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## Walton-DeFuniak Library

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# Florida Library History Project

## Walton-DeFuniak Library

An organization of women formed the "Aid Society" in the winter of 1886 in the Florida Panhandle town of DeFuniak Springs to welcome the many newcomers who had been attracted to this small recently-founded railroad town by the opening of the Florida Chautauqua the previous year. By early summer in 1887, this energetic group of women began to plan for more specific services. It was apparent that a library was needed to provide reference material for the community at the Florida Chautauqua and to furnish recreational reading material for winter visitors. Therefore, the "Aid Society" members pledged \$1 each to buy books to start this endeavor, and changed their group's name to the "Ladies' Library Association."

Naturally, the first requirement was an adequate building to house the library. So, a one-room 75' by 100' lot was leased from the DeFuniak Land Company, and the original building, costing \$579.80, officially opened its doors on December 20, 1887. Although this original portion of the building has been added to several times over the years, it still remains as the front of the present library. The Ladies' Library Association didn't abandon their original objectives, however, and continued to give socials and various other forms of entertainment every week at the DeFuniak Public Library, named in honor of Captain Frederick de Funiak, who was entitled to the French title of "Count" and came to the United States from Europe. (The village of DeFuniak Springs was named for him also in 1882.)

For the first few years, the library was served by volunteer librarians, one of which was Alice Fellows, who later, in 1902, became the first salaried librarian. Miss Fellows undertook the job of classifying and cataloguing the 2,000 books on the shelves. For 30 years (1896 - 1926), she filled the position of Librarian at DeFuniak Public Library, almost from the organization of the institution. She received a very minimal salary and declined more money, as she worked largely through her love of the task and dutifully serving the people. She persisted in keeping all questionable books out of the library. Of course, she was succeeded by several successful individuals, up to the current librarian who carries on the tradition, Ms. Marilyn Coe. A donated picture of the diligent and initial librarian,

Miss Fellows, is displayed in the library, in remembrance of her remarkable and memorable endeavors.

While several additions have been skillfully meshed with the architecture of the original white-painted wooden building over the years, it still appears as quaint now as it must have the day it opened over a century ago. In addition, the name of the library changed in 1966 to Walton-DeFuniak Public Library, in order to take advantage of state and federal monies then available, as well as to become a member of the Florida Regional Library, thereby having the opportunity to better serve the community and its needs. Furthermore, a state historical marker proclaims the Walton-DeFuniak Public Library to be the "oldest structure in Florida built as a library and still serving that purpose" at its original site on Circle Drive near the bank of the lovely Lake DeFuniak. The library's original building is still inscribed with only the word "LIBRARY," and an "Established 1886" sign is proudly displayed at its entrance. Also, the original, wooden-floor portion of the library is adorned with a collection of swords and other weaponry that ranges from those used at the time of the Crusades to rifles of the Daniel Boone era, as well as various significant, historical scrapbooks, portraits, books, pictures, and antiques. And, true to its tradition, the little citadel of knowledge still draws support from the community, as its presence not only possesses historical significance, but also expresses a desire for an education, enjoyment, and cultural development. And still, the Walton-DeFuniak Public Library continues to thrive in this small community, over 100 years later.