

1-1-1990

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Florida Library History Project

Putnam County Library System

From The River Flows North by Brian Michaels

In 1930 the Palatka Public Library was given a new building by philanthropist James Ross Mellon, who had wintered in Palatka for nearly fifty years. To be sure, Mellon may not have been the first man of means to have been accorded that opportunity to provide for the citizens of Palatka and Putnam County what they could not - or would not - provide for themselves, but he was the first to avail himself of the opportunity.

"In the early part of the winter of 1894 a few women of this town entered upon the noble work of establishing a reading room, mainly as an attraction for our young men and, during their leisure hours, for our working men from shops and mills." So begins the tale of the "noble work" of the Palatka Public Library, as told by one of the "founding mothers" of the institution, Mrs. George E. Welch, in a letter of April 1899, to Andrew Carnegie.

"Notice was given that all interested were to meet at the high school building December 28. A small organization was formed, officers elected, and committees appointed.

That night came the first of those destructive freezes of '94 which have so prostrated Florida, but the spirited effort of these men and women was not to be checked by cold or disaster.

A canvass of the town was made, three hundred dollars were subscribed, a room rented and furnished, librarian employed at \$2 a week, and reading room kept open three hours in the afternoon and three in the evening.

A loan of two hundred old books of a disbanded club was made as a nucleus; many of these were ill-chosen. Some books were given by tourists and a few of the latest publications were bought. The current magazines and one daily paper were subscribed for.

This was our beginning.

By entertainments and solicitations we have kept up the current expenses and increased the library to about three thousand volumes.

The town has never been able to help us, and knowing of your interest in libraries in general we have ventured to ask aid of you for the Palatka Public Library Association.

You have its history and can judge of its merits."

- Betty P. Welch

What response, if any, Mrs. Welch had from the philanthropist is not known - nor is whether the letter was actually sent; the copy from which the text has been taken is a signed original in the files of the Palatka Public Library, and it may have been only a draft, a copy, or a rejected idea. Another letter Mrs. Welch wrote, apparently at the same time, received a cordial reply of April 24 from Congressman Robert W. Davis, thanking Mrs. Welch for informing him of his election as an honorary member of the Library Association: "I trust you will call on me for such service or assistance as I may be able to render at any time," his letter concluded.

The Woman's Fortnightly Club, forerunner of the Palatka Woman's Club, was organized in 1897, with Mrs. Welch as its president. In the early years an annual \$2 subscription was requested of library patrons who wished borrowing privileges, and "entertainments" of various sorts were sponsored to raise funds for operating the "reading room" and expanding its collection.

One of the entertainments was advertised in the Palatka News and Advertiser of January 12, 1906: "The checker game for the benefit of the Public Library will take place at the Armory on Monday night. The admission is 25 cents. There will be dancing for all who so desire."

In 1912 the "City Library" moved to the second floor of the City Building built in 1905.

In 1915, when the library association met "at the library hall" on April 30 for its annual session, all officers were re-elected, including the "collector" H.F. Lecks. Whether Mr. Lecks was to collect money or overdue books was not indicated by the report of the meeting, but either function probably would have served a useful purpose.

The state legislature amended the city's charter in 1919 to authorize the city to establish and maintain a public library, and the "entire equipment" of the Palatka Library Association was formally transferred to the city on January 1, 1920.

By 1927, according to The Times-Herald Year Book for 1928 and Citizens' Manual of Palatka and Putnam County, Florida, the roster of librarians of the little library had included "Mrs. Conway," Miss Sallie Bollinger, 1896-1905; Miss Genevieve Merrill, 1906; Miss Louise Moragne, 1906-1918; Mrs. H.M. Buck, 1919-1920; Miss Serena C. Bailey, 1921-1922; and Miss Bess MacGill, 1923-. Miss MacGill's tenure would stretch to more than thirty years, enabling her to write an interesting and authoritative "History of the Palatka Public Library" for the Palatka Times-Herald of May 21, 1953.

James Ross Mellon spent a good deal of time in the library in and around 1929, watching the children who used the facility and noticing that "space was becoming limited." He was doubtless aware, also, of the library board's anguish when, after they had saved \$5,000 toward a needed new building, they saw it "swept into the account of general funds" by the city at the end of the fiscal year. In any case, Mellon soon chose a building board headed by A. Weyman Houston and including Robert L. Wright and A.L. Teaff. The city offered the property at the corner of Third and Reid, which it had acquired in 1903 for \$800, and Mellon engaged Jacksonville architect H.J. Klutho to design the building. William J. Banks was appointed to supervise the erection of the building, "which was to be a memorial to Mrs. Mellon and to be known as the Larimer Memorial Building," with a bronze tablet to that effect in the building's main lobby.

After the building was completed and dedicated, with much fanfare and special newspaper editions, in April of 1930, James Ross Mellon would have his chauffeur park outside the facility at the noon hour "so that he could watch the children coming and going. He was greatly interested in the children from the county. Frequently he remarked that the library should be a county library."

A perceptive man, Mr. Mellon.

Not long after the dedication of the Larimer Library, James R. Mellon was honored by his fellow Kiwanians at their weekly luncheon meeting. The speaker was real estate man C.W. Loveland.

"Here in our city we have just celebrated the Dedication of the Larimer Memorial Library, a gift of our fellow Kiwanian to the city in commemoration of his beloved wife.... I believe his great purpose in erecting this memorial was to build up cultural and spiritual values in this city which for nearly half a century has served him as a winter home.

I have no doubt that he cast about in many ways to find some fitting gift to bestow on this community which had become endeared to him through many years of association. It was a happy thought which caused him to finally determine to let that gift take the form of "the poor man's University."

Fellow Kiwanians, if you have not visited the Palatka Public Library of an afternoon after 3:30 o'clock, let me implore you to do so. You will find the room crowded with earnest school children from the grammar and high school grades who are encouraged to use that institution as a laboratory by their teachers.

Teaching has vastly improved since you and I conned our lessons by rote. Today the library is an indispensable adjunct to any right scheme of education for our youth.

And friends, it seems to me that run efficiently, as our Palatka Library is run by our devoted and untiring Librarians, it is the one bright ray of hope for our youth who are beset on every side by attractions and excitements leading them to an artificial and even degrading attitude toward life....

But a Library is more even than an adjunct to our schools. It is the poor man's university. It can be made the rock on which to build an enlightened citizenry. The real curse of the world is ignorance. Illumine the human mind with intelligence and most of the ills of humanity will cease."

A perceptive man, Mr. Loveland.

In 1976 the Palatka Public Library continues to try - as it has tried for more than eighty years, to become that "rock on which to build an enlightened citizenry" - always with too few staff and insufficient funding. When the Putnam County Commission some time ago reduced its annual library allocation of \$2,200 to \$2,000 to "tighten the county budget," it prompted a resolution from the local chamber of commerce calling for more funding. Nonetheless, the constant struggle for money to improve services and to expand collections is, as the history of Palatka's public library clearly reveals, simply a matter of priorities. When the citizens of Putnam County rise up and demand better funding for libraries and other things educational, they shall have them. That is the view, at least, of one Palatka retiree who expressed his chagrin in this letter published in the Palatka Daily News of June 28, 1976.

"Editor, *Palatka Daily News*:

The Putnam County Fishing Improvement Fund apparently spent some \$3 1,000 in a year to improve fishing. The money was provided by a special \$1 assessment on each fishing license.

The County could afford only \$2,000 for public library facilities to improve the human mind. In some Florida counties a special millage is provided for library purposes.

If the citizens of Putnam County are satisfied with this rather strange ordering of priorities, they have no reason to complain that their high school graduates are unable to read or write.

Max Buck"

A perceptive man, Mr. Buck.

In 1976 the Palatka Public Library Board of Directors includes William Spalding, president; Evelyn (Mrs. Ralph) Tavel, vice-president; Geraldine (Mrs. Lynn) Burling, secretary; Jack Zahner, treasurer; and Herbert A. Wilson. The full-time library staff consists of Librarian Frances Cordray, Mary Jo Barry Waterhouse,

and Mary Hickey.

UPDATE: In 1991, the Library moved to a new 15,000 square foot headquarters on the campus of St. Johns River Community College.