

# History of the Norfolk Public Library

Compiled,  
written, and edited by  
Peggy Haile McPhillips, City Historian



**Early 19th Century:** There were many private libraries in Norfolk during this period, notably those of Gen. Robert Taylor, Hon. Littleton W. Tazewell, Hon. William Wirt, Hon. William B. Lamb, and others. As early as 1805, advertisements appeared in the Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger announcing meetings for persons wishing to contribute to the development of a public library.

**March 22, 1827:** Saw the opening of the Lyceum, a one story brick building on the northwest corner of Wolf and Chapel Streets. Named for the place where Aristotle taught philosophy in Athens, the building housed a circulating library, and was also used for public lectures and literary association meetings. The Lyceum was opened through the efforts of William Maxwell, lawyer, who

later left Norfolk for Richmond to become editor of the Virginia Historical Register and manager of the Virginia Historical Society. The Lyceum lasted for over a decade.

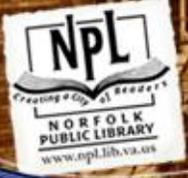
**1839:** The Lyceum building was sold to the Odd Fellows Society for \$2,000; was destroyed by fire 2-18-1859.

**1847-1850:** A library was established around this time by the Washington Institute. It was broken up during the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1855.

**1870:** Norfolk's population was 19,229. The Norfolk Library Association was organized at City Hall on 18 August that year, with Samuel Selden as the first president.

**October 1872:** The Norfolk Library Association (NLA) was chartered by the Circuit Court. Officers were Samuel Selden\*, president; F. Welborne, vice-president; T.R. Ballard,





corresponding secretary; George Chamberlain, treasurer; T.B West, librarian. The membership fee was \$5 per year for all except stockholders. Members might check out 1 book at a time for no more than 10 days. The fine for taking a book without checking it out was \$1.



Norfolk's first library opened in a large rent-free room in the Norfolk Academy building. Built in 1840, the Norfolk Academy (Bank Street) was a copy of the Grecian-Doric temple of Theseus at Athens and was designed by Thomas U. Walter of Philadelphia. C. Hall, a prominent book merchant of this city, directed the building. The Norfolk Chamber of Commerce is now housed here.

\*Samuel Selden resigned 10-1-1870 and William Selden was elected president on 11-9-1870.

**1883:** The library moved into the YMCA building on Main Street.



**1893:** Moved to the Newtown House on the corner of Granby and College Place. The house was built in 1793 and used by the Branch Bank of the U.S. and the Farmers Bank of Virginia. It was sold to George Newtown in 1828.





**1894:** The move from the Norfolk Academy building had been opposed as disadvantageous by many, and proved to be financially unwise. Even after all subscriptions had been paid, funds were still insufficient to increase the book stock. Without new books, there would be no new subscribers, hence no future income for NLA. As the library was about to be sold for debt, the stockholders consented to transfer the books to a few individuals, who would agree to pay the debts of the NLA and organize a public library.

**2-12-1894:** The Norfolk Public Library was incorporated by the General Assembly. Its affairs were vested in a self-continuing Board of 15 directors, from and by whom officers were elected: Col William Lamb, president; John L. Roper, vice president; William Henry Sargeant, librarian. Mr. Sargeant came to Norfolk from Baltimore, where he had served as librarian of the Mercantile Library.

Membership dues to the library were payable to the treasurer in advance:

\$3 per year -- for the use of the Reading Room and 1 book at a time.

\$50 -- for a 3rd rate lifetime membership, with the same privileges as above.

\$75 -- for a 2nd rate lifetime membership, giving the use of the reading room and two books at a time.

\$100 -- for a 1st rate lifetime membership, with the use of the Reading Room and three books at a time

\$500 -- for a perpetual and transferable membership, with reading room privileges, 3 books at a time, and admission to all lectures and entertainments sponsored by the Norfolk Public Library.

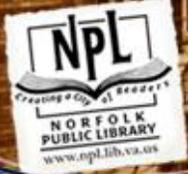
**1895** The first appropriation was made to the library by the City of Norfolk -- \$750 for the last 6 months of the year.

**1896** The first steps were taken towards the creation of a free public library. To the 3 types of paying memberships (life, annual and monthly) were added free memberships for scholars, teachers, ministers, and editors

**1897** Mr. Sargeant began to advertise in Norfolk newspapers for donations to supplement the library's collection of Virginia. For example:

"If I am over zealous in bringing the public library continually before the people, it is certainly a zealousness in good cause -- that of the people themselves. A little while ago I wanted complete files of newspapers, just because the library is the very place for them -- the place where they will do the most good. Now I am asking for copies of old city





HOTEL  
MONTICELLO

directories. A complete set ought to be somewhere easy of access, and where better than in the library?"

And so began the collection of the Sargeant Memorial Room.

**1900** Library attendance was 53,000 this year, with 26,000 books given out. Miss S.E. Taylor died, leaving \$2,000 to the library.

**1901** John B. Jenkins and Barton Myers applied to Andrew Carnegie for a grant to build the new library. They received the promise of \$50,000 on the condition that the city appropriate \$5,000 for maintenance. The children of William Selden gave land on Freemason Street as a site for the new library, and as a memorial to their father.

At his death, H.D Van Wyck bequeathed \$15,000 to the library for the purchase of a lot for a library branch.

**1902** There were 3 collections of books available to the Norfolk Public this year: the Norfolk Public Library collection, about 8,000 volumes; the YMCA library; and the Norfolk and Portsmouth Bar Association Law Library. A charter from the legislature gave city councils in Virginia the authority to appropriate up to \$5,000 a year for support and maintenance of libraries.

**10-8-1903** The cornerstone for the Carnegie Library on Freemason Street was laid under Masonic auspices by Owens Lodge. Herbert D. Hale of Boston drew the plans for the building.

**11-21-1904** Norfolk's first free public library, the Freemason Street Library opened quietly, with no special ceremonies to mark the occasion. John L. Roper was the new president.

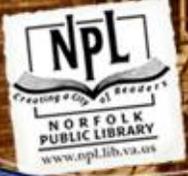
**1904** The new library had 2,712 members; 11,403 books; and a circulation of 34,225.

**1905** Anna Cogswell Wood's Irene Leach Memorial art collection had been housed on loan at the library. Its care was taken over by the Leache-Wood Alumnae Association at this time.

**10-1-1905** E.W. James, a director of the library and editor of the Lower Norfolk County Antiquary, died, leaving his collection of books and \$1,000 to the library.

Mr. Carrington Grigsby and his sister, Mrs. W.W. Galt, gave the Grigsby collection of old Norfolk newspapers to the Virginia collection.





HOTEL  
MONTICELLO

**1916** The library Board voted to use the Van Wyck bequest (see 1901) to build a branch opposite Maury High School. Application was made to Andrew Carnegie, who gave the city a grant of \$20,000 under the same conditions as his earlier grant (1901). Ferguson, Calrow and Wren drew the plans for the branch.



**5-15-1916** Van Wyck Branch, Norfolk's first branch library opened at 345 Shirley Avenue.

**1917** Mr. Sargeant died on 23 March, and in May Miss Mary Denson Pretlow became librarian.

All non-fiction books (@14,000) were reclassified to conform to the Dewey Decimal System completed in 1938.

**World War I** The library opened on Sunday afternoons during the War until August 1920. Local people donated books and magazines to be sent to servicemen, and library staff, with the assistance of enlisted men stationed here, packed them for delivery.

**6-24-1918** Capt. Roper died, and Robert M Hughes became President of the board.

**9-1918** Miss Pretlow went overseas to work with the YMCA on American military bases. Janet Carter Berkley was acting librarian for a year.

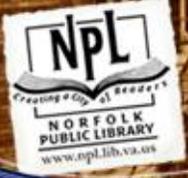
During World War I, the library acted as an agent for selling War Stamps.

The library was closed for four weeks during the influenza epidemic of October 1918.

During part of 1919 and all of 1920 the library furnished books to the Merchant Marine and the Public Health Hospital.

**4-20-1921** The Berkley branch opened.





HOTEL  
MONTICELLO



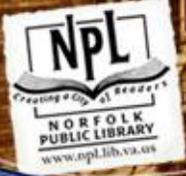
**7-19-1921** The Blyden Branch opened, the first library for blacks supported by a municipality in Virginia.

**4-26-1922** The Brambleton Branch opened at 1520 E. Brambleton Ave.



**7-21-1923** The Ocean View Branch (later Pretlow) opened on the second floor of an office building. In 1939 it was moved into a large room in Ocean View School with a separate entrance on Government Ave. It was moved to its present location in 1961.





HOTEL  
MONTICELLO



**9-24-1923** The Tanners Creek branch opened in a half-basement in Larchmont School. It would later become the Larchmont branch.



**1924-25** Government Documents on deposit were cataloged.

**1925** The library had 52,000 members, and attendance was 241,000. Norfolk was ranked 38th among 43 cities with a population of 100,000 to 200,000 in per capita budget for libraries.

**1926** The Norfolk City manager designated \$35,000 for the library's budget.

**May 1927** The opening of the Sargeant Memorial Room, with Mary Churchill Brown in charge. Due to the efforts of Mr. Sargeant and Miss Pretlow, there was finally enough Virginiana to set aside an entire room for it -- the Library Board room was fireproofed and dedicated SMR. The collection included one of the most complete files of historical newspapers in the U.S at that time. (by 1957, SMR averaged 6 patrons a day)

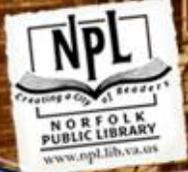


**1921-1930** saw the greatest period of growth because of the opening of many branches.

**7-1-1930** Opening of Lafayette Branch.

**1932** This was the greatest year of activity thus far (other than wartime), with circulation at 1/2 million.





HOTEL  
MONTICELLO



**1-13-1933** The library was to be opened on Sunday afternoons from 2:30 to 6:00 as an experiment of indefinite duration. (This practice was begun during World War I, but attendance dropped so sharply that the Sunday schedule had been abandoned after Armistice Day.)

**1934** With the population of Norfolk 129,710, the library boasted 50,972 members; 80,833 books; and a circulation of 385,747.

A "pay collection", begun during the Depression, lasted until 1944. Books were purchased from the fines account and placed in the pay collection. They were loaned for 10c per circulation until paid for, then put on the regular shelf.

**1937** Military Hospital Service was inaugurated by NPL, when the Junior League began this service at Norfolk General Hospital. The Women's Auxiliary at St. Vincent's began service there in 1942.

**1940** A study of the main library made by Brigham and Hughes termed the building a "formidable staircase surrounded by inadequacies and inconveniences," further stating that "the side of Norfolk's cultural development which was most often neglected was represented by its public library." The main building was too small, the seven branches were overcrowded and understaffed. Norfolk did not act on this report for more than ten years.

**1943** The Library Board voted to convey all library properties to the City of Norfolk and to turn over the operation of the library system to the City. By ordinance effective 25 November, the library ceased to be operated as a private corporation.

**1946** Land on Olney Rd. was chosen as a potential library site.

**Jan 1947** A "branch" was created at the South Pole, when 12 books from the Norfolk Public Library were loaned to Admiral Byrd's expedition.

**April 1947** John A Norton came to NPL as Director.

**1950-1952** The number of books loaned declined (298,000 in 1952; daily attendance 500)

**Oct 1951** Norton resigned.

**7-1-1952** Arthur M Kirkby, from Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, succeeded J. A. Norton as Librarian.





**1952-56** The number of books loaned increased 60% after City Council increased the book budget 2.5 times. The number of reference questions tripled.

**7-1-53** The Board engaged Alfred Morton Githens, the foremost library architect in the country, as consultant for building a new library.

**Sept 1954** A move had been made to combine the Norfolk Public Library and the Norfolk Division, College of William and Mary library. The Board issued a statement pointing out the impracticability of such a move.

**Sept 1954** A proposal was made to move the Berkley Branch to the Berkley police precinct station -- the old building was inadequate. A \$15,000 appropriation was asked. City Council delayed action on the request, ordering instead a study of the cost to rebuild.

**8-29-1955** Berkley Branch reopened in a new building at 225 E. Berkley Ave.

**7-17-1956** The City of Norfolk launched its first bookmobile to provide service to the 55,000 residents of the recently annexed Tanner's Creek area of Norfolk County.

**1956** The Friends of the Norfolk Public Library formed to get support for building a new main library.

**1957** Blyden Branch opened at 879 E. Princess Anne Road.

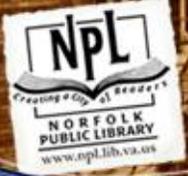
**March 1957** The Friends of the Norfolk Public Library organized. Their first annual meeting was held on 29 May. The 2400 members paid dues of 50c per year.

**1957** Harold G. Sugg suggested a new study of the prospective library site. Norfolk's population had doubled and two annexations had taken place since the Olney Rd site had been selected in 1946. The 42-room Joynes mansion, close to City Park, was recommended by several people as ideal for the new library.

**1958** Norfolk City Council called for a full study of the main library site.

**1958** Russell Munn and Keith Doms were hired by City Council to study the library and recommend specifications for a new main library building. They said "with respect to library service, Norfolk is one of the most under-privileged cities in the U.S. ... Based on per capita figures of books owned, books loaned, and dollars spent, Norfolk has about 1/3 of a library system, compared with other cities in its population group."





\$100,000 was pledged from the Munro Black fund of the Norfolk Foundation for the new building, stipulating that it must be begun within three years, and it must cost more than \$1,500,000.

In a comparison with 24 cities in the 250,000 - 500,000 population group, Norfolk ranked at the bottom with .44 books per capita, 1.77 books loaned per capita, and an expenditure of 68c per capita.

Munn and Doms recommended the relocation of Lafayette, Larchmont, and Ocean View branches; new branches to be located at Wards Corner, Five Points, the Military Highway/Little Creek Road intersection; the purchase of one additional bookmobile; the closing of the Brambleton Branch; a \$2,000,000 central library; and a greatly increased operating budget.

**8-8-1960** Second bookmobile hit the streets to serve residents of the portion of Princess Anne County (Kempsville District) recently annexed to the City of Norfolk.

**1961** Pretlow branch opened at 9640 Granby Street.

**1962** Kirn Memorial, 301 E. City Hall Ave., became the new main library for the City of Norfolk.

**1966** Janaf branch opened at 124 Janaf Shopping Center.



**1967** Little Creek branch opened at the intersection of Little Creek Rd. and Tarpon Pl.

**1968** Larchmont branch opened at 6525 Hampton Blvd.

**1970** Lafayette branch opened at 1610 Cromwell Road.





**1972** Feldman Audio-Visual Dept. opened at Kirn.

**1977** Barron F. Black branch opened at 6700 E. Tanners Creek Dr.

**1979** Park Place Multi Service Center (formerly the Black Culture Center, established in 1970) opened at 606 W. 29th Street.



**Pages from Norfolk's Past** are researched and written  
by Peggy Haile McPhillips, City Historian

