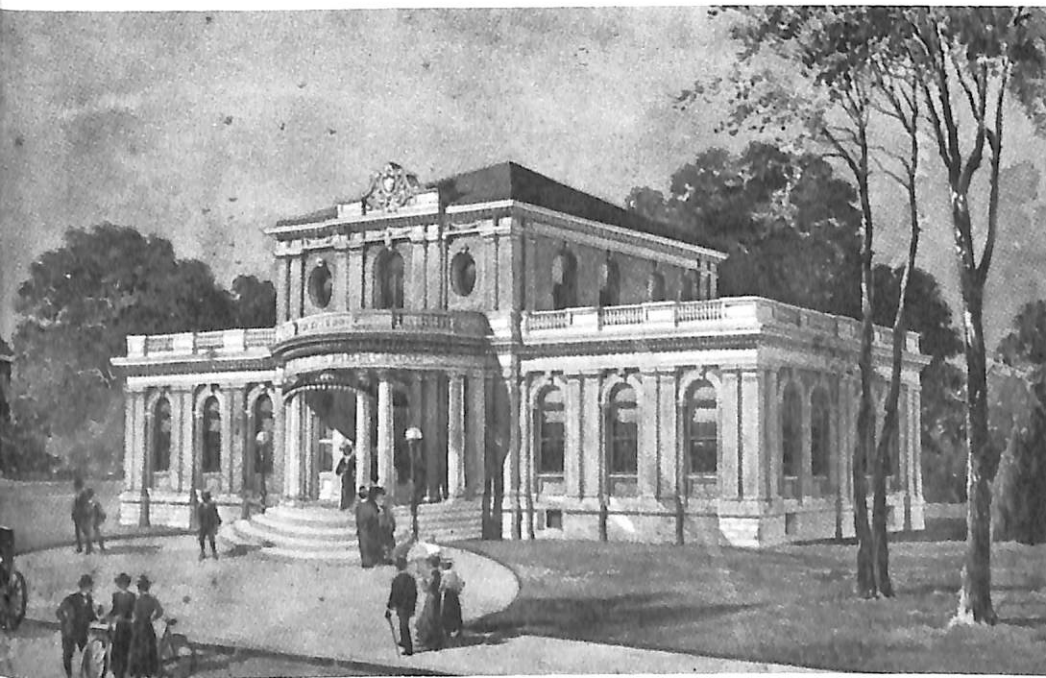


*A History of the
B. S. Ricks Memorial Library
and the
Yazoo Library Association
1838 - 2003*



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The history of the library in Yazoo County began with the creation of the Manchester Library Association in 1838 before Manchester became Yazoo City in 1839. The Library Association, chartered as a corporation in 1840 by act of the state legislature, met during its early years in the armory of the Manchester Fusiliers. The men who gathered in 1838 were mostly professionals aged twenty to thirty, including merchants with interests in banks, bankers in politics, lawyers, the postmaster, the only insurance agent, the editors of both newspapers, and more merchants including grocers. These men gathered, swapped books, and debated by candlelight. They formed committees to create a constitution and bylaws and began buying books.

In 1842, according to David Woodburn's history of YLA, the Library Association rented two rooms from Mr. Hamer. By 1843 they had to purchase more bookcases because of the increasing size of the book collection. An entrance fee of \$1.00 was charged, and dues were \$.25 annually. Payment of dues was enforced, and some members were even blacklisted at times. Mr. Tom Anderson served as librarian for some years, succeeded by Mrs. Livie Posey.

In June 1845 the Masons (Yazoo Lodge #42) and the Yazoo Library Association met and agreed to borrow

\$3000 from the Commercial Bank to erect a building which was completed in 1847. This partnership lasted almost fifty years.

In the years following 1847, the Library Association met infrequently because of yellow fever outbreaks, the War Between the States, and Reconstruction. The book collection was scattered among members and others. In 1871, through the efforts of Reverend J. W. Kerr, the Association was revived, and R. E. Craig, the new librarian, posted a notice in the city's newspapers for citizens to return the books. However, to this day some 135 years later, these books have never surfaced. After the War, the Board of Supervisors met in the library building while a new courthouse was constructed in 1870. In 1873 the Library Association leased its building to the Yazoo Female Seminary and in 1874 to the Board of Supervisors, who intended to use it as a school. By 1890 the Yazoo City Public Schools were operating a school in the building and claimed ownership by Adverse Possession.

During the decades from 1872 to 1892, the library was housed in a building shared with the Masonic Hall. In 1890 Reverend Abbey aroused new interest in the local library, and the building, leased to the schools in Yazoo

County, became a source of controversy. On March 31, 1891, a suit ensued between the schools and the Yazoo Library Association over the ownership of the building. The suit was finally settled by the Mississippi Supreme Court in favor of the Library Association. On January 2, 1893, the Association voted to sell their share of the building to the Masons for \$1500. This money was spent over the next few years on books approved by a special committee and housed in rooms offered by the city schools. It was reported that 312 new volumes had been purchased from Leggett Bros. in New York. By April 17, 1894, the committee had bought 968 books from many subject disciplines and fiction. One donation from that period from Mrs. M. A. Harrison, thirty volumes of the Harper's Classical Library, survives today in the Museum Book Collection.

In August 1892 US Representative John Sharp Williams, whose Washington career spanned the years 1893-1923, became a member of YLA. From July 3, 1893, until the 1930's, he gave many books to the library. Among the almost 600 books donated by him by September 1894 were many governmental publications, such as Congressional Globe and Record. He also gave the library his subscription to *National Geographic* during the 1910-1929

period, and special boxes were bought to house them. In November 1905 he added some 213 US Senate and House reports and additional Congressional Records. These remain in part as a special display in the Museum Room of Ricks Library.

A Board of Trustees was elected in December 1896 to oversee the membership and create an endowment. This committee was able to raise \$1000. Money from this endowment, invested in two loans and the Opera House, included \$250 from General and Mrs. Benjamin S. Ricks and money from J.S. Williams, C.H. Williams, R.C. Shepherd, W.C. Craig, and others. The library, which had existed in the schoolrooms for several years, was housed once again in the Masonic Hall by 1896. Two years later, in 1898, the library's only surviving print catalog was published. The collection and the catalog were organized by subject topic and included a diverse list of 1700 titles, including many Greek classics, drama, and even books on agriculture, cotton, and dairying. Many of the library tables and shelving still in use were bought during this period.

On November 14, 1900, a watershed of our history began. Mrs. Fanny J. Ricks offered to build a library for the

Yazoo Library Association to be called the "B.S. Ricks Memorial Library." Her husband, General Benjamin Sherrod Ricks, was born in Madison County in 1843. He left Princeton during the War Between the States to enlist in the Confederate Army. He was at Gainsville, Alabama, when the South surrendered in 1865. After the war, General Ricks lived at Belle Prairie, his Yazoo County plantation of some 18,000 acres. From this land came his fortune. He cultivated 6000 acres which annually produced 3000 bales of cotton. In the 1890's, he and his wife, both of whom had financial interests, moved into town, staying with friends until their house on North Main was finished. General Ricks died December 3, 1899.

The memorial library given by Mrs. Ricks was to cost no less than \$20,000, and she was to have design control. Mrs. Ricks also stipulated that she be made a permanent member of the Association's Board of Control. It took an act of the Legislature to empower the city to give land to a private association. The land was deeded over in July 1901. The architect for the new building was Alfred Zucker, known in Mississippi for his state building designs as well as courthouse and university architecture. The library was completed in 1901 and was officially dedicated January 1, 1902.

For the new library, Mrs. Ricks commissioned a portrait of her husband at a cost of \$1000 from artist A.E. Edmonds, who was active in New York, New Orleans, and Columbia, S.C. Its ornate frame was additional. The portrait measures about four by nine feet, and after recent restoration, hangs facing the mezzanine, a striking setting. Friends of Mrs. Ricks later had her portrait added to the Library Collection, commissioning it from H.E. Burdette of Washington, D.C. Her family also presented a smaller portrait of him that hangs in the library she built.

During the early years of the twentieth century, the book collection continued to grow. In 1900 R. C. Shepherd died, and his sister, Mrs. A. F. Gardner, contributed \$1000 for an endowment from which many books were purchased until around 1910. Many of these still exist in the Museum Collection. Yazoo City itself began giving \$50 per year for support once the library opened in 1901. By 1903 the library held 400 volumes from the US Printing Office. The minutes of November 1, 1904, show a donation of books, which had been shipped in August, from the estate of John Dimitry of New Orleans. Many of these are rare and are on display in the Museum Room as a special collection. On November 5, 1907, an additional

ten bookcases were bought to hold the growing collection

May 1904 was a devastating month for Yazoo City. A massive fire burned almost all of the business and residential districts. By divine providence, the Ricks Memorial Library was spared. The library lost only 35 volumes in the fire in the homes of members; all were replaced. Even though Mrs. Ricks' home next to the library was destroyed, she remained a generous benefactress. Her financial backing helped to rebuild a portion of the business district. She had also assisted the University of Mississippi's summer school program from 1900-1903 by underwriting the entire cost. The 1902 yearbook, which features a full-page portrait of her, is on display in the new Museum Room. In her will Mrs. Ricks left a downtown building to the library to provide rental income. The Association owned this building until the 1990's.

During its first sixty years, the library had only two librarians: Annie Barksdale, 1902-1922, and Mrs. M. P. Derden, 1922-1962. After Mrs. Derden became librarian in 1922, Ricks applied for a Carnegie Grant but was turned down with the statement that it was so far superior to other

libraries in the United States that it did not qualify for the Carnegie. Herschell Brickell, an outstanding editor and literary critic for the *North American Review* starting in 1920, said that it was among the books of the Yazoo Library that he learned to read and love books and was given an appreciation of literature.

A number of other significant events occurred during these early decades. The Honorable John Sharp Williams was made a life member August 3, 1923. Also in 1923 the library installed its first telephone service. During the mid twenties, the Boy and Girl Scouts held meetings upstairs in the library. In 1926 Ricks paid its first dues to the Mississippi Library Association. Librarians from Ricks attended the convention in Jackson that same year. Also, on December 7, 1926, the Board of Supervisors started giving \$300 annually of library support. In 1927 the American Library Association donated \$500 to the library to replace volumes damaged by the Great Flood of 1927. Again, Ricks was fortunate to receive minimal damage in this disaster.

The 1930's saw Ricks Library face a number of challenges. The building and the grounds were damaged by a cyclone in 1933. Mr. Hugh Craig contributed \$100 toward

replacing the roof. In 1934 the building was renovated cellar to roof by the CWA. After that the FERA furnished funds for workers in the library and with county services.

The library closed briefly in April 1933 because of budget woes. Soon afterwards, Mrs. Charles Clark of Denver, Colorado, sent \$400 to provide immediate relief and to reopen Ricks. In this same year, the library became a voting precinct. In 1934, Mrs. M. P. Derden, the CWA Director for Yazoo County, employed a book survey to assess the needs for reading in Yazoo. The Ladies of Eden expressed a desire for a circulating library. Mrs. Elizabeth Robinson, Secretary of the State Library Commission, offered the use of the state's 4000 volumes.

In October 1935, the Yazoo Library Association Board of Control had to curtail expenses, which included repairing and cataloging the book collection. During the mid thirties, Mrs. Charles Clark donated \$500 annually to keep the library open. In 1936 Ricks benefitted from a special book mending project as specified by the earlier PWA Local Board. This project employed women to aid in repairing old books at a cost up to \$3084.

A special radio broadcast in September 1938 celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Yazoo Library Association. Mrs. M.P. Derden, librarian, was recognized. The Board of Control stated that 2000 books per month were going out into the county to fourteen library stations.

On October 3, 1939, Governor Bilbo announced the WPA Library Project. Following a study of needs, Yazoo County planned and implemented county services. In 1940 the county began paying a county librarian, Mrs. Z. G. Montgomery, for five book stations with nine workers, according to the *Yazoo Herald*. Other sources state ten to seventeen. The *Herald* reports 1500 readers in the five free libraries in Yazoo County. Logically, I believe that those would have been Holly Bluff, Benton, Bentonia, Satartia, and perhaps Tinsley or Eden. There is no known list. However, service to these areas ended about 1942, with some library privileges at Benton High School provided by Mrs. O. V. Clark for a time after that date. Also, during World War II, a book campaign headed up by librarian Mrs. J. W. Woolwine obtained books for soldiers. These were sent overseas if suitable.

The library of the 1950's is best remembered by Thurman Boykin, publisher, former PRM radio personality, and

former coordinator for Mississippi Center for the Book: "The odor of the books and polished wood, the high ceilings, the comfort, the noise of foot steps on the floors, the bigggggg windows...." Boykin began a correspondence with children's author Walter Farley because of the library and its resources and collection of children's books.

Reflecting today, Yazoo City and its downtown are much as they were during the fifties in their quality of life, community support, hospitable people, and the overall ambience of Mississippi.

1962 was a pivotal year for Ricks Library, first because of the study and planning of Director Mrs. ^{Mary} Emma Smith, and continuing under the leadership of Mrs. Mary Louise Williams. In that year the Junior Auxiliary raised \$11,000 through a drive for life memberships in the area for \$100 per person. The Auxiliary approached city and county officials for additional funds to help with the redecoration and expansion of the library. The upstairs of the old library was used as the Director's office. The Junior Auxiliary's renovation created a History Room or Board Room which was also used as a Music Room, furnished by the Mozart Music Club in 1963.

After Mrs. Williams took over as Director in 1962, a substantial reorganization began. Ricks began providing public library service to both Yazoo City and Yazoo County, and a bookmobile was purchased. When contract service was extended to Sharkey County in 1964 and to Issaquena County in 1966, the South Delta Library Service was created. Also in 1966 the Lamar Street Branch opened to accommodate African Americans on land bought from the John F. and A. J. Oakes family, a prominent local African American family. Other special events during the sixties included Eudora Welty's reading at Ricks during National Library Week in 1965, and the publishing of a lengthy and laudatory article by U. S. Representative John Bell Williams in the Congressional Record in commemoration of National Library Week and Ricks Library.

Beginning in 1972, Ricks began to blossom into a very active period of library service. First, under the direction of David M. Woodburn (1972-1977), the library expanded its space in a first phase of expansion for additional fiction, magazines, a reading area, processing room space, and a bookmobile area. Woodburn initiated a still viable service in the "Mail-a-Book" program that sent books to shut-ins via what he called an overall "Operation

Outreach." In 1975 the Ricks Memorial Library was listed on the National Register of Historic Places after a local campaign to discuss the fate of the Main Street School-Library Community Triangle. Woodburn's original History of Ricks was published in *Mississippi Library News* in 1974. He is also credited with a 1976 addition to the building that provided administrative rooms and a new meeting room.

Ricks Library continued its progress under Director M. Jane Smith (1977-1980), who obtained LSCA federal funds and improved regional services to Yazoo, Sharkey, Issaquena, and Humphreys Counties. Her support of Ricks has continued throughout her career with the State Library. Her advice, advocacy, and leadership for Mississippi libraries and librarians are a testament to her professional library career. She is responsible for getting the first preservation grant from the Department of Archives for the Ricks Library building and for coordinating the Humanities grants that began the assessment of the Museum collections. She also began a cooperative program with Mississippi Chemical Corporation that has lasted three decades.

Jon Scheer was Library Director for only a year (1980-1981). He added service to Humphreys County via the bookmobile in July 1980. He also guided the library through a period of low funding and a beginning of new growth potential.

The next Director of Ricks came from Yazoo's local citizenry. Harriet Decell as librarian began to cultivate the history and culture of Yazoo. Her work in creating the Yazoo Historical Society and the Triangle Museum is legendary. She had a weekly series on local television called Ricks Looks at Books. Mrs. Decell also has the distinction of making Ricks the first library in Mississippi to be automated through the Dynix System, which became operational in October 1985. Through her efforts a portion of the pre-1915 book collection survives to reflect late nineteenth century intellectual thought in Yazoo City. Dr. John Pilkington and Dr. Antonio Rodriguez-Buckingham noted that because many of the books were from the libraries of private citizens, they are a good index of the reading habits of that time.

Linda Crawford, Director 1988-1992, was also Director of the Triangle Cultural Center. Ricks continued to provide excellent service to the community during this time. She

instituted Supercat Cataloging along with a massive retrospective conversion of library holdings to MARC format and was instrumental in getting Ricks designated as a Mississippi Landmark in 1989. Ms. Crawford worked closely with the schools and began the first Yazoo program for adult literacy. She had a newer heating and cooling system installed. Humphreys County withdrew from the South Delta Library System, and the Lamar Street Branch was closed during this time. The building downtown left by Mrs. Ricks was sold to fund roof replacements. The process to separate the Yazoo Library Association from the Triangle began.

From 1992-2002 Kathryn Merkle served as Director. Her accomplishments in fund raising for a major renovation of Ricks were extraordinary. Her background as a consultant with the State Library Commission for many years gave her excellent knowledge of grant writing and policy making. In her position with the state she acted as a consultant for Ricks as early as 1982. In 1999 the Mississippi Legislature made possible the funding of ten million dollars for improvements for Mississippi libraries. Yazoo County citizens over-matched the grant project, enabling Ricks to undertake a massive multi-year renovation of the original 1901 building and the 1971 and

1976 additions. Also during Mrs. Merkle's tenure Mississippi Chemical Corporation constructed and gave to the Yazoo Library Association a \$300,000 conference center, adding another 4000-5000 square feet to the library complex. Some of her other projects were brochures dealing with the history of the library and a Bricks-for-Ricks campaign to raise additional funds. She is also responsible for having the leadership role in getting City and County funds increased to their current levels, the highest in the Association's history.

Starting in 2003, Director Paul Cartwright has focused on traditional library services in preparation for a return to Yazoo County Library Service by 2005. After that date, the South Delta Library Service will cease to exist, and the Yazoo Library Association can once again look at county-wide library needs. Studies are planned to check demographic use and to look at the telecommunication needs of all patrons in Yazoo County.