

History of the Watauga County Public Library and Libraries in Boone

The 1987 book *The Heritage of Watauga County* (Volume I) began its history of Libraries in Watauga County by alleging that “very little can be found out about the beginnings of a public library in Watauga County. Apparently, in the early [19]30s, one was set up as a W.P.A. [Works Progress Administration, a New Deal program] project with Mrs. Elsie Hagaman as the Librarian.”

However, a historical resource which the Watauga County Library now owns are copies, on microfilm, of the local newspaper of record, the *Watauga Democrat*, from its foundation in circa 1888 up to the present year. An article which appeared in the December 3, 1903 issue of this newspaper reads as follows:

The Public Library

It has been our pleasure to examine the first installment [sic] of books for the public library at Boone, sent by 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. Or, if you have no books to spare, place a little of the coin of the realm in the hands of the treasurer who will be appointed a little later, and it will soon make its appearance on the library shelves in the shape of good, clean literature, all of which will be elevating to the reader. For just a small contribution in either books or cash from everyone in this vicinity who should be interested, would insure us a library of 1,000 volumes or more in the near future.

For the present the library will be kept at the residence of Mrs. Alice Council, for the convenience of Mrs. Boyden, the Librarian, but early in the spring neat rooms will be fitted up for its accommodation, which we hope will assume large proportions. 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 accepted, 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.”

A Letter to the Editor by the same Rev. Savage, from a 1911 newspaper, tells us:

“The books of the Library, known as ‘The Boone Public Library,’ which for seven years have been kept at the home of Mrs. Alice Council, 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 [!]. Hoping that all the citizens of Boone will help in the good cause and join in an effort to build up this means for the betterment of a community, in memory of one who loved Boone and its good people, and was ever an example, a woman good, pure and true, and a friend to all about her, I am, Respectfully, WILLIAM R. SAVAGE.”

What became of this first library, housed first in a home and then in a store, is not recorded (or, perhaps, has not yet been fully discovered in resources such as the newspaper archives). The Heritage of Watauga County volume continues the story of Libraries in Watauga County by following the history of the WPA-built structure, which was (according to this source) “located in a little corner of the old Rivers Printing office [home of the *Watauga Democrat* newspaper] and then later moved to a tiny store front on King Street. The books were all donated.” This may reflect some recollection of the earlier libraries of the early 1900s, rather than attempts in the 1930. Later, the Library was established in an upstairs room of an annex to the County Courthouse, the facility built of native stone by the Works Progress Administration, then moved downstairs to renovated, larger quarters, which the recollections of county employees tell once housed the maintenance facility for Watauga County School buses.

A bookmobile was used to deliver books as an outreach service, when “the first bookmobile, a panel truck, was purchased in 1949.” This first bookmobile had “weight routes, include[ing] stops at community stores, post offices, schools and a number of private homes.”

Watauga County Public Library became part of the Appalachian Regional Library in 1963, joining in a partnership with Ashe and Wilkes Counties to share books and other resources. The Watauga County Public Library continues as a part of this cooperative system to this day. The Heritage of Watauga County notes that, “since 1945 there has been a Library Board of Trustees. They serve as an advisory committee, making recommendations regarding policy and procedures. “

After expansions in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to the library space adjacent to the county courthouse, a five-year plan from 1995 to 2000 oversaw the planning and construction of the current building of Watauga County Public Library, which was located close to Downtown Boone on a site which formerly housed an abandoned burley tobacco warehouse.

Compiled August 14, 2012 / Ross Cooper, Reference Staff, Watauga County Public Library