However, his work merits acknowledgement here because “[i]ts purpose is to bring us back to the local knowledge of people in the civic associations that provide democratic societies the social capital they require” (p. xv). His sources of local knowledge taught Couto that large-scale “public programs were part of the cause of poverty in places like central Appalachia and were responsible for the poor provision and lack of social capital” and led him to an understanding of social capital that resulted in “an analysis of community-based organizations as agents of the democratic prospect of increased communal bonds and social and economic equality” (p. xv). Kranich’s library, “an institution rich in social capital and poised to usher in a new era of civic awareness and community revival,” (40) and Couto’s community-based organizations seem to bear a striking resemblance to one another.

The civic associations and community-based organizations to which Couto refers are mediating structures, synonymous entities one might regard one of two ways: as “alternatives to and protection from government intrusion in individual liberty” or “protection from the savage side of market capitalism and as partners with government in protecting consumers, workers, and others from the market’s excesses and failings” (3). Each of the 23 mediating structures considered in Making Democracy Work Better was connected to the Committee on Religion in America (CORA); that none were libraries led to my realization that few scholars writing in the field of Appalachian Studies have considered the role of libraries and library services in the context of that region’s overall
development. McCook (2000) has shown that the exclusion “of libraries and librarians is not because they do not participate” in community building initiatives, “but because their participation has not been connected or identified as integral to community building by policy analysts and scholars” (p. 81).

Three major surveys of the Appalachian region’s cultural and economic development were published during the period under consideration, the early 1900s through the early 1960s: John C. Campbell’s The Southern Highlander and His Homeland (1921), the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic and Social Problems and Conditions of the Southern Appalachians (1935), Thomas R. Ford’s The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey (1962). Though it continues the scholarly tradition of overlooking the role of libraries in the region’s development, John A. Williams’ Appalachia: A History (2002) is regarded as the most recent major survey of the region (Hay, 2008).

Though the field of Appalachian Studies has largely overlooked the contributions of librarians in Appalachian communities, academic librarians writing about the work of developing general and special collections of works on the Appalachian Region have identified periods during which scholars, novelists, activists, and others have discovered and written about Appalachian communities. Bibliographer Robert F. Munn (1965) has identified four major rediscoveries of the region that help to frame this study of the development of the public library in Watauga County. The first rediscovery was a literary one, popularly recognized as the local color movement, that occurred during Reconstruction and continued well into the Progressive era (p. 11); the second

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3 Historians, anthropologists, and other scholars writing about communities in Appalachia have reasonably devoted much attention to topics such as religious life, education, tourism, public health, and the region’s ever-dwindling supply of natural resources (coal, timber, waterways).
rediscovery, which occurred “shortly after the first and was to some extent stimulated by it” (p. 11), prompted the mission school movement; the third rediscovery occurred in the early 1930s in the coal-producing areas of Kentucky, namely Harlan and Bell counties, when “liberal groups” (p. 11) discovered the plight of the coal miners; the fourth major rediscovery occurred in 1960, when John F. Kennedy’s campaign trail wound through the region (Hay, 2008, p. 47). Munn, writing shortly after President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, could not have predicted the impact of the “War on Poverty” throughout the region.

This study of the development of the public library in Boone, North Carolina, will consider factors which contributed to the library’s growth and stasis from 1903, the year a donation of 122 volumes prompted an announcement in the local newspaper of plans to form the Boone Public Library, to 1962, the year the Watauga County Public Library joined forces with libraries in two neighboring counties to form the Appalachian Regional Library System. More broadly, through an understanding of how a community’s library came to be will come an understanding of the community; that is, the work of unearthing details and evidence of the library’s existence will in turn reveal details about the community members who attempted to sustain the library that, while seemingly minor, will shed light on community connections. Although the library’s connection to the community hinges on the actions of individual members of a community, a historical account of any community can be enriched with an account of how its library came to be.
Watauga County, North Carolina: A Brief History

On the occasion of Watauga County’s centennial, Whitener (1949) dedicated his History of Watauga County, North Carolina: 1849-1949 to “the sturdy pioneers of Watauga County and their descendants.” However, the first discoverers and known inhabitants of what is now Watauga County, a 320-square mile area, are thought to have been Cherokee People, not the northern European white settlers commonly regarded as pioneers. The county seat, Boone, takes its name from legendary pioneer and hunter Daniel Boone.

On January 27, 1849, Watauga County, whose northern and western sides border Tennessee, was formed from parts of Ashe, Caldwell, Wilkes and Yancey counties (Whitener, pp. 33-34). Its topography “resembles a high plateau surrounded by and dotted with mountains rising fifteen hundred to two thousand feet above the valleys” (p. 25); average elevation is between 3000 and 3100 feet above sea level, with the highest peaks rising to nearly 6,000 feet. Watauga and its neighboring counties in the northwestern section of North Carolina are situated in the Blue Ridge Mountain range, which, with other mountain ranges in North Carolina’s western reaches, form part of the larger Appalachian range.

Watauga County is also home to Appalachian State University, which evolved from Watauga Academy, a school founded by brothers Dauphin Disco and Blanford Barnard Dougherty in 1899. “Dauph” and “Blan” and their sister Etta were the children
of D.B. Dougherty, who became a “progressive and respected” (p. 74) resident of Boone and would later donate land and lumber to help develop the school his sons founded. The Dougherty family merits attention, if briefly, because of their connection to R.C. Rivers, Sr., who co-owned the *Watauga Democrat* with D.B. Dougherty from 1889 to 1899 (p. 74); because of the family’s connection to the prominent Councill family—D.B. Dougherty purchased Jordan Councill, Jr.’s old store and remodeled it to serve as the family’s home (p. 74); and because Etta Dougherty later married Richard M. Greene⁴, a merchant whose store housed the Boone Public Library for some time.

In 1903, the same year Rev. William Rutherford Savage donated the volumes that would inspire the formation of a library in Boone, “Watauga Academy became Appalachian Training School and a State institution” (p. 77) dedicated to the training of teachers. In 1925, a new charter resulted in a name change to Appalachian State Normal School and a board of nine trustees appointed by the governor. In 1929, the legislature changed the school’s name to Appalachian State Teachers College (A.S.T.C.), a law which “only legalized a fixed purpose to make a great and respected college” (p. 84). The next name change occurred in 1967, when A.S.T.C. joined the consolidated University of North Carolina system. (Appalachian State University Historical Timelines, “General Events: 1960-1969,” n.d.). The extent to which the Dougherty family directly influenced the development of the public library is unknown, but the University’s impact on Watauga County is deeply felt.

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⁴ According to finding aid to the Brown-Scoggins Collection, UA.5187, University Archives, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C. (See description of Box 12.18.): [http://collections.library.appstate.edu/archives/findingaids/ua5187brownscoggins.html](http://collections.library.appstate.edu/archives/findingaids/ua5187brownscoggins.html)
**METHODS**

Historical research methods were used to gather the information necessary to present as accurate an account of the evolution of library services that occurred in Watauga County from the early 1900s to the 1960s. The nature of historical research is such that analysis and data discovery almost go hand in hand, with repeated information gathering episodes distinguishable only by the nature of the materials being searched. Although the “detective” identity one nearly assumes during the process of historical research is alluring (at first), it is also a risky venture (which may, in fact, add to its appeal): the documents and artifacts historians use as sources can be difficult to interpret, can omit information, can be inauthentic, or may simply not exist (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 160). Thus, researchers who rely solely upon documentary evidence “must know quite a bit about the social context in which it was created” (p.160). As Carmichael (1991) warned in his appeal for further study of southern library history, a “characterization of the historical as a literary or ‘soft’ methodology belies its true complexity” (p. 100) and, one might add, difficulty.

A clear limitation of this methodology is its exclusion of human subjects. Interview transcripts could further enrich the study of library services in the area, and good questions could elicit answers that confirm or challenge the accuracy of information gathered from documents. Attempts to locate references to libraries in transcripts of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Appalachian Oral History Project and the
Southern Oral History Project were not fruitful. Thus, consulting traditional sources of historical information—organizational records, manuscript collections, newspapers, census records, and historical surveys—was necessary to understand the landscape of library services available in Watauga County.

Historical research drew upon existing documents available through the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill libraries, especially the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library; the State Library and State Archives of North Carolina; Carol Grotnes Belk Library at Appalachian State University; and public libraries in the county. Although some resources, especially secondary sources such as journal articles, were available electronically, this research required multiple trips to Boone, Chapel Hill, and Raleigh, North Carolina. Traditional strategies, such as examining footnotes and works cited in secondary sources and searching selected historical sources, yielded further citations; through analysis of those works and the materials cited therein, a clearer sense of the true reach of the university extension service, the Citizen’s Library Movement, the WPA, and the North Carolina Library Commission’s efforts to deliver library services to the region emerged.

The most helpful resource consulted, the *Watauga Democrat*, was also the least efficient to search. Though it has been microfilmed, it has not been indexed, much less digitized, and certain issues appear on reels available in Watauga County but not on reels delivered via Interlibrary Loan from other North Carolina lending institutions. From 1902 through much of 1922, the Democrat was a four-page weekly paper; citing higher demand, it expanded operations in early fall of 1922. In a series of announcements published in its own pages, *Democrat* readers learned about the purchase of a much
larger printer, the move to a larger space, and an increase to eight pages. For regular

*Democrat* readers, their local paper was not only a source of information about local and county events, but also state, national, and world affairs. As Lentz (2001) has shown,

The rugged mountain terrain may have delayed the coming of modern, hard surfaced roads in Avery and Watauga counties in the first two or three decades of the 20th century, but the supposed isolation of the mountains did not shelter its people from the modern worries of unstable governments, imperialism, or world war. In national affairs both great and small, the readers of the *Avery Advocate* and *Watauga Democrat* were as well informed as any other people in small town, rural America who bothered to read the newspapers. (p. 127)

Indeed, during the early 1900s, *Democrat* readers could expect a front page devoted to reports of national and state significance while advertisements for automobiles (and service stations), radios, and men’s suiting appeared throughout the paper alongside movie listings, announcements of new banks, and editorials on topics including mail service to railroads to rural electrification.

Though a few short stories, announcements, or editorials may have escaped notice, an attempt was made to identify all pieces about the Boone Public Library printed in the *Democrat* during the years 1902 through 1925 and about its successor, the Watauga County Public Library (WCPL), printed during the late 1930s and in 1962, the year the WCPL joined the public libraries in neighboring Ashe and Wilkes counties to form the Appalachian Regional Library System. Of course, the decision to search 25 years of the Democrat was not without its frustrating consequences, namely, little time and resources remained that could have been applied to examining the unprocessed records of the North Carolina State Library.

Branson’s (1962) analysis of stories and editorials appearing in five North Carolina newspapers sheds light on how libraries in five cities used the newspaper to
publicize activities and events. Although her study considers what a newspaper reader “is exposed to from all sources—librarians, newspaper staff writers, private citizens, and any other persons who write on the subject for whatever reasons” (p. iii), its description of the types of stories published is also valuable to researchers of any town’s library history. In Branson’s analysis, regular news includes schedules and statistics, information and follow-up articles about programs, and pieces on the condition or expansion of physical facilities; feature news and editorials cover individual libraries or patrons and the practical advantages of reading, such as relaxation and self-betterment. Branson observed a pattern of poor coverage of library budgets and, lamenting the noticeable lack of coverage of the activities of librarians and boards of trustees, recommended publicizing information such as

reports about the head librarian and his duties, the department heads and how they contribute to the total library organization, how much power the board of trustees has and how the board is chosen, and what the special functions of the county commissioners are in reference to libraries. (p. 73)

For researchers who are heavily dependent on the local newspaper for information about a community’s library, the publication of such information in newspapers would be most welcome.

Whether Branson would have praised aspects of the relationship between the Democrat and the library community in Watauga County cannot be known. Ultimately, she advised

A program of publicity making known all phases of library service and organization should be the ideal of every public library. Though it may be impossible for many libraries to attain a program of complete coverage in the press, they should strive to do as much as they can rather than to drift along without trying to do anything. The newspaper is the ideal medium for library publicity, and the library should take full advantage of it. (pp. 77-78)
A cursory review of *Democrat* coverage of the fledgling Boone Public Library and its successor, the Watauga County Public Library, suggests those responsible for maintaining library collections for residents of Boone and Watauga County took advantage of the newspaper as a medium for publicity, if inconsistently. Periods of seemingly sparse coverage may have several causes: In some cases, instances of missing issues on microfilm made it impossible to know whether follow-up articles were published in subsequent issues; those responsible for maintaining the library collection may have experienced illness or were forced to prioritize responsibilities to the community, especially during World War I; also, newspaper accounts suggest the Boone Public Library was housed in a succession of residential and commercial spaces and that the Watauga County Public Library experienced several moves as well before occupying space in a W.P.A. structure intended for county government.

Another resource, the North Carolina Library Commission (NCLC) newsletter, sheds light on the activities of this organization on behalf of library development across the state. Unfortunately, the time spent examining an eighteen-year run of this monthly publication did not yield much information about the WCPL other than a single announcement about its bookmobile and the occasional personnel announcement. In the run examined in the State Library of North Carolina’s Government & Heritage Library, there was but one issue published in the years 1938 (May) and 1939. Since it seems unlikely that the newsletter all but ceased publication in those two years, one is left wondering if the formation of the WCPL in September of 1938 and its activities rated any mention in the newsletter issues missing from the run examined, if there was a pattern of non-communication between the librarian in Watauga County and the North Carolina
Library Commission, or if some other factors influenced under-reporting of Watauga County Library news when many other western counties enjoyed publicity, such as it was, in the newsletter.

Although newspapers, newsletters, and reports of the North Carolina Library Commission have shed light—to varying degrees—on the development of the Boone Public Library and the Watauga County Public Library, the inability to identify references to these libraries in oral history transcripts, diaries, and other records or to access board meeting minutes raises difficult questions about the regard librarians have for the importance of their work. If such records exist but are not easily discoverable, archivists must also be held accountable. If “the establishment of a public library is an index of community wealth, self-confidence, and literacy” (Valentine, 1996b, p. 113), librarians and archivists can better serve both the public and the profession by making documentary evidence of the establishment of public libraries more readily accessible. Put simply, “professional history gives us a better understanding of what we do and why we do it” (Carmichael, 1991, p. 99). A thorough examination of causes and effects of the profession’s seeming low regard for its own history does not belong here, but the connection Carmichael observed between “a lack of self-knowledge” and “the low professional self-esteem and image problems with which service professions have been plagued” (p. 99) deserves further consideration.
**HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:**

**LIBRARIES IN RURAL AMERICA, THE SOUTH, AND NORTH CAROLINA**

The work of identifying, compiling, and describing the resources that expand our knowledge of library development in Watauga County during this time period begins with a review of the literature on the history of libraries in the United States, in the South, and in North Carolina. The available literature points to a need for more research on library services in rural areas across the United States and for a more nuanced understanding of the factors that contributed to the existence of libraries in North Carolina’s northwestern counties.

Operating loosely within a geographical framework, literature that addresses rural library development broadly will be considered first, followed by works on library services in the southeast and southern uplands (Appalachia). The works that address library services in the Appalachian region also touch upon library development in western North Carolina. A review of literature specific to North Carolina follows the review of literature dealing with public libraries in the South and the Appalachian region and supports analysis of references to the Boone Public Library and its successor, the Watauga County Public Library.

**Public Libraries in Rural America, the South, and the Appalachian Region**

Noting that the “majority of public libraries established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were located in rural communities” (p. 88), Marcum quite
reasonably asks why so little has been written about them. \(^5\) Using the Hagerstown, Maryland, Public Library as a case study, Marcum (1991) considers the intersection of public library history, rural librarianship, and the development of the profession of librarianship. Her review of shifting approaches to public library history is especially helpful: Whereas Shera and Ditzion adopted a progressive interpretation of library history which held that “civic-minded philanthropists” created public libraries “so that the common people could educate and improve themselves” (p. 89), Garrison, Harris and DuMont viewed public libraries “as a form of social control or force for cultural hegemony” (p. 89), and Garrison linked the “effort at social control to the feminization of the profession” (p. 89). As Marcum notes, revisionist historians have called into question the motives of the founders of these libraries, and her discussion of their ideas is a welcome and encouraging reminder to examine the real impact of library services in western North Carolina communities.

Evelyn Coskey’s “Public Library Service in the Southern Appalachian Region: An Overview” appeared in a special issue of Library Trends focused on library services and programs to the disadvantaged. Writing in 1971, Coskey presented “geographical, economic, and sociological” (p. 242) factors that influenced the development of public libraries in the southern Appalachians: the “thrifty, Bible-reading” nature of the “Scotch-Irish” people who settled the area and “who placed more emphasis on religion than on formal education” (Coskey, 1971, p. 241); the nature of the lives of the region’s inhabitants, “people who had to work from dawn to dark in order to survive [and] were too tired to have any desire for books” (p. 242); the influence of the Civil War; and local

politics. An overview of the development of public library services in the southern Appalachian region precedes a state-by-state assessment. Thus, the section devoted to library development in North Carolina’s twenty-four Appalachian counties is limited to allow room for brief sections on Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama.

In 1945, twenty Appalachian counties in North Carolina had “some form of library service” (p. 248). By 1971, all of the state’s Appalachian counties were served by public libraries and the number of regional systems had doubled to four with a fifth system serving one Appalachian county and several bordering counties. State financial aid for library services, federal aid from Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) and “Appalachian funds” (p. 249), “a lively state library program” (p. 249), and the state’s “long-time emphasis on education” (p. 248) combined to create a favorable climate for the continued development of library services in North Carolina. Coskey had little room to address the development of library services in western North Carolina prior to 1945, to predict the continued allocation of federal aid in the form of “Appalachian funds” that could be used to support those libraries after 1971, or to acknowledge more than a few specific libraries or library systems in North Carolina’s Appalachian counties. Public library service, she observed, “is growing steadily and has a tremendous potential for further growth” (p. 254). Though the article is a generally helpful introduction to the landscape of library services in the region at the time it was written, Coskey’s simplistic portrayal of mountain people as provincial, prone to feuding, and monolithically white and Protestant is difficult to overlook.
With the publication of *Library/Media Studies in Appalachia: An Overview*, Newman (1972) expanded upon Coskey’s article-length overview. In this study, Newman attempted to

establish the human and historical overview of Appalachia necessary for such present and future library program development; to broadly delineate significant factors and trends influencing services in public, school, and academic library or media services through existing models; and to thereby suggest alternatives, evaluation, and blind spots with the ultimate objective of improving outreach and the human condition throughout the area... (p.5)

Newman does introduce new or different points about library services in the Appalachian region and discuss factors affecting access to library services in the Appalachian region at greater length than does Coskey. However, both Newman and the publisher of this study, Appalachian State University (located in Watauga County, N.C.), merely present another broad overview of the Appalachian region when their geographic location afforded them the opportunity to delve more deeply into the experience of library services in western North Carolina. That is, Newman’s overview contains but a snippet of the story of library services in North Carolina’s northwestern communities.⁶

As I searched broadly for material on libraries in the southern Appalachian region, I encountered a number of articles on the development of regional collections in the area. Such collections are usually housed in academic libraries, exist to support research and scholarship in the field of Appalachian Studies⁷, and occasionally attract family historians. Hay (2006, 2008), Hyde (2008), Munn (1966) and others have written about the development of regional collections at such repositories, but just as “no comprehensible bibliographic roadmap exists” (Hay, 2006, p. 1469) for the significant

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⁷ Scholarship in the fields of anthropology, English, geography, history, music, political science, sociology and religious studies contributes to the broader field of Appalachian Studies.
research materials scattered across Appalachia, there appears to be no comprehensive source on libraries in the western, much less northwestern, reaches of North Carolina. High (1977) attributed the existence of only a “few works which compare and evaluate library development on a statewide basis” to “the dearth of published materials at the grassroots level from which one could build a comparative history” (p. 241). Because our knowledge about the development of libraries and library services in western North Carolina during the late 1800s and early- to mid-1900s is not yet contained within a single source, or even several sources, it is difficult to identify gaps in the knowledge as well as areas that merit further inquiry.

**Public Libraries in North Carolina**

Libraries existed in North Carolina during the colonial period, and the General Assembly incorporated at least thirty-two library societies—whose members were men who paid an annual fee to obtain books that circulated among themselves—between 1794 and 1848 (Mitchell, 1983, p. 2). Smithsonian Institution Librarian Charles C. Jewett’s enumeration of libraries in North Carolina, published in 1851, included the 1,500 volumes held in the Valle Crucis Mission School Library (in Watauga County), the libraries at University of North Carolina (nearly 12,000 volumes), the State Library in Raleigh (3,000 volumes), and several college and university libraries (Mitchell, 1983, p. 2). North Carolina boasts a long, if tumultuous, library history, marked in 2012 by the State Library’s bicentennial celebration. Yet, the evidence of the existence and activity of North Carolina’s many libraries is scattered throughout newspapers, newsletters, archival materials, various reports, oral tradition, and other formats. It is tempting to compare the many snippets of information on libraries in the state’s northwestern reaches to elements
of a story that disappear with each re-telling. The North Carolina Federation of Women’s
Clubs, traveling libraries, and the North Carolina Library Commission figure prominently
at first; the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and county government make later
appearances; and several additional characters, such as retired Massachusetts Institute of
Technology professor Charles Hallett Wing, inspire curiosity.

In 1887, retired Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Charles Hallett
Wing opened the Good-Will Free Library in the mountain community of Ledger, in
libraries of 300 or more books each” that called North Carolina home in 1886 were
school, college, or university libraries (Mitchell, 1983, p. 3), Wing’s free, public library
was an exceptional case. However, the expansion of library services across the state
during the second half of the nineteenth century did not seem to impress Louis Round
Wilson, who, in 1928, lamented the absence of a “clearly defined, well-organized library
movement in the South” (Mitchell, 1983, p. 4) in the late nineteenth century.

Yet, such movement did begin to occur in the early 1900s (Mitchell, 1983, p. 4),
and the efforts to sustain development of library services in North Carolina from the early
1900s to the 1960s are described in many publications. Writing in 1923, Louis Round
Wilson enlightened readers of The Library Journal to the status of library development in
North Carolina. His article contained few references to areas in western North Carolina
other than Asheville, but he did briefly describe the University Extension Division
established by the University of North Carolina, “the first state university in the South to
establish a university extension division and carry its service to all quarters of the state”
(emphasis added, p. 23). To some extent, exploring Louis Round Wilson’s Papers and the
Records of the Office of the University Librarian\(^8\) did result in a somewhat clearer, if still incomplete, understanding of the *quarters* to which Wilson referred. According to a Library Extension Service report, the Extension department served six towns in Watauga County and 64 individuals received materials from the extension service in the year 1930-1931.\(^9\)

Gunn’s (1987) study of the history of library extension at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill shows that library extension services were popular in the early twentieth century, but by the early 1950s, there was concern that the extension service in North Carolina was “impeding the progress of public (and school) libraries by supplying materials that ought to be available from them” (p. 43) and fear “that service to students on campus would suffer at the hands of service to individuals in the state” (p. 47). By 1958, the Extension Service was subsumed entirely by the new Interlibrary Center.

Several publications describe traveling libraries in use in rural areas and the history of bookmobile service in North Carolina and beyond\(^10\). The *Seventh Report of the North Carolina Library Commission* (1922) lists Boone as a Traveling Library Station during the summer school session (p. 15). The report suggests cooperation between the North Carolina Library Commission and the State Department of Public Instruction, which requested that traveling libraries be sent to all the summer schools; the State Board of Education’s appropriation, in the spring of 1922, of “one thousand dollars for

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supplementary books to be sent to the summer schools” (p. 11) seems to have funded this request in part if not fully. In 1922, the North Carolina Library Commission report suggested it maintained a highly sought-after but small collection of materials for rural schools:

The demand for school traveling libraries is far in excess of the supply. During the winter months, there are from fifty to sixty applications on file. Most of these cannot be filled. Special collections on agriculture which are loaned for the school term, have been very popular with teachers of agriculture. Every effort is made to meet the book needs of rural teachers through traveling libraries, debates, declamations, pageants, educational books, and stories to tell. (p. 9)

Road conditions in Watauga County were such that travel during the winter months was a difficult, if not impossible, proposition. Because the report did not include a list of applications that were filled (it could not have been a very long list if “most” of the “fifty to sixty applications” were denied), it is unclear whether any schools in Watauga County received a traveling library. In a letter published in the News & Observer on June 29, 1913, Louis Round Wilson described “a series of Extension Bulletins…, two numbers of which have been devoted to the professional training of teachers on secondary schools and to the needs of the thousands of pupils in both primary and secondary schools who participate in declaratory, oratorical, and literary societies.” The letter suggests the Extension service was working to meet the needs of rural teachers as early as 1913; the extent to which its efforts overlapped those of the North Carolina Library Commission, of which Wilson served as Chairman from its founding in 1909 until 1916 (Valentine, 1996a, p. 114), is also unclear.

Two other social surveys published shortly after Recent Social Trends do acknowledge the work of librarians: Howard Odum’s Southern Regions of the United States (1936) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) survey, Economic and
Social Problems of the Southern Appalachians (1935). Published a year after Gratia Countryman voiced her disappointment about the notable absence of libraries in Recent Social Trends, the USDA survey bears the curious distinction of reporting on library activity in a region that “has always served as ‘the South’s South’ (Reed, 1986, p. 42)” (Inscoe, 2002, p. 369). Carmichael (1992) has credited Odum’s decision “to include library development as a factor to be considered in his massive regional study” (p. 38) to the powers of persuasion exerted by Tommie Dora Barker, the American Library Association’s Regional Field Agent for the South from 1930 to 1936. Attributed to Odum is this assessment of library movement in the South: “Perhaps no deficiency in the Southeast is more marked than its lack of books and libraries and the consequent absence of reading habits” (Valentine, 1996, p. 113). Progress was slow, but it was being reported.

In his assessment of library facilities and services in Appalachia in the 1930s, Garnett (1935), who is credited as compiler of the USDA survey’s section on Social Conditions and Social Organizations, also acknowledges North Carolina. Public school libraries in North Carolina had 150 books per 100 enrolled students, whereas Virginia reported 160 books per 100 students (p. 166). Furthermore, Garnett’s description of resources available to public libraries in Appalachia suggests patrons in western North Carolina benefited from “the book-lending service of the extension division of the State university” (p. 166), which supplemented public library resources in each state except Kentucky, and that a State central library agency rendered a similar service to public libraries in each state except West Virginia (Garnett, 1935, p. 166).
Multiple works describe the Citizens’ Library Movement (CLM) as an “important force behind public library development in the state” (Smiley, 1971, p. 138). In Library Development in North Carolina Before 1930, Smiley acknowledges multiple public libraries in selected areas of western North Carolina; that none are found in the state’s northwestern reaches is consistent with the claim put forth in the Handbook of the Citizens’ Library Movement that no public library service existed in the northwestern counties (North Carolina Library Association, 1928, p.13). In his study of the role of philanthropy in the development of public libraries in North Carolina, Valentine (1996b) briefly noted the CLM’s influence on library development in 1941, when some public libraries received state appropriations while CLM “was also influential in starting a few public libraries and perhaps in stimulating local philanthropy” (p.284). According to von Oesen (1952), who examined the impact of WPA assistance on access to library services, the CLM “form[ed] the backbone of citizen support” in the struggle to obtain supplementary state funds from the North Carolina General Assembly during the WPA years.

Two more works on the Citizens’ Library Movement in North Carolina, Eury’s (1951) master’s thesis and Powell’s (1954) do not specifically reference efforts to extend aid to Watauga County, but do give a sense of the organization’s reach. Powell’s description of CLM’s efforts to obtain state aid for libraries suggests the organization was well-organized and quite cognizant of the challenges ahead:

It was in 1936 that the Citizens’ Library Movement was first reported as advocating and promoting a request for state aid for libraries from the 1937 General Assembly. A four-page folder on the subject of state aid for libraries presented the matter briefly but graphically. A map of North Carolina was included indicating, county by county, the extent of library service available. Subsequently, a bill was introduced into the General Assembly providing for the
appropriation of $150,000 annually to be used ‘for promoting, aiding and equalizing public library service in North Carolina.’ When the bill was finally passed in March, 1937, however, the section appropriating funds had been deleted. It did, nevertheless, authorize the Library Commission to accept and administer any money appropriated or granted to it, separate from the general Library Commission fund, for providing and equalizing public library service in the state, by the Federal government or from other sources. Whether or not the lawmakers had an idea that the Citizens’ Library Movement might become a fund-raising organization and thus supply the missing money, we do not know. (p. 38)

Eury’s assessment of the state of library service is all too familiar:

In small communities the total library funds were too insignificant to permit adequate book collections and to employ trained librarians. The library hours were short, the quarters either donated or rented, the book collection small and with many of them old and worn out, and there was a continual financial struggle. Some libraries barely existed through the year, giving public library service of a sort but not measuring up to the service they should perform. Often they were kept open by some self-sacrificing person who realized the need of such an institution to the community. (p. 10)

Though Eury may as well be describing periods of inactivity in the history of the Boone Public Library’s development, arguably library inequalities within the state were not as distressing as the fact that North Carolina boasted fewer public libraries than any state: “In the matter of public libraries,” the Goldsboro News declared November 14, 1938 (p.8), “we can’t even thank God for South Carolina” (p.10). The intricacies of the relationship between the CLM, the North Carolina Library Commission, the university extension service, and others involved cannot be considered here, but their efforts to obtain continually increasing state aid through the 1940s were effective.

Following the passage of the 1937 bill, the North Carolina Library Commission (1938) announced plans to request $300,000 for each year of the biennium 1939-1941. The Citizens’ Library Movement and the North Carolina Library Association concurred that this amount would “permit every county to share in the fund at approximately $0.09
per capita (p. 6). In 1939, the Budget Commission and the Joint Appropriations Committee heard the request but made no appropriation (1940, p. 7). A list of “[r]esults which would be achieved from State Aid for Public Libraries” (p. 8) accompanied the Commission’s announcement of its plans to request the necessary funds at the next meeting of the General Assembly:

1. Equalization of library service to reach all the people.
2. Improved and enlarged book collections, especially books of information.
4. Bookmobiles to distribute books to all rural sections.
5. Trained librarians in charge to direct and implement the service.
6. Good magazines to help people keep informed and up-to-date.
7. Books for institutions, hospitals, and prison camps. (p. 8)

An announcement in the January 13, 1938 issue of the Democrat of a dance to raise “funds to resume operation of the WPA book-truck in Ashe, Alleghany and Watauga counties” (p. 1) reminded readers that

this is the only regional WPA bookmobile in the south and that its benefit to this section that has rather limited library facilities was clearly demonstrated last summer when a large number of people in all parts of the three counties took advantage of the opportunity to get and read good books. (p. 1)

Whether the NCLC both administered WPA funds in accordance with the 1937 State Aid bill and supplied books to be loaned through the bookmobile service is not readily apparent; that Watauga County residents benefited from state- and federal programs to provide library services in 1937 at a time when library services were unevenly distributed across the state is quite clear.

The success of the dance fundraiser and the outcomes of other fundraisers, if any occurred, are unknown, but a story published May 26, 1938 about the WPA Educational Program again stated
This district has the distinction of having the only regional WPA book truck in the south,…

The regional bookmobile is stationed here at West Jefferson and through the cooperation of the public libraries distributes books in Ashe, Alleghany, and Watauga counties. (p. 1)

Nearly a year later, on May 11, 1939, the “county library committee” announced the arrival of a bookmobile scheduled for the following Tuesday, May 16.

The bookmobile is loaned to the county by the NCLC and is to be managed by the WPA Watauga county library project. The purpose of the bookmobile is to bring the books to you…

There is no cost whatever to borrow as many books as you please and the bookmobile will be back two weeks from the date borrowed to bring more books and to get the ones you have read.

The bookmobile comes equipped with 2,200 new books. There are books for old and young – books for everyone. (p. 1)

Several weeks after the WPA Bookmobile returned to Watauga County, the Democrat reported its popularity was such that

the problem now seems to be to have enough books to carry out the rounds as originally planned for the truck. The last trip the bookmobile had little but magazines to offer, and those were gladly taken. Today the vehicle is to cover a route on which 300 volumes had been distributed last week, and they will be collected and taken to other neighborhoods. (1939, June 1, p. 1)

Reports of the WPA bookmobile’s activity in Watauga County during the late 1930s challenge later accounts of the arrival of bookmobile service to Watauga County, which give 1949 as the year Watauga County acquired its bookmobile. According to a news item in the North Carolina Library Commission newsletter,

The Watauga County Bookmobile, which was in Raleigh awaiting delivery, was put on display on the Capitol grounds on February 8. It was inspected by a number of the members of the General Assembly, as well as by other interested citizens and just-plain-passers-by, and spoke, one can feel sure, its own persuasive word for libraries and aid to libraries. (Beal, p. 2)

Gaffney (1984) also gives 1949 as the date Watauga County acquired its bookmobile:
The first bookmobile, a panel truck, was purchased in 1949. This served the purpose, but had many disadvantages.

Mrs. Mary Brown became the first, and up to now, the only bookmobile librarian. Her 8 routes included stops at community stores, post offices, schools, and a number of private homes. She made a total of 40 stops each month in remote rural areas. (p. 17)

In a *Democrat* feature story on the county bookmobile, Nicholson (2002) reported,

The county’s bookmobile service dates back to 1949. Mary Brown drove the routes two days a week for 37 years, working two other days per week at the library.

She remembers the first bookmobile, a 1948 Chevrolet with panels that had to be opened on the side to reveal the bookshelves.

Brown delivered to schools as well as homes, and Brown went through three different bookmobiles during her career. She would deliver medicine to those on the route who called with the request.

Also, according to Knerr’s (1978) survey of library services in Ashe, Watauga, and Wilkes Counties,

The Watauga County Public Library was organized in the late 1930’s and was first housed in a walk-through store on King Street. In 1946 the library was moved to one room in the Courthouse Annex and additional space was acquired by removing walls. The first bookmobile was purchased in 1949. (p. 24)

Indeed, appropriating funds to purchase a bookmobile for county-wide use and making use of a bookmobile provided by the WPA are distinctly different, but the absence of any reference to bookmobile service prior to 1949 in the NCLC newsletter and in works prepared by residents of Watauga County is notable. State Aid for libraries would have its advantages, especially after WPA programs ended; without WPA assistance, the library landscape in Watauga County may indeed have been quite desolate during the late 1930s. However, the omission obscures a vital aspect of WPA involvement in Watauga County during a time when the NCLC and other key organizations were actively campaigning for State Aid.

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11 The Appalachian Regional Library is listed as Knerr’s co-author.
With the passage of the bill for state aid in 1941 and the appropriation of $100,000 for each year of the biennium 1941-1943, North Carolina became “the first state in the South East [sic] to provide funds for improved library service” (Moore, 1948, p. 13). To receive aid in the amount of $900 each year of the biennium, a county was “expected to develop a plan for county-wide service within the county, considering the number of people to be served, the wealth of the county, the book collections and the best means of reaching the most people with the money available” (1942, p. 5). Twenty-four counties did not participate; their allotment was reallocated, so the remaining seventy-six counties received an additional $398.35 “for the purchase of books” (p. 5). No list of the non-participating counties appears in the seventeenth report of the North Carolina Library Commission (1942), so it is not immediately apparent that Watauga County received as much as $1298.35 to use for “the purchase of books, supplies to process those books, the purchase and running expenses of a bookmobile, the salary of a trained librarian and the extension of library service” (p. 6). However, the report did include Watauga County in a list of counties where “the college librarian, released from college duties one day a week, aided the public library program” (p. 7). The nature of work conducted by the college librarians in these counties—Franklin, Hertford, Harnett, Jackson, and Watauga—suggests they were among the seventy-six participants, and that Watauga County used the state allocation to purchase books recommended by the college librarian and establish book stations on bookmobile routes.

The General Assembly continued to increase the annual appropriation through the 1940s, to $125,000 in 1943 and to $175,000 in 1945 (Moore, p. 15). A map showing 1944 expenditures per capita for North Carolina Public Libraries indicates Watauga
County is sharing in state aid funds and enjoys anywhere from $0.10 to $0.30 cents per capita (1944, p. 4). A map showing book stock per capita for North Carolina public libraries indicates Watauga County’s library offered less than one-half book per capita (p. 6). Statistics gathered from reports submitted to the State Library indicate Watauga County had a population of 18,114; its library held 2,410 volumes and was open 20 hours per week during the winter season; of its annual budget of $2,577.63, $443 came from county appropriation, $1,484.35 came from the state, and the source of the remaining $650.23 is unknown.

In 1947, the General Assembly increased the State Aid fund to $275,000 for each year of the biennium 1947-1949. (1948, p. 7). Each county was offered $2500, but the non-participation of 10 counties resulted in a reallocation; 90 counties received $2962 (p. 7). The Watauga County Public Library’s holdings increased to 5,461 volumes; income grew to $3,751 and included a local appropriation of $100, and a county appropriation of $400. According to Beal (1948), 3,292,719 people living in North Carolina had access to 1,585,730 books in 1947, or less than one-half book per capita. According to a Democrat story published August 23, 1962 (shortly after the formation of the Appalachian Regional Library System), the Watauga County Public Library held 10,711 books. Census figures reported by the State Library of North Carolina indicate Watauga County’s population was 17,529 in 1960. Thus, WCPL was offering roughly more than one-half book per capita to its devoted patrons. Gaddy’s (1962) feature on the Watauga County Public Library bears a headline, “County Library’s Circulation Record Called ‘Astounding,’” that does little to cue the reader to the significance of the story it tells:
The oil soaked floors give a scent of the “ancients,” as is the case in most public buildings. But the smell of age fades away as the reader enters the room of the much burdened book shelves [sic] known to Watauga County as “The Library.”

The Library is small, compared with most…. Yet, one most important factor is evident from the data compiled during the past year by head librarian Homer F. Brown. It is, in his words, “the amazing circulation record.”

While the library has only 10,711 books (or half book per person in the county), the circulation for the one year period ended July 30 was 74,427 (or three books per person in the county).

“To some people,” Brown said, “this may not have meaning. But when one realizes that the national average is four books to each person and the Southeast average is 1.1 books, the 3.3 average in Watauga County is remarkable.”

… In 1938, when the library was begun in Boone, a collection of only 200 books was available to the people of Watauga County. The library, for a time stagnant, slowly grew, gaining momentum over the years.

And today its staff of three, its circulation of nearly 75,000 per year and its “ancient scented” oil soaked floors give evidence of intellectual activity in so-called Hillbilly land. (p. 2)

Setting aside the inaccuracies reported about the library’s holdings and the inactivity it experienced in 1938 (when the WPA was actively involved in a program of library service in Watauga County), one first notices the description of the library’s size, its “much burdened” shelves, and its oil soaked floors; from this story of a small library that has grown steadily but continues to struggle to meet patron demand for the materials emerges a sense that library is a vital member of a community that has only recently shed its “lost provinces” stigma.

Though an indispensable resource during the first stages of research, closer analysis of entries in Williams’ (2004) four-part bibliography indicates little material has been published on the northwestern counties.\textsuperscript{12} A cursory review of entries supports High’s (1977) observation, “The history of libraries and librarianship in the state of North

Carolina remains largely the province of master’s theses. As a result, knowledge of the profession’s origins and development in this particular state is mainly confined to treatises on individual libraries” (p. 241). Parts I and II include “general historical works about North Carolina public libraries” (2004a, para. 4) as well as histories of public libraries from most of North Carolina’s 100 counties; Part III includes references to general works on the state’s library history and to sources on its college, university, and community college libraries (2004c, para. 1); and Part IV covers archival and manuscript collections, including personal papers of certain North Carolina librarians, library educators, and benefactors (2004d, para. 1). Williams’ bibliography, a significant contribution to the study of North Carolina library history that served as a roadmap to the discovery of resources on libraries in the state’s western counties, necessarily “omits clipping file items, annual reports, newsletters, and handbooks that many libraries have published” (p. 50). It is hoped that the following description and analysis of those excluded materials—reports, clipping files and news stories, and newsletters—will enrich our understanding of library development in Watauga County and the communities served.
THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN WATAUGA COUNTY

Hay’s (2008) observations about the difficulty of tracking down resources on any given topic related to Appalachia (perhaps inexplicably) guided the decision to impose a loose geographic arrangement upon the works described above:

Due to its history as a cultural and physiographical region but not a political one (despite [the Appalachian Regional Commission’s] political bias), Appalachia is decentralized and characterized, like its topography, ecology, flora and fauna, by great diversity. So is the region’s documentation scattered across the region, nation, and the world. (p. 60)

Not surprisingly, documentation on the development of a single, small, public library in a section of North Carolina that is not only rural but also somewhat contained by high peaks was scattered among reports, clippings, newsletters, newspaper accounts, and archival materials that were housed at four different institutions: Appalachian State University’s Carol Grotnes Belk Library & Information Commons; the Watauga County Public Library in Boone and its Western Watauga Branch in Sugar Grove; the State Library and State Archives of North Carolina in Raleigh; and the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From this point, description and analysis of materials containing references to the Boone Public Library and its successor, the Watauga County Public Library, will proceed somewhat chronologically.

The earliest reference to a public library in Watauga County appeared in an editorial with the headline, “The Public Library,” on December 3, 1903:

It has been our pleasure to examine hurriedly the first installment of books for the public library at Boone, sent by the Rev. W.R. Savage, of Blowing Rock. There
are 122 volumes, neatly bound and are all by our choicest authors, and contain a vast amount of information that is at your disposal for the asking, for the present, at least. This is indeed a very handsome and valuable gift from Mr. Savage, and now it is the duty of our people to do all they can to carry on the work begun by this good man by contributing as many volumes as possible to the library…. For the present the library will be kept at the residence of Mrs. Alice Councill for the convenience of Mrs. Boyden, the Librarian, but early in the spring next rooms will be fitted up for its accommodation… The rules, regulations, etc. to govern it will be published later but in the mean time go to work for this noble undertaking which can be made, our schools accepting [sic], the most beneficial of anything we could possibly put within the reach of our people. Mrs. Boyden extends a general invitation to all to call and examine the books. (p. 2)

Reverend William Rutherford Savage was an Episcopal priest who arrived in Blowing Rock, a community in southern Watauga County, in September, 1902 (Arthur, 1915, p. 85). Savage was born October 20, 1854, in Pass Christian, Mississippi, and educated at the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Va. (p. 217). Newspaper accounts of his service were generally glowing. As Arthur reported, “He is a worthy successor to the late Rev. W.W. Skiles of Valle Crucis fame. In the words of Rev. Edgar Tufts, Mr. Savage has done more than any other to create a fraternal feeling among all the denominations of the mountains” (p. 217). A reference to George W. Councill’s involvement in the construction of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church (p. 113) in Boone suggests Mrs. Alice M. Bostwick Councill, her husband Dr. William B. Councill, and her daughter, Margaret Boyden, were Episcopalian.

On February 4, 1904, the publication of a request from W.A. Stanbury, Librarian at Appalachian Training School, raises questions about the relationship, if any, between the Training School’s library and the fledgling town library and suggests competition for acquisitions:

One practically new feature of the school is the Library and Reading Room. We have a small number of well-selected books and good papers and magazines and
these are accessible to the students every afternoon from 3:30 to 4:30. The greater portion of the student body is anxious to take advantage of these opportunities, but we are greatly in need of more books. In order to obtain these, we must appeal to the friends of education all over this part of the country.…. (p. 3)

Arthur has suggested that Boone residents had access “to many thousands of volumes in the library of the Appalachian Training School” (p. 142) in addition to the public library, but the terms of those privileges are unclear.13

On September 28, 1911, the Democrat printed a card from Rev. Savage which announced the sad news of librarian Maggie Boyden’s death and the location of the Library’s new home:

The books of the Library, known as “The Boone Public Library,” which for seven years have been kept at the home of Mrs. Alice Councill, have recently been placed in shelves in the store of Mr. R.M. Greene, in Boone, Mr. Greene kindly consenting to harbor them and act as Librarian during the coming winter. Hereafter the Library will be known as a Memorial to Mrs. Maggie Boyden, the friend of all good works. In soliciting gifts of books for the Library, remember that Mrs. Boyden did not approve of light and trashy reading, so let not books of that character be placed upon the shelves.

An announcement in the prior week’s paper informed readers of the new location and advised, “those wishing books can get them by complying with library requirements.”

Over two years passed before an update about the Library appeared (on December 18, 1913): “The Boone Public Library is now open in the Little Gem Café building.” (p. 3) It is unclear whether the Little Gem Café was a venture of Mr. Greene’s, or what factors influenced the decision to move the Library’s collection to a café.

Announcements about illnesses, deaths, and diseases regularly appeared in the Democrat’s “Local Affairs” section; Mrs. Boyden occasionally reported improved health, but reports suggest she endured the removal of a tumor and was frequently ill. Further

research may reveal whether others assisted Mrs. Boyden with the Library, the extent to which her chronic illness affected access to the books under her care, and what, if any, guidelines regulated the use of the materials.

Following the announcement of its move to the Little Gem Café in December, 1913, no direct references to the Library appeared in the Local News sections of the issues examined. On August 12, 1926, the Democrat carried a brief report of the Worth While Club’s meeting, which occurred at Mrs. L. Tatum’s home on Friday, August 6: “There was a little business transacted, books exchanged and a few new books placed in the club library” (p. 1). A closer examination (and re-examination) of issues published during the early- and mid-1920s may shed more light on the activities of the Worth While Club, but its connection to the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs (NCFWC) is all but confirmed in an October 28, 1926 announcement:

Mrs. J.M. Moretz, president of the Worth While Club, was elected president of the third district of the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs… and Mrs. F.M. Huggins was elected secretary. And in addition to this the ladies from the metropolis of the mountains landed the next district meeting. (p. 1)

A May 19, 1938, announcement raises questions about a possible link between the third district of the NCFWC and the third district of the North Carolina Federation of Home Demonstration Clubs, which held its district meeting in “the auditorium of the Appalachian College” on Friday May 13. The third district includes clubs from Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Caldwell, Wilkes and Watauga counties.

W.H. Walker, Watauga County’s Superintendent of Education, asked fellow residents to “show your interest by attending” the upcoming “library meeting” scheduled

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to occur May 18: “Miss Marjorie Beal, secretary and director of NCLC, will be the guest speaker. Miss Beal will discuss the possibilities of establishing a library through the WPA library project. Everyone realizes the need of a public library for Watauga County” (p. 1). That Walker felt the need to “emphasize that that this will be a public library and will be open to anyone in Watauga county” (p. 1), suggests the Boone Public Library had been “public” in name alone. Those in attendance at this important meeting could also expect a display of work by the “WPA library and book-mending project of the county” (p. 1). This was to be an important meeting, but if the Democrat printed a follow-up report, it was overlooked.

On September 1, 1938, readers of the Democrat were treated to an announcement of the library’s opening:

The library committee announces the opening of the Watauga County Library on September 1st. It will be located in the former Watauga Democrat building. Miss Jewell Hagaman, county librarian, will keep the library open each afternoon from one till five o’clock.

The public is cordially invited to visit the library. There is no charge for the loan of books; the borrower being allowed to keep the book for one week. It is stressed that this library is not only for the citizens of Boone but for the entire county. Miss Hagaman wishes the people to feel that the library belongs to them and that they are welcome to borrow books.

Miss Hagaman is assumed to belong to the library committee, but the names of many of the committee’s other members of the library committee are unknown. In a September 15, 1938 announcement of a campaign “for the purpose of gathering up books for the use of the county library, which has been established in the former Watauga Democrat building,” the committee “urges the full co-operation of the people” and reminds them “the library is for the service of the entire county, and deserves” their support (p. 1).

More important than the cryptic reference to a library committee is the warm, welcoming
tone used to convey information about the library to prospective patrons. Announcements appearing in January and February of 1939 suggested residents responded positively. The librarian consistently reported increased growth and circulation while requesting donations of volumes or money with which to purchase them.

Appeals for funds and assistance continued through March, even as the library moved from “the old Democrat building to the quarters in the courthouse recently vacated by the county agent” (23 March, 1939, p. 1). Hagaman used the announcement to insist upon the prompt return of all books, but resumed a gentler tone of voice for the following week’s appeal:

The Watauga county library is steadily growing in circulation, but there is a great need for new books. The library committee is sponsoring a drive for funds to start a “memorial shelf.” You may choose your own book or the library can select it. A plate will be placed in the book to designate the donor and the name of the person in whose memory the book is given. Rev. Paul Townsend, chairman of the committee, urges everyone in the county to co-operate in this drive, for in what better way can you honor the memory of a loved one than by promoting a worthy cause?

The announcement reveals the identity of a committee member as it recalls the request Rev. Savage made of Democrat readers shortly after Mrs. Boyden’s death in 1911.

In the weeks leading up to the week of July 30, the Democrat subjected its readers to a flurry of announcements about Library Week activities. Reports suggest Hagaman and the “Library committee” had coordinated fundraising efforts with area churches, a strategy likely inspired by the committee chair, Rev. Townsend. If the regular publication of Library-related news items had not already convinced readers of the Democrat’s support of the library, the following editorial should have erased any doubts:

The people of the county should be glad to lend the library committee their full co-operation during Library Week… Since the inception of the county library, the demand for the books afforded has been increasingly heavy, and the WPA
bookmobile which visited the county some time ago reported an unprecedented demand for reading material. It is a good omen for the future of the county when the people are so eager to secure books, magazines, and newspapers, and the matter of supplying the demand is a public responsibility. Most of us could spare a volume from our library—practically all households contain stacks of discarded magazines and the matter of helping in this important work is not only inexpensive but should be highly pleasurable. Miss Hagaman and the library committee asks [sic] for your help. Will you cooperate? (p. 4)

Subsequent issues which might have contained additional coverage of library week activities and successes were missing.

Over twenty years later, the Democrat again voiced its support for the library on the occasion of Library Week, which may have occurred the week of April 12, 1962, in order to encourage the participation of college students:

This is Library Week, and various activities are being planned at the College and over the country to emphasize the importance of reading…

Besides the Library at the College, of course and the various public school libraries, Watauga county has an excellent library, which is rendering an important service to the people of this area, and it is a good thing, once a year, to stop and consider the values in expanded reading programs and more use and support of libraries of all types… (p. 4)

Three months later, on July 12, 1962, the Democrat reported,

A regional library for Wilkes, Ashe and Watauga counties was formed this week at a meeting in the Wilkes Chamber of Commerce offices here.

Homer Brown, who was named regional library director, said the regional agreement will also make it possible for the three-county area to qualify for an annual grant of $12,000 from the state of North Carolina…

Brown will maintain his headquarters in North Wilkesboro and will… rotate his services among the three counties.

He pointed out the development will mean economic saving and greater service for the three-county area of 75,000 people. (pp. 1, 6)

This project began with many questions around the whereabouts of libraries in scholarly works on Appalachian history. But as Hill (2009) has suggested, the better question might be “What is a library?” (p. 20). It is hoped that the many references to the Boone Public Library and the Watauga County Public Library presented here will help to
illustrate what the library in Watauga County was for its community, what it might have been, and what the next 110 years might bring.
CONCLUSION

A review of the *Watauga Democrat* and other resources suggests local factors that may have affected the pace of library development in Watauga County include Appalachian Training School’s growth and its Library’s competition for acquisitions, Mrs. Boyden’s health issues, Mr. Greene’s and Rev. Savage’s ongoing involvement, instability caused by frequent re-location, and, of course, newspaper publicity. Still, the story of this library’s early development is far from fully told. Discovery and analysis of other documentary evidence may shed light on the extent to which statewide organizations such as the Citizen’s Library Movement, the North Carolina Library Commission, and the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs influenced the development of the Watauga County Public Library.

As one who hopes to return to western North Carolina to work, the opportunity to familiarize myself with sources of historical information on library development in the region was both exciting and meaningful; indeed, historical sources that convey a sense of hope and fervor for the perceived benefits of libraries should offer solace at a time when libraries across the state are struggling to continue to provide services to their patrons. This exploratory study could support further, increasingly worthwhile research pursuits that will, in turn, contribute to the fields of librarianship and Appalachian Studies over the span of my career. Such research pursuits may include semi-structured interviews with librarians focused on the library’s evolution or the experiences of librarians and “library committee” members in these communities; further analysis of
existing documents or documentation with a focus on the record-keeping practices of librarians; further inquiry into experiences of African Americans in these communities during the Jim Crow era; and further exploration of the intersection between history of libraries and the region’s history.

Reexamining the development of libraries across broader swaths of western North Carolina in the context of critical works on the history of rural libraries; primary sources such as newspapers, annual reports, manuscript collections; and Appalachian Studies bibliography, ethnography, and historiography would lead to a richer understanding of the experiences of librarians and patrons in western North Carolina and to a clearer vision of that point at which the history of libraries intersects with the region’s history. The work of examining the role of libraries in these communities against the backdrop of not only American public library history, but southern Appalachian history will require much more time and involvement; it may be a career-long effort. If one goes so far as to regard this paper and the findings presented therein as a successful pilot project or test case, in that it demonstrates how researching library history can result in a richer understanding of a community’s history, one might be a step closer to re-visioning the narrative that has so consistently excluded libraries.
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