

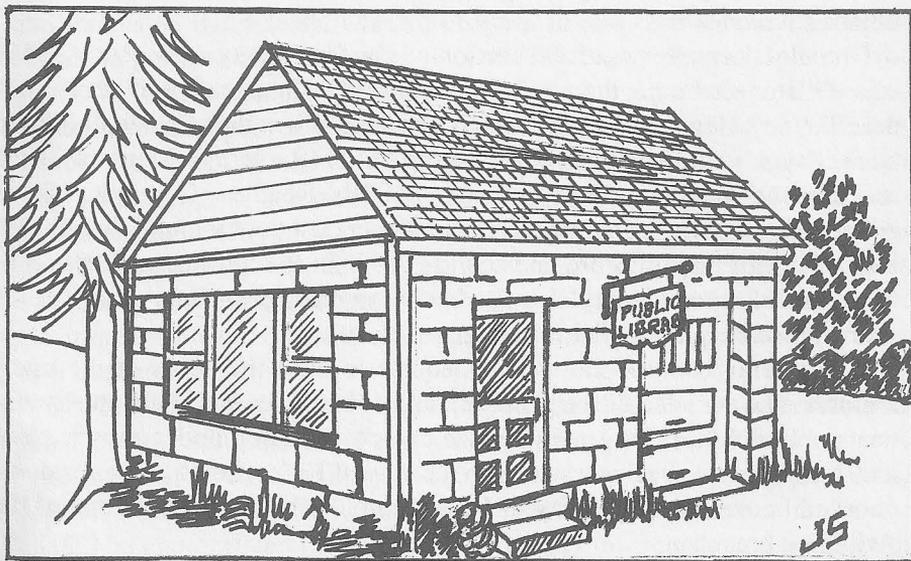
BRANCHING OF THE FAIRFAX LIBRARY: A REGIONAL ENDEAVOR

by Sophie B. Vogel

The branching of the Fairfax County Library was a regional affair. Residents of Fairfax County, the Librarian of Falls Church, taxpayers of the City of Falls Church as well as the Director of the Arlington County Public Libraries, all wished to see branch libraries established in Fairfax.

In 1952 the Fairfax County Library was thirteen years old. It consisted of one cinder block building and one bookmobile. Independent libraries existed in Herndon, Vienna, McLean and the City of Falls Church. Neighboring counties of comparable populations, Arlington County in Virginia and Montgomery County in Maryland, had centralized systems each made up of seven branches. In 1936 a Library Department of the Arlington County government had been formed when the County Board voted to support the libraries which had been unified several years earlier by a local group, the Arlington Library Association.¹ The Montgomery County Library Department had been established by the County Council in 1950.

Fairfax was a rural county wrestling with an unprecedented influx of outsiders who threatened the fabric of its existence. Military personnel and federal employees, attracted by the pastoral charm of Fairfax, chose to make it



Fairfax Library building located behind the old court house, c 1940. Drawing by Juliette Sharff.



Falls Church Public Library, May 1951.

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their home. The pressure from these new settlers for library services was great, libraries were few.

The most densely populated section of Fairfax County in the early 1950s was Willston-Culmore, the area between Bailey's Crossroads and Seven Corners. Payne's General Store at Bailey's Crossroads was the sole neighborhood store. Payne's sold sticky flypaper but no "Flit" (fly spray). Many residents relied on the Westmont shopping center, at Glebe Road and Columbia Pike in Arlington, for their necessities. One day I opened a door which I thought led into the Ben Franklin Store and found myself in the Shirlington Branch library of Arlington County! I immediately applied for a library card which was granted despite my Fairfax County address.

The Fairfax bookmobile was inadequate to meet the needs of the many children who attended the neighborhood schools: Bailey and Willston elementary public schools; St. Anthony's, the parochial school, under construction; and Juniper Lane, a private school in the City of Falls Church. Area residents checked books out of the City of Falls Church Public Library or one of the Arlington branches.

The best equipped and best funded of these was the City of Falls Church

library which was located in a large house at 934 West Broad Street. The city's population in the early 1950s was about 10,000.² Jane Nida, a professional librarian, was the library's director in 1951. Under her administration the collection grew to 15,000 books. The library budget allocation was \$3.50 per capita as compared with Arlington's \$1.67 and Fairfax's \$.31 per capita expenditure. Circulation at the Falls Church library was 15,000 books per month.³

Jane Nida and Arthur McLean, chairman of the Falls Church Library Board of Trustees, recognized that 55%-60% of their users were from Fairfax County. These non-residents willingly paid a subscription fee of \$5.00 for library privileges and many performed volunteer non-professional tasks in the library. Falls Church wanted a fixed annual appropriation from Fairfax County to help defray the cost of serving the County's users.

Some people in the City of Falls Church thought it was time for Fairfax to construct its own libraries. Fairfax residents thought annual payments to Falls Church and other jurisdictions would divert resources needed to start a branch in Fairfax.

Mildred Casgrain, a City of Falls Church resident and a part-time, non-professional employee in the Falls Church library, was a civic activist who was aware of Fairfax County's policy to help communities establish libraries in donated space. Believing that a librarian was needed to coordinate the Fairfax project, she arranged for a mutual friend to introduce me to her.

We organized the Friends of the Library, composed of citizen associations and interested individuals, which I chaired. In less than a month's time we secured a promise of rent-free quarters at 1116 Peyton Randolph Drive from the H.G. Smithy Company, owners of the Willston Apartments. Utility bills would have to be paid by the library. This offer was forwarded to the Fairfax Library Board of Trustees shortly after March 15. It was on the agenda for the May 12 meeting. At that meeting three areas of Fairfax besides Falls Church — Annandale, Jefferson Manor-Groveton and Mount Vernon — complained that library services were inadequate in their districts. Mrs. Blanche Davenport, newly appointed to represent Falls Church district on the Library Board, recommended that the Board accept the rent-free space. No action was taken by the Board.⁴

The Friends of the Library circulated petitions, which were signed by 1300 persons, requesting that the Board of Supervisors accept the free space and appropriate \$5,000 for the branch. The petition was on the agenda of the June 4, 1952 meeting. Anne Wilkins, Falls Church District, made a motion that \$5,000 be appropriated for the library from any unappropriated funds in the County's General Fund. The motion died for lack of a second. Arthur Shaffer,

Mount Vernon District, then moved that the matter be referred to the County Library Board of Trustees. Seconded by Stuart DeBell, Centreville District, the motion carried unanimously.⁵ [After the meeting ended the members of the Board engaged in an informal discussion among themselves. The farmers on the Board were apprehensive that further development would jeopardize their farms. One of them said his children were reluctant to remain on the farm and wondered if the farm were worth saving under the circumstances. A suggestion was made that an ordinance requiring building lots of five acres might stem the rate of development. As I listened, the branch library seemed a dwarfed issue. I loved the gently rolling hills, the homes and handsome herds of cattle that grazed in the fields. I could not imagine the county without them. Stuart DeBell closed the discussion by observing that the time had probably come to consider things like libraries.]

Mildred Blattner, Director of the Arlington Public Libraries, who lived in Fairfax, was a member of the Fairfax Library Board of Trustees. Arlington's main library was located in a large white house on Irving Street in Clarendon. At the Fairfax Library Board July meeting Mrs. Blattner moved to "request that the Extension Division of the Virginia State Library make a survey of the facilities and needs of the County Library as soon as it can possibly do so."⁶

Christine Coffey was assigned by the Virginia State Library to conduct the study. She completed her report in November; it was submitted to the Library Board in December.⁷ The report identified the Falls Church District as the fastest growing in the county with a 450% increase in population during the decade since 1940. The district needed improved library services. The runner-up was Mount Vernon District with an increase of 254%. Christine Coffey also recommended the addition of a library director to the county's staff.

Upon receiving the report, County Executive Carleton Massey directed the Library Board to prepare a budget to meet the library needs of the county. Mrs. Blattner (Arlington's Library Director) and Mrs. Davenport (Falls Church District representative) presented a budget totalling \$57,948 to the County Board at its January 17, 1953 meeting.

On January 28, Arthur McLean, Falls Church Library Trustee, requested \$5,000 from Fairfax County to cover the cost of services to Fairfax residents.⁸ Although this request was not granted, a mutually acceptable plan was worked out whereby \$1,000 in books was loaned to the Falls Church library and Fairfax County also provided the part-time services of a cataloger, not to exceed the amount of \$2,000.

Meanwhile the Smithy Company had withdrawn its offer of free space when no action was taken by July 1, 1952. After the library budget was approved, Mrs. Davenport asked me to submit a list of available space in the area. Again,

the two best offers came from the Willston Apartments. Mr. Horne, manager of Willston Apartments, offered space for a nominal rent of \$975 per year. It contained two rest rooms; light, heat and air-conditioning were included in the rent. In less than two weeks, the Friends of the Library secured pledges of more than \$200 to help defray the rent. A second rent-free offer was made by Mr. Finney who had a yarn and fabric shop in Willston with sufficient space in the rear for a small library.

Between May and December, the other three areas (Mount Vernon, Jefferson Manor, and Annandale) formed groups to find donated space in their districts.

Mary McCulloch was chosen to be Director of the Libraries in 1953. Under her administration, the Thomas Jefferson Library, which operated out of the rear portion of a barbershop in the Jefferson Shopping Center, opened in 1954. A second branch, the Martha Washington Library, opened the same year in the Mount Vernon District.

In 1954 Mrs. Nida left the Falls Church Library to become the Assistant Director of the Arlington Public Libraries. Three years later, when Mrs. Blattner retired, Mrs. Nida was appointed Director of the Arlington Public Libraries. During her tenure library expansion occurred in Arlington as well as in Fairfax.

Before Jane Nida retired in 1980 the resources of Arlington, Fairfax, and Falls Church libraries were "pooled," so to speak. Reciprocal privileges were made available to residents of all three counties. Regional cooperation is desirable when library budgets, per capita expenditures and library holdings are at comparable levels in all three counties.

The grass-roots movement of 1952 helped forge a network of excellent library services that is now enjoyed by the residents of the entire region.

Notes and References

Sophie B. Vogel was on staff of the Music Library at Columbia University and was the Music Librarian at Queens College in Flushing, N. Y. before moving to Falls Church (1949). Her husband was with the State Department. They moved to Arlington County in August 1953. From 1957-1980 she was librarian at Walter Reed Elementary School in Arlington. She is currently an editor of the AHS *Newsletter*.

Mrs. Jane Nida also contributed to this article.

¹ C.B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County, Virginia: A History* (Arlington: Arlington Historical Society, 1976), pp. 201-202.

² Statistics contributed by Jane Nida.

³ Minutes, Fairfax Library Board of Trustees, May 12, 1952.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Minutes, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, June 4, 1952.

⁶ Minutes, Fairfax Library Board of Trustees, June 16, 1952.

⁷ Coffey, Christine, "Report of a Survey of Certain Aspects of Public Library Service in Falls Church," November 1952 (Bound with Volume 1952 of Library Board Minutes, housed in the rare book collection of Fairfax Library).

⁸ Minutes of Fairfax Board of Supervisors, January 28, 1953. Other minutes containing references to the branch library are July 9, 1952 and January 17, 1953.