

Looking Back Stepping Forward



WYTHER-GRAYSON REGIONAL
LIBRARY

Wythe-Grayson Regional Library



Value statement

Our library plays a crucial role in the rural Southwest Virginia community, providing essential services and materials that may not be readily available. Our staff collaborates respectfully to offer professional and courteous service to our patrons. Our library is a welcoming and inclusive space for people of all ages and backgrounds, offering a range of programs and resources, including story time, media services, telescopes, voter registration assistance, and passport services. Ultimately, our goal is to enrich our community to the fullest extent possible.



Mission

The mission of the Wythe-Grayson Regional Library is to provide materials and activities for the life enriching, informational and educational needs of the individuals of Wythe and Grayson Counties and of those in the surrounding areas who request library services.

EARLY HISTORY OF WYTHE- GRAYSON REGIONAL LIBRARY

Wythe-Grayson Regional Library is celebrating 75 years of history! The theme for WGRLs 75th anniversary is “Looking Back Stepping Forward”. I have heard a lot of stories over the years, especially about the Becker Library in Independence and the citizens of both Wythe and Grayson counties promoting the development of their public libraries and in creating a joint library system for the two counties. ... The story begins with Independence and Wytheville supporting public libraries and continues as branch libraries became part of the regional system. I am Mary Thomas the current Executive Director of WGRL. Please join me on a journey looking back at our beginnings.

The story of WGRL needs to be told in several segments. The first segment starts with Pauline Bourne, the Town of Independence, and Grayson County. Parts of the story of a public library in Independence come from written accounts, oral history, photographs, and local history books. The Grayson County Public Library has furniture from the Becker Library, the Berry Clock and books that were a part of the Becker Library collection. Archived materials in the Grayson Library files include a news article by Carol Newman Jr. Additional information comes from Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures by James Stamper.

Pauline Bourne – a Vision for a Library in Grayson County VA.

In an article I found in the Grayson County Library files: “Footback Librarians of the Hills” by Carol Newman Jr. we learn about Miss Pauline Bourne and the National Youth Administration (NYA), but the focus of Newman’s article was the footback librarians and the people that benefited from this service. The article represents the heartfelt appreciation not only for the delivery of books but the time the youth spent with their patrons.

The story of the first library in Grayson County really begins with Miss Bourne and her love of reading. She was a lover of books; she knew their power. She referred to her books as her ‘silent friends’. Miss Bourne took steps toward her goal of a public library by successfully securing a book lending project, through the NYA in the latter half of 1935.

A native of Grayson County, she passed the bar in 1931 and practiced law in Independence. She was also active in the NYA – a program started by President Roosevelt as part of the New Deal. Miss. Bourne served as the local director of the NYA and hired young people as “footback librarians” to carry books to the citizens of Grayson County. Continuing from the same article mentioned above: “[Miss Bourne] conferenced with officials of the county and her NYA supervisor, W. C. Chapman, from Roanoke; she decided to work up some kind of a library.” Miss Bourne’s vision was for a library that fit the needs of the county. The article indicated that the residents, in the hills of Grayson County, rarely came into the town of Independence. In 1934 Independence was located 17 miles from the nearest rail station.



One of her goals was to place a public library in Grayson County. The plan Miss Bourne developed was to find books and take the books to families using the NYA boys and girls. In the beginning books were gathered from her personal collection while she waited for delivery of books from the State Library of Virginia located in Richmond. Books would be loaned for three months at a time. From a document: Outstanding Women of Grayson County (Laura Bryant) it recounts that “The books were sent by the State Library of Virginia in wooden chests on the train to Galax and trucked to Miss Bourne's office in Independence.” The books were housed in Miss Borne’s former law office, which became the headquarters for NYA. The NYA youth were each given a satchel filled with books to distribute. They had to go on foot. There were no other means of transportation available for them; few roads and more often than not there were no roads up to the homes they were going to. Going on foot was their best option.

At the time the article was published (date unknown) it is mentioned that the Becker Library was being built using NYA boys as there were 3000 readers being served. The library grew to holding 1729 books and 2000 magazines; it served 27 ‘isolated’ communities. Mr. Newman, the author of the article, noted that the library and the communities being served were growing.

The growth of the 'Footback Librarian Project' justified the building of the first library in Grayson County. It is recorded in different sources that Miss Bourne valued education and reading for pleasure. The support for a physical public library was a big accomplishment. Miss Bourne campaigned and secured the funds for the new library and supervised the NYA boys to build the Becker Library located on the town square in Independence. In the Outstanding Women of Grayson County document, it states that Lola "Kidd" Dickenson drew up the plans for the library. Starting in the winter of 1936 through 1937 a log cabin was built to house the library's growing collection. The plans are framed and are hanging in the Grayson County Library today. Another woman of note is Euna Faye Gentry. She also passed the bar in 1931 and served as librarian at the public library and at the high school.



Photo of the Becker Library. Date unknown.

Miss. Pauline Bourne hired young people to carry books to the citizens of Grayson County. This facilitated the development of a public library. Between the years of 1936 - 1937 a log cabin was built to house the growing library collection.

The Becker Library – the Original Grayson Library

The success and confidence of the 'Footback Librarians' drove home the need for a physical building to serve as a public library in Grayson County. Miss Bourne worked on this building project through the NYA. Donations of money and materials had to be found. The Grayson County Supervisors at the time could offer encouragement and moral support for the project and property for the building. Support came from all over, including as far away as Washington D.C. Florence Becker, widow to the noted geologist George Ferdinand Becker, was the main contributor to the library project. The Becker Library was dedicated on July 4, 1937.

Mrs. Becker gave several gifts to the library including two chairs and a desk that were used by George Becker and which are in the Grayson County Library today. She also gave fifty books to the library. The Grayson Library also has "the Berry Clock" which was presented by Miss Rosamond Berry of Lynchburg, VA.

In looking at the writings about the Becker Library and the project to bring books to as many people in the county as possible I found a statement that is particularly interesting for today: “Not everyone is in favor of everything the Government is doing, but when people enjoy books and see other people enjoying them, they forget politics.”

The Becker Library operated continuously until 1942. After 1942 the library operated sporadically until 1948. In 1948, an agreement was made between the Becker Library, (also known at the time as the Grayson County Library), and the Wytheville School and Public Library, in Wytheville, Virginia.



BOOKMOBILE

1935- 1948

The Wythe-Grayson Regional Library honors the early history of the Wytheville Library, initiation of Bookmobile service, and ultimately the creation of the Regional Library System, and the growth in services provided at each branch library. Looking back at the formation of libraries in both counties has been both enlightening and fascinating. The Grayson County Library started in 1934 with one woman's vision. The Wytheville Library had its start in the mid 1920's, culminating in the formation of the Wythe County Public Library in the 1970's. In part two of this series, we look back at the history of the library in Wytheville, and the development of the Wythe-Grayson Regional Library. I am Mary Thomas the current Executive Director of Wythe-Grayson Regional Library system. Please join me as I continue to present the rich history of library service to the residents of Wythe and Grayson Counties.

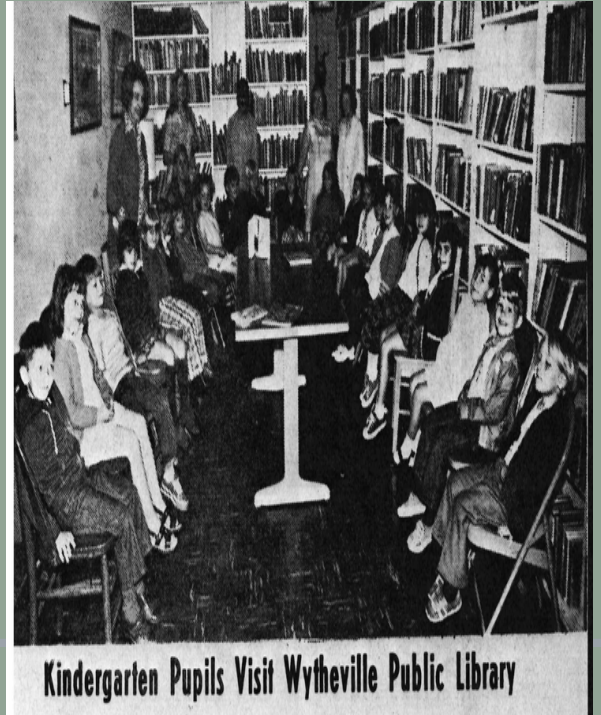
The early history of the Wytheville Library, or later known as the Wytheville Public and School Library, is limited to a few public records. The first record that I could find for the Wytheville Public Library dates to 1925 from an annual report sent to the State Library of Virginia. Mrs. R. L. Peirce is listed as the librarian and the library was open for three hours per week. The next record I found was from a 1938 annual report to the State Library of Virginia; the name of the library was The Wytheville Public and School Library, and the librarian at the time was recorded as Virginia U. Sumner.

The Library in Wytheville changed locations, as well as names, over the years. In 1925 the library was in a white frame house located on Church Street across from the Wytheville Baptist Church. In 1960 the library moved to 270 West Spring Street. Later, the library moved to a storefront between a flower shop and a beauty shop on North Tazewell Street. The library's name was changed to the Wytheville Public Library when located on North Tazewell Street. In 1979 the Wythe County Public Library opened at 300 East Monroe Street, its current location.



THE PATH TO STATE FUNDING: COUNTY LIBRARY RESOLUTION

In a letter dated July 12, 1942, from H. B. Zabriskie to the Works Progress Administration (WPA)-- another program of President Roosevelt's New Deal-- I read that WPA assistance to public libraries would be suspended on July 15. Mr. Zabriskie was seeking alternatives for funding to help keep a library in Galax going. His letter indicated that the Galax Business and Professional Women's Club was the sponsor of the Galax Public Library and funding was needed. There are several letters during this period seeking financial assistance for the Galax Library. The response from the Extension Division, a part of the State Library of Virginia, was a suggestion to create a county library system because county library systems could qualify for state aid. In a letter to the Galax Public Library committee (June 17, 1942) it was suggested that the Grayson County Supervisors could create a County Library system under specific library codes. With the formation of a county library system, applying for state aid would then be possible.



In a September, 1945 letter to Mr. John H. Crowley, Superintendent of Wythe County Schools, Miss Earnestine Grafton, Head of Virginia Extension Library Division, indicated that while attending a conference in Williamsburg (July 1945), Miss Frances Richmond, the School Librarian advised her (Miss Grafton) of planned expansion of library services for Wythe County. This letter was copied to Miss Richmond, Librarian, Wytheville Public and School Library.

The collection of letters in WGRL's files skips to 1947, when the Grayson County Supervisors agreed to establish a County Library System and appoint a library board consisting of individuals from Fries, Independence, and Galax. At the end of 1947 a letter from Berta Feaganes, the Librarian for Wytheville Public and School Library states the composition of a board of trustees of five men from the towns and districts of Wythe County. On February 9, 1948, the Grayson County Supervisors passed a resolution to create a Grayson County public library system. There is no record in our files of Wythe County creating a county library system.

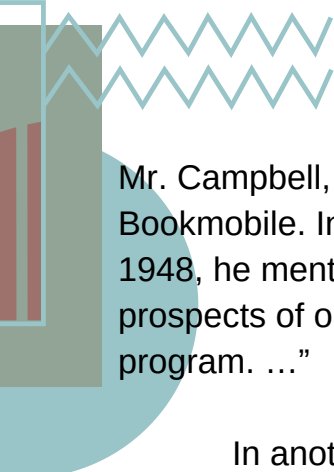
A memo in our files (no date specified) – is headed “Suggested Carroll-Grayson Regional Library Headquarters to be in the town of Galax (which is in both counties).” It lists populations, service area and, handwritten in, are funding amounts from each county meeting the listed local funds required. There is mention of traveling librarians that go to the schools in both Grayson and Carroll Counties. No spoilers here, we know that a Carroll-Grayson regional library system was never formed. However, when the Grayson County Library system was formed it included the Grayson and Galax Public Libraries. At the time, the Grayson County Library system laid the groundwork for the strong cooperative atmosphere that exists today between the current Wythe-Grayson Regional Library (WGRL) and the Galax-Carroll

With the officially formed Grayson County Library in 1948, the system qualified for State Aid. On February 13, 1948, Miss Rose Thomas Smith, Librarian, Grayson County Library system was informed of the approval of \$5,000 in state aid. The letter goes on to confirm the composition of the new board of trustees for the combined Galax Public Library and Grayson County Library. The letter also acknowledges the added tasks of the Galax Library being the headquarters for the county libraries. This is also the first letter that mentions a bookmobile. Specifically, that “Mr. Campbell, [member of the board of trustees], hopes to hire a veteran for the bookmobile driver”.

BOOKMOBLIE SERVICE

The mention of a bookmobile comes from a letter dated at the end of February 1948 addressed to Miss Grafton from the Grayson County Library. The letter recounts a presentation to the Business and Professional Women’s Club about the bookmobile. The signature on the letter is not legible, but I assume it to be Miss Rose Smith. The letter states, “There is a great deal of interest in [the Bookmobile] locally, especially in this club which sponsors the Galax Public Library. The club is planning on more information on the extent of services at their March meeting.”






Mr. Campbell, a Grayson County Trustee, notified Miss Grafton of the order for the Bookmobile. In a follow up letter from Mr. Campbell to the Extension Division, in May of 1948, he mentions meeting with Mr. Poole (Wythe County) and discussing the "... prospects of our two counties [Grayson and Wythe] joined together in a regional library program. ..."


In another letter from Mr. Campbell (June 1948) to Miss Grafton, he states that there will be an informal presentation of the Bookmobile at the Grayson County Supervisors meeting on June 14, with a plan to take the Bookmobile on the following day up to Wytheville to show the Wythe County Board of Supervisors. He states "... It is my impression that the Board will be receptive to our program. ..."

Bookmobile services were reported as having over 900 books went out in July of 1948 in Grayson County. During this month the Wythe County Board of Supervisors decided to cooperate in the bookmobile regional library services. In a letter Miss Smith indicated that they "were busy trying to keep the shelves full." The first trial run in Wythe County was in early October 1948, starting with service to schools in Wythe County covering Lead Mines, Max Meadows and Austinville. In a letter from Miss Rose, she stated that "...the children were delighted that they really [were] having library services. ...". Several other trial runs were planned to service a total of 11 schools in Wythe County. In another letter Miss Smith indicates the bookmobile circulated over 1400 books throughout the regional system in November 1948.



Wythe-Grayson Regional Library Agreement

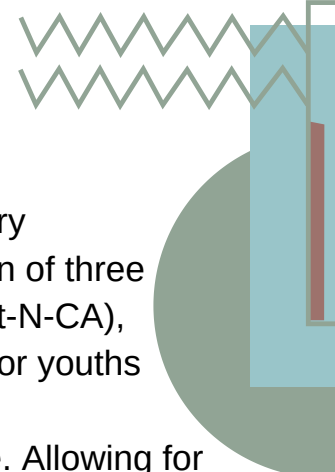

With the initiation of the bookmobile, it appears that, in a manner of a few months, the concept of a regional library was discussed and then approved by the supervisors of both Grayson and Wythe Counties. Miss Grafton (from the Extension Division of the State Library of Virginia) was the 'go-to person' for information on regional library formation in the state. There is a memo from her to Rose Thomas Smith, Librarian, concerning the Grayson-Wythe Regional Library. Yes, Grayson's name is mentioned first in the memo. "On the basis of the enclosed resolution from Wythe County, the telegram of approval from Grayson County and the budget with incomes already approved by the various agencies, the parties concerned asked that the Extension Librarian present a request for a regional library State Aid Grant to the State Librarian and the State Library Board for consideration in the July 16 State Library quarterly board meeting." The memo goes on to say that the counties expect to have an agreement by early August (1948). Included in the memo is mention of the Bookmobile and that routes into Wythe County would begin as soon as the "Application to Qualify for State Aid" documents had been signed. It is interesting to note that letterheads and further communication from the regional library to the State Library have the name as Wythe-Grayson Regional Library.



REGIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE IS FORMED

The Regional Library Contract between Grayson and Wythe was signed by Grayson County on August 19 and Wythe County on August 24, 1948. The appointed board of trustees for the new regional library system were L. R. Campbell of Independence, in Grayson County; R. K. Poole of Wytheville, in Wythe County; Miss Celene Phipps of Galax, Grayson County; James Crockett of Wytheville; Burt Hudy of Elk Creek, Grayson County; and Fendall R. Ellis, Wytheville. Mr. Ellis was the Wythe County, Superintendent of Schools.






Over the past 75 years, the Regional Library system has expanded library collections, programs, and services. Expansion also includes the addition of three branch libraries, creation of the Mountain Network Catalog Consortia (Mt-N-CA), initiation of outreach services to homebound individuals, and programs for youths and adults.


With the addition of branch libraries came an increased in collection size. Allowing for greater diversity in the types of materials available to loan to library patrons (we are not just books anymore). Each of our five libraries offers Public Access Computers (PAC), free WiFi, and most recently the addition of privacy booths at the Wythe, Grayson, and Whitetop Libraries. All our libraries offer (for a nominal fee) copy, printing, and fax services The Grayson and Wythe Libraries serve as Passport Acceptance Facilities.

New Main Library Buildings and Branch Libraries join WGRL

In 1960, citizens of Wytheville formed the Wytheville Library Association to obtain additional library services, beyond the bookmobile, for the Town of Wytheville. They established their own library in the town. According to a document compiled in 1974 by Donna Brown, it is implied that Wythe County up until this point, only had library services provided by the bookmobile. The Wytheville Library Association joined the Regional Library system on June 25, 1960. The contract states the “desire to establish in the Town of Wytheville a branch library of the Wythe-Grayson Regional Library to serve the library needs of the Town of Wytheville”. At some point after this agreement the Wytheville Library moved into the North Tazewell Street location. The contract between WGRL and Galax Public Library was updated on June 5, 1962. The Galax Public Library at this time was considered a branch of the Regional Library. (GCRL recently celebrated its 45th anniversary).



In the late 60's the Wythe-Grayson Regional Library Board, determined that more space was needed for the collection, library operations and regional services. A new building was completed in 1973 and is the current Grayson County Public Library and headquarters for the Regional Offices. This was also the year the board hired a professional librarian to improve the services of the Regional Library (according to the 1974 review by Donne Brown). Miss Martha A Carter is noted in the September 1973 board minutes as the Librarian for the Wythe-Grayson Regional Library. The Wytheville Public Library Association, in reviewing the collection size and use of the facility on Tazewell Street also determined in the mid 70's that a larger facility was needed. The current location of the Wythe County Public Library on East Monroe Street was dedicated in 1979.



A branch library opened in the Town of Fries, in the Community Center (formerly the old YMCA building) in April 1996 as recorded in a 2007 “History of WGRL” document by Michael Gilley, Executive Director at that time. The Fries Library serves the Town of Fries and surrounding area. In the past few years, the Fries Library overcame a major challenge and has come through with a warm and inviting library space. The library is currently open three days a week and the view of the New River creates a peaceful feeling in this library.

The Whitetop Public Library opened to the public in August 1996. Originally located in a rented space off U S Route 58 in Whitetop, this branch library outgrew its space, and an alternative site was sought.

The library was moved into its present space in the Whitetop Community Center in 2006 and the library continues to operate in this location. The view from the back windows of the library is spectacular at any time of the year but especially in the fall.

According to a “Brief History of Rural Retreat Public Library” (Courtesy of Sandy Vernon) a library started in 1999 through the efforts of the Friends of the Rural Retreat Public Library. The Friends group found a temporary facility near Interstate 81 and leased space. They started the process of establishing a library with donations from the public.

The Friends of the Rural Retreat Library sought a permanent location for the library. In late 2000, a potential location was found. The Friends made a monumental effort to secure funds and as group they took a leap of faith and secured a mortgage to purchase an old house not far from the elementary school. The library closed for a short period to make necessary renovations on the house to make it function as a public library. This more than a century-old building has charm and character of a county cottage. This is the perfect place to sit in the front ‘parlor’ and relax with your favorite book. The Friends of the Rural Retreat Library have scrapbooks, created by Evelyn Lahman, documenting the early years of the RRPL.






Outreach Services

Outreach services originated with the 'footback librarians' in Grayson County. The service expanded to include Grayson County and Wytheville with the purchase of a bookmobile in 1948, which continued until May 2000. The service at that point changed to a delivery service to homebound patrons in Wythe and Grayson Counties.


In 1994 WGRL and Galax Carroll Regional Library formed the Mountain Network Catalog (Mt-N-Cat). The purpose was to have a joint automated system. The spirit of the bookmobile has adapted over the years and continues today, as courier service to move books from one library to another as requested by patrons using the shared online catalog or for home delivery to qualified patrons. Over its 75-year history, the Wythe-Grayson Regional Library has grown into a five-library system in a consortia relationship with the Galax-Carroll Regional Library and maintains outreach services to patrons in Wythe and Grayson Counties. Recently the libraries went fine free, this was a huge positive change for everyone.

Looking Forward

WGRL libraries are more than books on the shelves. WGRL libraries offer a wide range of items, books included, for checkout. The library collection includes books, audiobooks, DVDs, Music CDs, newspapers, and magazines. Our libraries also have mobile hot spots, ereaders, STEM kits, Book Club kits and the Grayson Library has a telescope. Our collections continue to expand and be redefined by patron requests. During our Strategic planning sessions with the public, there were suggestions of including more 'things' as part of our collection. From our redesigned website more resource more materials, recourses and databases are available. All Wythe and Grayson County residents have access to Overdrive/Libby, Worldbook Student, Kanopy, Ancestry Library Edition (in house only) and a variety of Databases.



WGRL's goal is to offer programs free of charge to the public. We have and continues to offer programs for children, teens, and adults. Many of our programs come from recommendations from our library users. June through July our libraries are busy with Summer Reading programs. Storytime for children is always popular during the school year. Currently programs for adults range from recipe swaps to game nights, movies to book clubs, Trivia night to Dungeons and Dragon. Programs offering live music, storytelling and author talks always draw a crowd. Music at the Rural Retreat Gazebo on a summer evening is always a delight. Ukrainian Egg decorating, a long running popular program, is so much fun.



OUR FIVE LIBRARIES



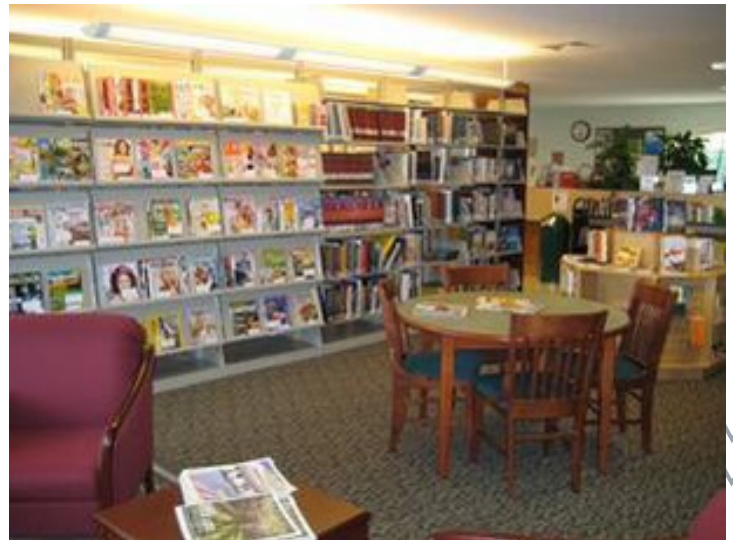
Fries Public Library
105 West Main St.
Fries, Va.



Grayson Public Library
147 South Independence Ave.
Independence, Va.



Rural Retreat Public Library
119 North Greever St.
Rural Retrea, Va.



Whitetop Public Library
16309 Highlands Parkway
Whitetop, Va.



Wythe County Public Library
300 East Monroe St.
Wytheville, Va.