

**History of the Southport Library**  
**Southport, North Carolina**  
**The Margaret and James Harper, Jr. Branch of the**  
**Brunswick County Public Library System**

**Portfolio Artifact**

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The Southport area was explored as early as the 1500's by Spanish explorers (Wikipedia, 2012.) It is a community steeped in various historical events. In 1744 Governor Gabriel Johnston designated a committee to choose the most beneficial location to construct a fort to defend the Cape Fear River region from privateers, pirates and Spanish aggressors. In 1748 the construction of Fort Johnston began at the mouth of the Caro Fear. Southport, originally named Smithville, developed around this fort. Smithville was named after Benjamin Smith who had served in the Revolutionary War under George Washington and was later elected governor of North Carolina. It was the seat of Brunswick County from 1808-1977. It was renamed Southport in 1887 as plans were promoted to transform the village into a major southern port (Wikipedia, 2012.)

In 1775, American patriots destroyed Fort Johnston by burning. In 1778, the North Carolina General Assembly granted the funds to rebuild this consequential structure. In June of 1881, Signal Corps (United States Army) reoccupied the fort. The facility became the home of the Weather Bureau, United States Army Corps of Engineers, Surveying Corps and in 1912, a public library for Southport was opened in the old Garrison house at the site of Fort Johnston.

The announcement of the new library was quite an event as displayed in the August 22, 1912 copy of the Southport News as stated below:

**Opening to the Southport Public Library**

*The president and members of the Civic League cordially invite everybody to be present at the opening of the Southport Public Library, which will take place this (Thursday) evening at 8 o'clock. Mrs. Addie Jones has arranged a most attractive musical program, and Chaplain Springer, of Fort Caswell, the silver-tongued orator of the army, will deliver the address.*

*This interesting function marks a new era in the city of Southport, and it is hoped that everyone who possibly can will attend.*

*Through the courtesy of Maj. Stickle, U.S. Engineer in charge of government work, the east wing of the Garrison building has been acquired for the Library and nearly 500 books have been generously donated by friends and bought by the Civic League, who have labored untiringly to establish this most excellent institution.*

*As this Library is not endowed but is absolutely dependent upon the energies of the Civic League, it is expected that a large crowd from both Southport and Fort Caswell will be in attendance at the lawn party ceremonies. A number of young ladies will serve cool and delicious refreshments on daintily appointed tables by moonlight, and around the various diversions will be the voting of a handsomely frosted cake to the most popular young lady of Southport and a fish pond where both children and grown-ups can "try their luck and be surprised."*

*-H.K. White*

The following edition of the *Southport News* reported on the grand event and it was stated, "How much more, when there is opened, here, a free mine of the richest treasure of the age. You are proud of this old Garrison, with its military glories; you are pleased to be the county seat, and to have a voice in the State Legislature; you were elated the railroad came, offering the boost of machinery; and you want mills and factories; but the diffusion of these silent teachers -books- through your whole community is to work greater effects than ARTILLERY, MACHINERY OR LEGISLATION." The association of books with their readers is unlike any other between objects and their users, the mere possession of a book implies social standing (Manguel, 1997.) There was talk of how this library would arouse civic pride and spirit and give the people something worthy of which to build a solid foundation for the structure of their personal character.

During this era, America was thought of as a nation with an abundance of libraries. However, this was not the case in the Southern states. Public libraries were a great rarity in North Carolina in the 1900's (Valentine, 1996.) North Carolina at the turn of the century was driven by racial and political distrust, its citizens were poor and poorly educated, and higher literate culture existed in only scattered pockets (Valentine, 1996.) Changes in the cultural and social setting of the South were slow to diverge and monetary wealth was often sparsely located. Many North Carolina cities and towns requested funds in the form of grants from industrialist and philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie. He strongly believed that those of great fortune should disperse their wealth throughout their communities and nation for the greater good of the people as a whole. Library construction was part of his vision for "the improvement of mankind" (Murray, 2009.) Carnegie's generosity was responsible for 1,670 public libraries in 1,412 American communities at an expense of \$40 million before he died in the year 1919 (Murray, 2009.)

Southport grew into an active fishing village and military town with the help of its practical location. It was regularly serviced by a river steamer until 1925 and served by railroad from 1911 to World War II (Southport Historical Society, 2012.) This bustling town relied not only on the philanthropy of outside sources for their library facility, but the camaraderie of its townspeople.

Through books and periodicals, Americans were addressing other Americans in print, stimulating intercolonial communication that fostered a growing sense of unity (Murray, 2009.) In January of 1912, Progressive Teas for the benefit of Southport's own public library were in full swing under the auspices of the Civic League and in June of 1913, Emma Thompson White, the recorder for the library noted that \$15 of library funds be paid for the purchase of books and book cases and the minutes for meetings be kept from that day forward. It was also noted that a second library room (in the Garrison House of Fort Johnston) be "put in proper condition" for a reading room. In 1915, the Civic League secured an appropriation of \$4 per month for the library from the city council and in 1927, the City of Southport and the Brunswick County Commissioners agreed to pay \$60 per year for a librarian's salary. The library at that time had 7,026 books in its collection (The State Port Pilot.)

In August 1955, the Southport Public Library moved from its quarters in the Garrison building to a room in the community building and in 1959 it was moved to the second floor of the town's City Hall in Franklin Square. A state librarian was invited to make recommendations for the improvement of the collection. It was discovered that if the Southport Library was to operate on a county-side level, it would be eligible for state and federal funding. The library was reorganized and the Southport Woman's Club (formerly the Civic League) stepped down from its instructional position and the City of Southport became the governing body of the institution. At this time, Brunswick County agreed to match the city's contribution and each group appointed trustees to the board. Mrs. James M. Harper, Jr. (Margaret) was one of those appointed.

Margaret and her husband, James M. Harper, Jr. were instrumental in the shaping of this coastal town. James Harper became the editor and publisher of *The State Port Pilot* in 1935, adopting the motto, "A good newspaper in a good community" (Calhoun, 2004.) Margaret assisted her husband with the operations of the newspaper business and also employed many endeavors of her own. She operated the Stevens Insurance Agency, a business established in 1890 by her maternal grandfather. Mrs. Harper was secretary treasurer of the North Carolina Press Association, president of North Carolina Democratic Women, North Carolina Press Women, and the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs. She served on the board of numerous committees and institutions including the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in 1968 she became the first woman in North Carolina to seek the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor receiving 148,613 votes and carrying five counties (Margaret Taylor Harper papers, 1987.) Mr. and Mrs. Harper were strong advocates for the now City of Southport and were instrumental in the positive growth of this seaside community.

The Brunswick County Board of Commissioners was approached by a library representative in August of 1959 to renew their request for the County to budget funds for the library facilities, including the purchase of a library bookmobile (Hickman, 1959.) A motion that the sum of \$2,400 be allocated for the library facilities for that year was accepted and in 1960, the bookmobile arrived at the Southport Public Library. This extension of the library and its resources served to

support the rural patrons of the county. This service was essential to reach the children and elderly citizens of the county that could not easily connect with the library and its collection. It remained in operation until recently when the demand for its usage diminished due to the ease of information retrieval by internet access.

Prior to the issuance of the bookmobile, it was decided that the Southport Public Library needed to be once again relocated into a building of its own to house its ever-growing collection. Meetings were held and plans began to take shape. In January of 1967, the Southport Board of Aldermen decided to purchase the E.H. Cramer House on Moore Street. The ground breaking ceremonies for the new \$77,000 building of the Southport-Brunswick County Library on Moore Street were held (State Port Pilot.) In March of 1968, the construction of the new library building was near completion and the community excitedly awaited the opening of their new edifice.

The members of the Southport volunteer fire department assembled shelves for the new library and a dogwood planting project by the members of the Woodbine Garden Club helped in the landscaping efforts of the new building. Keeping with their civic pride and spirit, these efforts once again showed the involvement of the citizens in the improvement of their hometown. Volunteers are still relied upon to help shelve books and contribute to other needs that the library may incur. The "Friends of the Library" hold used book sales each month to offer monetary donations to their local Southport Branch.

In 1973, the library officially and legally came under county control due to a North Carolina General Statute change. The library was now a part of the Brunswick County library system including: the Rourk Library in Shallotte and the Leland library. In 1994, the G.V. Barbee Sr. Library was built adding the fourth branch to the system. The Hickmans Crossroad Library opened in 2004. It moved to its current location in 2018 and was renamed the Southwest Brunswick Branch Library. The library system originated in Southport and each of these branches has credited Mrs. Harper as the guiding light of the library system's growth (Calhoun, 2004.)

In 2004, the Southport Public Library was officially renamed The Margaret and James Harper Jr. Library. At the christening ceremony, Margaret Harper stated she "was carrying on the work of her mother, Jessie Stevens Taylor, a founding member of the Southport Woman's Club that established what later became the public library." She described the development of what began as a grassroots movement that culminated in the dedication of the current Moore Street Building.

Many of the libraries of such early beginnings fell victim to a number of detrimental circumstances. The support of these institutions needed to address all phase of library work: staff, books and services, rather than just buildings (Valentine, 1996.) Fortunately, The Southport Library is still very active in our community today. Mrs. Signa Simpson has worked with the Brunswick County library system for the past 12 years and is enjoying her 4<sup>th</sup> year as branch manager in the Harper Library. They employ a staff of four and the collection has grown to

incorporate the most recent releases in keeping with present wants and needs. Patrons are able to take advantage of an interlibrary loan service which broadens the scope and availability of the literature that is made available to them.

The first-grade teachers of Southport Elementary School take their students on a field trip to the library where Mrs. Simpson gives them a tour of the library, engages them in an active story-time period, and encourages them to have their parents bring them to the library where they can register for their own Brunswick County library cards. Each year the library runs an extensive summer reading program for the youth of the Southport community. Outside agencies such as the Fort Fisher Aquarium, Fossil Hunters, puppeteers, magicians and story tellers amuse and entertain these students and enforce the importance of literacy in not only their lives, but their family's lives as well.

Not only does the library have a separate and whimsical room for the young people that visits, but it also has a large inventory of movies and a nice selection of books on tape. The library boasts an expansive North Carolina section which documents much of our state's rich history and is certain to captivate those who hold an interest in past events. The computer lab is an increasingly active area and is visited by many on a daily basis. Upon entering, the foyer offers an array of pamphlets and papers to inform patrons of local area events and classes that are available through the Brunswick County library system.

The main determinant for local philanthropy appears to have been fortuitous local circumstance, to wit, a wealthy local person or family with an interest in library work, civic pride, and the opportunity to create family memorial (Valentine 1996.) Mrs. Harper and her family past and present have been monumental in filling the needs of the community in which they were a part. They have had an enormous influence on the "civic pride" of those who have been able to enjoy their years of hard work and dedication. She stated at the christening of the library renamed in she and her husband's honor, "A good community needs a good hospital, good churches, good schools and a good library" all of which she and her husband were instrumental in providing for the City of Southport.

Next month, August of 2012, the Margaret and James Harper, Jr. Library will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the Smithville Township of which it began. The city still exudes the small-town charm of its historical past with a present population of around 2,500 full time residents. The Garrison House of Fort Johnston, the former City Hall in Franklin Square and numerous other building of days gone by still line the oak-shaded streets of this Cape Fear River community. We are very fortunate that Mr. and Mrs. Harper had the insight to fulfill these basic needs which have made Southport and the people who inhabit the area more knowledgeable of their history and have better prepared them for success in their futures.



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