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Suwannee River Regional Library

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Florida Library History Project

Suwannee River Regional Library

January 1958 - April 1998

Settlement in what was to become Suwannee County began in 1827. During the years from 1845, when Florida became a state, until 1858, Suwannee County had been a part of four different counties, Alachua, Columbia, Duval and St. Johns. On December 21, 1858 an act was signed by the Florida Legislature that brought Suwannee County into being. With county boundaries established on three sides by the famous-in-song Suwannee River, this area is known as the Heart of the Suwannee River Country.

Live Oak was designated as county seat of Suwannee by the State Legislature in 1868 and was incorporated on April 24, 1878. In 1903 the Town of Live Oak became the City of Live Oak, site of the only and present headquarters for the Suwannee River Regional Library System.

Early development of libraries in the State of Florida originated with a reading room located in St. Augustine.

A small town library was in operation in Live Oak for a number of years until the early 1940's, financed by an almost negligible \$25 per month County appropriation. It was housed in a wooden structure on the corner of Pine and Wilbur Streets, which was originally the City's public restrooms for white women. With the demolition of that building there was no home for the library.

In 1948 the Board of County Commissioners included a library annex in its County building expansion program. A new brick building was erected to provide facilities for these varied services: a public restroom for white women; a draft board office; and a library. Some book shelves were built and the remnants of the old library were moved to the new location in 1950. There the matter stopped.

There have always been citizens of Suwannee County who were willing to shoulder the task of securing cultural, educational and civic projects for the benefit

of everyone. Historically, women's clubs have spearheaded many of these endeavors, and this story of the development of public libraries is no exception.

The local Draft Board occupied the annex until the fall of 1954 when the Woman's Club of Live Oak adopted the project of a reactivated, well-equipped library system with ultimate county-wide service. According to available records, the draft board and the library shared the same quarters and were staffed by the same personnel.

Mrs. Winston (Sara) Rogers was appointed Chairman of the Library Project Committee, which frequently visited County Commission and City Council meetings to secure endorsement of a library project with viable funding.

At the beginning of the fiscal year, October 1954, the County Commissioners assigned one-half mill of the County budget to the operation of a Suwannee County Free Library. The City Council followed this lead with a \$500 annual appropriation. This netted approximately \$5,000 for the first year's operation: not enough, perhaps, to work wonders, but substantially a far cry from the \$25 per month of a decade earlier.

Thus the dreams and dedicated resolve of many citizens culminated in the creation of what would become in January, 1958, the first regional library system to be established in the State of Florida, with services to Lafayette and Suwannee counties.

One of the first moves of the new Library Board, duly appointed by the Governor of Florida at the request of the County Commissioners, was to move the Draft Board out of the library annex. They borrowed some books from the State Library, painted their one-room space, built shelves, and opened the library on February 28, 1955. The library started from a small collection of 3,100 books which contained a variety of reading materials available in its lending program.

Since the Board did not have the budget at their disposal to procure the services of a professionally trained librarian, Mrs. Rogers resigned as Chairman of the Woman's Club Library Project Committee and in January 1955 accepted the position as librarian. Soon the Board visualized a new library in Branford, and that branch library celebrated open house on January 13, 1956.

Total estimated Suwannee County receipts for salaries and books was \$6,312.75 in the fiscal year ending 1956. For a few years the City of Live Oak continued to furnish \$500 a year to the Library Fund.

On April 6, 1956 Mrs. Rogers resigned to become postmistress, and on March 15, 1957 Mrs. W. D. Richardson succeeded her. A consultant from the State Library was loaned to the library to administer the region until a head librarian could be found.

It is often difficult for a small rural community to provide adequate library service for all its people; but when a small community goes into partnership with a larger community, or many communities, the benefits of cooperation are realized. Regional library operation is a demonstration of the motto that, "In Unity There is Strength".

The Suwannee River Regional Library, a pilot cooperative library concept, materialized when Congress passed the Library Services Act in June 1956. Efforts were begun by the local library board to meet the minimum requirements established by the State Library Board for participation in the federal funds program.

In 1957 an adjustment was made in the formula, and by evaluating their building and other services provided by the county, the local Library Board found that they would be considered for a grant if they joined with another county. The Suwannee Board was able to convince the Mayo Woman's Club in Lafayette County to have their county join with Suwannee County and organize the first library region in Florida. The Mayo group of women convinced their commissioners to get the project on the budget agenda for the fiscal year 1958, and a small library was established at Mayo in Lafayette County in October 1957.

With the formation of the duo-county, Suwannee-Lafayette Library Region, \$28,224 in funds immediately became available. A one-half mill assessment by each county produced \$9,595, and this sum was matched by an \$18,629 federal grant.

The 3,100 book collection rapidly grew to some 10,000 titles, some loaned from the State Library. A bookmobile was ordered and put on the road. By September

of 1958 each of the counties had appropriated money for the next year's operation, and in September, 1958 Henry J. Blasick was on duty as the first Director of the Suwannee River Regional Library System. The second and final year of the grant was about to begin.

After operating in these two counties for a year, the organization was approached by a number of adjoining counties interested in the project, and in 1959 Columbia, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Madison and Taylor counties qualified for membership and became a part of the system. The Suwannee County library in Live Oak has served as headquarters since the establishment of the Suwannee River Regional Library System.

No town had a population of over 10,000. There was a new junior college in Madison but no other college or university in the area, which then had a total population of 75,695.

The next step was to organize the region and get ready for service at the beginning of the new fiscal year on October 1, 1959. Established as a regional library cooperative, the seven county boards each signed a regional library contract, as well as signing an individual contract with the State Library when it received its rural development grant funds. The Regional Board employed the head librarian and approved his employment of the rest of the staff.

A history-making event for Florida libraries took place in Live Oak on Monday, July 20, 1959, when the Suwannee River Regional Library Board was host to the incoming boards of the five counties who officially joined the region on October 1, 1959. The Suwannee River Regional Library had forged its way ahead in rural library development, soon leading Florida, and receiving national recognition for its rapid and sound progress.

Suwannee and Lafayette counties had completed their rural development grant periods, but each would receive a small bonus for bringing other counties into the program. Altogether, for 1959-60, the local libraries would provide \$36,094 and the rural development grants would bring \$38,997 to the area.

Each county had a five-member board, comprising the 35-member full Regional Library Board. They met quarterly, rotating their meetings from one place to

another. Normal attendance was 23 to 25 members. Matters of policy and overall procedure were of concern to this group. Details for any county were taken up on the county level and any county board met on call. Librarian Henry J. Blasick attended all county and regional meetings. Fred Andrews, Assistant Director from July 1, 1959 to August 31, 1961, served as Secretary to the Board.

Five communities, Greenville, Jasper, Lake City, Madison and Perry had small libraries operated by women's clubs. Gilchrist, Hamilton and Lafayette counties had no public library within their boundaries. Columbia and Taylor counties had very small popular-donation Woman's Club libraries with no visible support. The Madison County Commission provided less than \$1,000 per annum to be divided among the two small libraries at Madison and Greenville. Only Suwannee had made real effort toward library support.

The regional branches continued in the same facilities in Greenville and Perry with additional space for more books.

The Madison and Mayo libraries were located in former jails donated by each county. They were freshly painted and furnished. Exhibited prominently in the Madison library was the old key to the jailhouse door with the legend: "The Key to Captivity is now the Key to Enlightenment".

The old police station building in Lake City was converted through volunteer labor and donated building materials into an attractive library. With donations, volunteers remodeled a storage area in Jasper to provide library space.

The Branford Library was in the public health building, where it remains today, pending a long-awaited move into their brand new library, under construction and scheduled for completion in September 1998.

The city administration at Trenton remodeled what had been an annex of the Trenton Fire Department building to house the Gilchrist County Library.

Of special significance at this time in the history of the Suwannee River Regional Library was the earned distinction as a recipient of the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award. This \$1,000 award by the Book-of-the-Month Club was a memorial given in honor of the author. The Suwannee River Regional Library was one of eight

rural libraries in the nation, and the only one in the South, to qualify and receive this honor in April, 1960.

This award, along with U. S. Congressman D. R. (Billy) Matthews' congratulatory address in Congress, focused attention on the Suwannee River Regional Library organization's outstanding work among the libraries of the nation. Several obscure libraries in North Florida had been parlayed into a system which received nationwide honors during National Library Week.

At this time the regional library system consisted of eight local units and the main library at Live Oak, with thousands of volumes in their collections, and two bookmobiles bringing library service to rural areas of the counties. The system, which had started with 3,100 books in 1957, now had 23,500, 3,000 of which were a gift from the Miami Public Library.

On August 2, 1960 Dixie County, the last one to be invited to join in, became a member of the Suwannee River Regional Library, making it an eight-county system. The Cross City library observed its official opening December 1, 1960.

When he resigned on August 31, 1961 Henry J. Blasick, the first Director of the Suwannee River Regional Library, had taken the original two-county regional system and built it into an eight-county region distributing over a quarter million books annually. At the same time the Assistant Director, Fred Andrews, resigned to enter the Army.

Mr. S. L. (Sim) Townsend, member of the Gilchrist County Library Board, served as Acting Director from August 31, 1961 to November 20, 1961, until Miss Elizabeth Ball assumed duties as Director.

On July 18, 1968 the Suwannee River Regional Library adopted a memorial resolution in honor of Mr. Townsend, who served on the Library Board from October, 1959 until his death on May 2, 1968. Records show that Mr. Townsend, whose library and civic honors included the American Library Association's "Outstanding Trustee Award", was among the first persons to provide leadership necessary to put the system on a firm foundation. Mr. Townsend saw the Suwannee River Regional Library develop from birth through its early stages of growth. Having retired some years before 1959, Mr. Townsend, with his pleasant

but determined and efficient demeanor, was able to bridge gaps and open doors in order to set the system in operation.

Miss Elizabeth Ball became Director of the Suwannee River Regional Library on November 20, 1961 and served until April of 1967. She came to Live Oak from Washington, North Carolina, where she had headed a regional library for two and a half years.

Taylor County withdrew from the Regional Library System on September 30, 1961 by resolution of the Board of County Commissioners of Taylor County on recommendation of the Taylor County Library Board. The Board had determined that it was in the best interest of Taylor County to operate the library system independent of any regional library association.

On December 4th of that year the Florida Budget Commission voted the first release of \$284,544 of the \$500,000 appropriated by the 1961 Legislature for State Aid to Public Libraries.

This was an important milestone in public library development, as Florida was the last of the southeastern states to accept the public library as a state responsibility, and provide funding for this vital community service.

The Suwannee River Regional Library, including Gilchrist County, received \$23,152, which was badly needed for bookmobile and other operating expenses, since the two-year Federal aid had now expired.

On March 5, 1962 a Regional Contract and Agreement was signed by Columbia, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison and Suwannee counties. Nine libraries and two bookmobiles were now serving the seven-county system.

On June 27, 1963 Miss Ball announced that the region had added a third bookmobile to its fleet, a purchase made possible by funds received from State Aid to Libraries.

The existing library in Live Oak had no large reading room and inadequate space to serve large numbers of Suwannee County school pupils. In 1966 Suwannee County razed a public restroom on the courthouse square to accommodate an

expanded, air-conditioned library. A two-story wing between the old library and the courthouse provided what was then modernistic facilities for the headquarters office.

At this time the system had nine libraries serving a population of 67,133 in an area covering 4,249 square miles. The collection consisted of 73,243 volumes which had a circulation of 316,828 in the 1964/65 fiscal year. Two operating bookmobiles and an additional one used as a reserve vehicle circulated library materials to all the rural communities in the system.

On October 30, 1966 the new Suwannee County Regional Library at 207 Pine Avenue was dedicated. This was a joint project, with Suwannee County bearing 45% of the cost and the federal government providing the remaining 55%. Total cost of the project, which actually came in at \$97,000, had been estimated at approximately \$80,000.

Fred Andrews, a former Assistant Director of the Suwannee River Regional Library from 1959 to 1961, assumed duties in April, 1967 when Miss Elizabeth Ball resigned to accept a position with a library in North Carolina.

Mr. Andrews graduated from Madison High School in 1955 and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Library Science from Florida State University in 1959. He then came to Live Oak, where he was assistant to Henry Blasick for two years, before entering the Army in 1961. He was stationed most of his two years in the military service in Alaska. Following his release from the Army in 1963, Andrews accepted a position as Director of Clay County Libraries prior to his employment here.

When he resigned as Director at the end of the fiscal year 1976 the nine-library, seven-county system enjoyed annual circulation of 344,331 items, with expenditures totaling \$162,717.

The Suwannee River Regional Library had been in existence over eighteen years when John D. (Danny) Hales, Jr. became the Director of Libraries on November 1, 1976, a position which he continues to hold today in 1998.

The growth and successes of the Suwannee River Regional Library during his 21-

year tenure have been no less outstanding than were those of the first eighteen years.

Raised in the small town of Fulton, Kentucky, Danny Hales attended the University of Kentucky, where he lettered in track and cross-country and worked part-time as a reference assistant at the main library. He graduated with a B.S. Degree in Accounting in 1971, and in 1973 entered the College of Library Science at the University in pursuit of his Masters. Upon graduation he elected to work in Jacksonville, Florida as Business Librarian in the public library there from April 1974 to November 1976, when he was selected as the Suwannee River Regional Library Director.

A reorganization study was undertaken in 1977-78, but local funds and commitment were not dedicated to implementation.

In 1978 the Columbia County Public Library was constructed under the guidance of Mrs. Eileen Brunner, and in 1979 Columbia withdrew from the Suwannee River Regional Library to become a single-county system.

The Mail-A-Book lending service, offered for the first time in North Central Florida in 1981, replaced the Bookmobile service. In the beginning catalogs were mailed to over 9,500 households in Suwannee, Hamilton and Lafayette counties, followed two weeks later with 9,000 more catalogs being mailed to Madison, Dixie and Gilchrist county residents.

Financed by a \$53,000 federal grant provided under the Library Services and Construction Act, it was designed to save energy and make library books more accessible to rural and homebound residents. There was no cost to the subscriber and no fines were assessed.

Supported with local help and donations, the new Lafayette County Library was constructed in 1982. It opened its doors to the public in January 1983, with a formal dedication ceremony on April 10, 1983.

Passage of a bill in early 1983 enabled regional libraries to reorganize using state funds. The Suwannee River Regional Library made plans to centralize many of its functions, using the \$75,000 they would receive in fiscal year 1984. An initial per

capita membership fee of \$0.88 was set for fiscal year 1986 to provide equalization of support for regional administrative services.

The per capita fee increased periodically to \$1.12 for fiscal year 1993. It was replaced in 1993/94 by a smaller "token" contribution, when significant new regional funds were received from State Library to cover regional expenses.

On Monday, March 20, 1986, the Live Oak Library blipped into the modern age when its new Dynix computer went online after two years of preparation.

A new library in Madison, constructed in 1987, was complete and awaiting only the shelves when a tornado blasted through the town on April 11, 1987. The force of the storm ripped the brand new structure apart, leaving only the foundation with roughed-in plumbing sticking out of the concrete.

Rebuilding was completed in less than a year, and the new library opened in 1988.

The Dixie County Library occupied what had been an old bank building and health clinic since joining the Region in 1960. In December, 1988 the County celebrated dedication of an enlarged and refurbished facility in that location.

In May, 1990 Madison County expanded its services by establishing a small satellite branch library in the Town of Lee. Dedicated community support and determination have enabled this small library to survive, despite a very limited budget.

In celebration of National Library Week, the Suwannee County Commission on April 7, 1992 signed a resolution honoring local individuals and civic and government groups who had a part in providing countywide library service for the past thirty-five years. The resolution recognized all persons and organizations responsible for the library's origin and progress.

"Those we honor here today were visionaries," said Hales of those responsible for the success of the library. "Our goal today, in honoring these visionaries, is to encourage people to talk about their libraries, to alert the American public regarding the increasing infringement of their right to know, and to mobilize support for libraries and those who have worked, even fought, to have them

funded and open to the public."

Local funding for Suwannee County amounted to \$191,071 in 1991, as compared to \$4,500 for the first budget of the new library in 1956. Circulation for for the same period totaled 167,266 items, an increase of eighteen per cent over the previous year.

On April 4, 1994 the Gilchrist County library collection was moved to the Yates Funeral Home while their old location, originally a church, underwent major renovation and expansion.

The staff operated out of these temporary quarters until the move back to the "new" library on May 31, 1995. They reopened their doors to the public on June 12, 1995 and celebrated dedication on June 17, 1995.

In July 1994 a Regional Task Force began exploring the advantages of dividing the six-county system into two three-county systems. A Task Force was organized to determine whether the system could stand to gain over \$200,000 in State Aid by dividing into two regions. The effective date of the proposed change was set for October 1, 1995. Suwannee, Hamilton and Madison counties would consolidate to form the Northern Region; and Dixie, Gilchrist and Lafayette counties would organize as a cooperative entity now known as Three Rivers Regional Library. Mr. John Hadden was hired to work with Hales for six months prior to the establishment of the new system.

Groundbreaking took place on Tuesday, August 16, 1994 for a new Jasper Library in Hamilton County. This library had moved twice since 1959 and had been in its present building, the old agricultural building for the County school system, since 1974.

The following recognition was included in the program of Dedication on June 4, 1995:

"We must recognize the Hamilton County Bank under the leadership of P. C. Crapps, Jr., who supported the library over twenty years and initially deeded most of the land to the county for this project. Later on Barnett Bank of North Florida donated additional land when it was determined it was needed."

From 1991 to 1996 efforts were focused on construction of a new headquarters facility.

In 1991 Director Danny Hales submitted a grant application to the Department of State, which includes the Division of Library and Information Services, for library construction grant funds to build a new 20,000 square-foot facility that would provide sufficient public and office space for the headquarters library for about fifteen years. However, a county match required for the \$400,000 construction grant limit was not available. This proposal was first in line for a state grant if the Legislature appropriated funding for library construction the following year.

Each county in the regional system (Suwannee, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Madison and Lafayette) had at least one library, but overall administration and centralized services were handled at the Live Oak facility.

The year of 1996 would bring construction of the new county library, thanks in large part to the enormous effort by Danny Hales and his staff, Friends of the Library, and scores of dedicated donors and volunteers who raised cash and in-kind contributions of over \$275,000.

Groundbreaking at the site of the new Suwannee River Regional Library at 1848 Ohio Avenue South in Live Oak was held at 3:00 p.m. on January 4, 1996. The new building was dedicated Sunday, November 24, 1996, at 2:00 p.m. with Open House from 2-4. A time capsule was established to be opened by students of Suwannee County on December 16, 2045 during the Florida Bicentennial.

The Hamilton County Commission included funds in its fiscal year 1997/98 budget for a second county library, which opened on July 27, 1997 in the Town of White Springs.

This was soon followed by a request from residents of the Town of Jennings in Hamilton County to secure support from the Board of County Commissioners for a library in their area. Meetings are currently taking place to pursue viability of this project.

Over the last twenty-one years the Suwannee River Regional Library has built or remodeled six branch libraries, in addition to building the new headquarters

library in Suwannee County, which opened in November of 1996. A seventh branch library is currently under construction and slated to open in September, 1998 in Branford.

The Regional System has developed a new organizational and administrative structure, automated the cataloging and circulation departments, and significantly increased staff hours of operation. Books-by-mail, a literacy program, information and referral programs, videos and cassette books were also introduced as new library services.

In addition, the preschool story hour, special programs and services designed for young adults and middle schoolers, as well as special library material collections for middle schoolers and young adults have all been introduced.

What was at time of reorganization in 1996 a three-county, six-library regional system now encompasses seven libraries, with the possibility of an eighth being added in 1998.

At present, 1998, the planning and implementing of a total networked library system is being undertaken. The system will include a wide and local area network with direct connections to the Internet and all libraries, the inclusion of online database for research and reference, and use of the online card catalog.

As in all phases of human endeavor, many contributors of special dedication and achievement, who have enabled the Suwannee River Regional Library to become a State-of-the-Art regional library system, are unsung and unknown. The success of the venture is concrete evidence of the concerted effort of the communities involved.

April 10, 1998 - Compiled by Evelyn Hantz from newspaper and radio releases, financial and use records, and miscellaneous public documents preserved in Live Oak library archives.