GFWC LIBRARIES
A History of GFWC Clubs Establishing and Supporting Public Libraries
When we asked clubs to contribute articles about how their histories are connected to libraries, there was an enthusiastic outpouring. It served as a welcome reminder of how GFWC’s past is interwoven with the establishment of libraries in this country. We want to thank the clubs who contributed articles that helped us piece that history together.

The library origin stories often follow a similar pattern: GFWC clubs had a few shelves of books, and were eventually inspired to collect more and establish reading rooms in their clubhouses. Sometimes an individual clubwoman would donate her whole book collection to get things started, like Erna Krauch, Second Vice President of the Sun City Center Woman’s Club (Florida), who donated 500 of her own books to launch the Sun City Center Library in 1962. The Coral Gables Woman’s Club (Florida) was able to obtain their first 300 books for a library by actually writing letters to the authors to request copies.

Clubs would have members bring books to meetings, as well as collect book donations from the community. The Community Woman’s Club (Florida) made the donation of at least one book part of their $1 membership due, while the Williston Woman’s Club (Florida) had members donate 15 cents whenever they borrowed a book, and used those profits to buy *Emily Post’s Etiquette* to present to the local Girl Scout Troop that the club sponsored.

Eventually clubs had enough books that a larger room was necessary, and so they fundraised to open a library to the public. GFWC clubwomen maintained the libraries, encouraged book donations, and served as librarians, like the High Springs Woman’s Club (Florida), who had a library in their tearoom where individual members served as the librarian one day a week. The club libraries began as a way for members to have access to literature, but in the last decade of the 19th century, many clubs started to widen their scope and develop libraries as a form of community service.

Once the library had been established in the community, it often made several moves to larger buildings as the number of books expanded, because GFWC libraries seemed to have nothing but continual success. The difference in the type of building could be drastically different, as having space was the main priority. For example, the

*Coco Plum Woman’s Club Library (Florida), providing a free library for a community where there were no public libraries.*
Collinsville Study Club’s (Alabama) library was initially in a room over the State National Bank, then it moved to the McWhorter building where there was a bus station, and then it spent its next 25 years in a room in the Presbyterian Church. When a county library system was placed on the South of Okaloosa County ballot and it didn’t pass, the Woman’s Club of Crestview (Florida) took over the library. They put it in an apartment and then moved it to a shopping center when the library grew. Sometimes after a club established a library, more libraries popped up over the time. But sometimes the GFWC library was still the only access that the community had. For example, the Marianna Woman’s Club (Florida) started a library in their clubhouse, and it was the only public library in the area for the next 26 years.

Many clubs made the establishment of libraries one of their first projects. The Woman’s Club of Miami (Florida), originally called The Married Ladies’ Afternoon Club, started as a group in 1900 that met on each other’s porches to visit and read. They made it their mission to collect and circulate books through Miami, and eventually they had an overflowing library. They successfully campaigned Miami’s largest landowner for a clubhouse and public library to be built.

Urbanization in the late 19th century meant that cities were more likely to fund libraries. However, that was not true for more rural and isolated areas. They did not have the same access to reading materials, and so several GFWC clubs made it their mission to change that, such as the Collinsville Study Club (Alabama) who organized in 1929. Three quarters of the founding members had attended college, and so they valued education, and wanted to fulfill the cultural needs of their small, rural town. Another example is the Arlington Woman’s Club (Florida), which began as a lending library with Mrs. Colcord, eventual first president of the club, keeping books on her grocery store shelf to lend to the readers in the rural area. In time they bought a clubhouse where they kept the books. A consolidated school opened nearby, so for 24 years, students walked with their teachers to the clubhouse every Friday afternoon to pick up books.

Clubs sometimes packed books in trunks that had shelves and brought them to several communities. These traveling libraries were introduced in part to be advantageous to smaller communities. Some of the areas that GFWC clubwomen transported the books to included mountain districts, country neighborhoods, and mining camps. The
The Coco Plum Woman’s Club (Florida) created their Book Wagon in 1948, and it was driven to three locations.
where eager children, some who had walked or biked long distances just to be able to use it, were waiting to receive books. The Camden Women’s Club (Maine) helped out students by creating a summer reading program for children at their local public library in the 1960s to inspire them to keep up with books even after the school year was over.

It’s the perfect example of how even when clubwomen didn’t develop a library, they were still invested in encouraging reading.
Students weren’t the only ones who took advantage of GFWC's commitment to libraries. The first documented reading room in West Palm Beach was at Union Church, and it served many groups, including the Ladies Union for Philanthropic Purposes (eventually GFWC Greater West Palm Beach, Florida), who provided literature to the men’s club that met there. GFWC clubs were committed to sharing free books wherever they could.

When GFWC clubs realized that their communities could use a library, they didn’t just sit back and wait; they took action. The Satellite Beach Woman’s Club (Florida), for example, saw a gap in their community and approached the mayor and city council to express the need for a library. This initiative led to the creation of committees to figure out the construction and finances. The Orange Park Woman’s Club (Florida) made use of networking by collaborating with sister clubs to develop a countywide library system in their community.

Philanthropist Andrew Carnegie funded the building of over one thousand libraries in the United States. He was a resource to many GFWC clubs who wanted to create a library in their area, including the Tampa Women’s Club (Florida) and the Gainesville Woman’s Club (Florida). They petitioned and pushed for their city councils to accept grants to establish libraries in their respective cities. While GFWC clubwomen did a lot of fundraising, they also often lobbied for public funding so that the library could get the support that it needed and deserved.

Even when disaster struck, it didn’t stop GFWC clubwomen. The Stuart Woman’s Club (Florida) established a library in 1916, but a Category 3 hurricane took the roof of the library and destroyed the books inside in 1933. The determined clubwomen deeded the land to the city, secured federal funds for rebuilding, and held a book drive to restock the library. The city returned the property to the club in 1934. Another example of GFWC clubwomen taking action when something threatened libraries was the Crystal River Woman’s Club (Florida), who established the first public library in Crystal River in 1964. Years later, severe budget cuts meant the library would likely close since it was already paid for, and closing down other branches with remaining loans wouldn’t be effective. Clubwomen protested by contacting the library department head and county commissioners, and showing up all together in their yellow shirts at the proposed closing to protect one of their club’s legacies. The opposition worked, and the library is still open today.

In the midst of World War II, GFWC outlined a National Defense Program, and one of its tenets included developing libraries so that citizens could stay knowledgeable. Many clubs took up the challenge, which shows how libraries have always been a priority for GFWC clubwomen. Because of both World War II and the Great Depression, the Collinsville Study Club (Alabama) decided to focus on civic projects to help citizens. Its first large community project was hosting a “Book Tea” to collect books that would help them eventually start a public library.
Due to the Work Projects Administration (WPA) operating during the Great Depression, public projects were carried out all over the country. The Milton Woman’s Club (Florida) opened the Santa Rosa Library in their clubhouse in 1939, and the WPA hired a librarian and donated 500 books to them.

To get the ball rolling for libraries, GFWC clubwomen pulled up their sleeves and got to fundraising. In 1976, when the Lake Placid Woman’s Club (Florida) realized their clubhouse library had outgrown its space, they placed Penny Pots around town, advertising that they wanted 500,000 pennies to fund the completion of a new and bigger library room.

Another way GFWC clubwomen supported libraries was by forming Friends of the Library groups, which are non-profit groups created to provide support to local libraries. The Community Woman’s Club (Florida), for example, formed a Friends of the Library group to garner support from the public, encourage the county and state governments to provide tax rates that would help fund the library, and raise money by selling donated books.

While many GFWC libraries eventually received aid from the government, the Woman’s Club of Delray Beach (Florida), originally called the Delray Ladies Improvement Association, maintained independence. They founded Delray Beach Public Library in 1913, and it is still neither a department within the city, nor is it owned or operated by the government, and instead is run by a nonprofit organization.

The Lamoille Women’s Club (Nevada) made their Community Improvement Program project in the late 1960s to establish a community library in Elko, and a retired librarian in the town donated a cabin to serve as that library. Local businesses contributed funds, but the women also raised money with bake sales, an antique auction, a community picnic, and a rummage sale.

The Blackshear Women’s Club (Georgia) made their 1962-1964 Community Improvement Program project to build a new civic center, part of which would serve as the Blackshear Memorial Library. They held fundraisers, but they...
knew that to successfully achieve their goal, they could use all of the help they could get. They implored for both moral and financial support from the entire community, including churches, school leaders, county and city officials, press and radio station, and the city’s Chamber of Commerce. In 1973, the Morrow Junior Woman’s Club (Georgia) met with the Library Board to discuss creating another library in the area. They learned that the three current branches had enough books to stock a new branch, so the club proposed to rent a building in the local shopping center and make it a new library for their community. In addition to presenting that plan to the Board of Commissioners, they tried to rally support from other clubs, and spoke at PTA, Civitan, and garden club meetings. Reaching out to the very community that would benefit from GFWC’s hard work was a smart move clubs made to ensure that they were getting all the support they could.

In the 1960s, the American Library Association confirmed 85 percent of all public libraries in the country had been founded by GFWC clubs. But GFWC’s relationship with libraries hasn’t ended since then. Clubs across the country are still firm supporters of their local libraries. The Fort Pierce Woman’s Club (Florida) originally spearheaded the first $1,000 to build the St. Lucie Library in the 1950s, and is continuing that legacy by collecting over a 1000 books to fill the new Paula Lewis Library. The Pinellas Seminole Woman’s Club (Florida), in addition to making monetary donations, adds a new book to their community library in memory of their deceased members.

Libraries are where many GFWC clubwomen keep their hearts. The Philaco Woman’s Club (Florida) founded the Apalachicola Municipal Library in 1896, and when the 1943-1944 President Margaret Key died in 1996, she left all property to that library. Legal intervention by the club and the city in 2004 allowed her $418,000 estate to be solely put towards the library.

The Curwensville Woman’s Club (Pennsylvania) led the founding of the Curwensville Branch of the Clearfield County Library, and cut the ribbon at its opening in 1968. While time has since passed, the club currently donates $500 every year, and have members who volunteer at the library every week, showing that GFWC’s support of libraries is unwavering.

In 2017, a torrential thunderstorm closed down a combined historical celebration of the 100th Anniversary of Women’s Suffrage in New York State and the 200th Anniversary of the Erie Canal, where the Women’s Club of Pittsford (New York) had activities. The Pittsford Library became a refuge for them, and the activities that the club brought are in the library to this day. Additionally, GFWC du Midi Woman’s Club’s (Alabama) President Sherry Stutts chose the New Bailey Cove Library, a new high-tech library that will incorporate spaces not historically seen in libraries, as her 2016-2018 President's Project. The club presented $30,000 to the Library Foundation in May 2017 after holding a fashion show fundraiser. The partnership between GFWC clubs and libraries runs strong to this day.

Some clubs are still creating libraries, like the Viera Woman’s Club (Florida), who helped establish a library at Sonata Viera, an assisted living residence. Or there’s the GFWC Paradise Valley Junior Women’s Club (Arizona), who created a Little Free Library to put in the Central Arizona’s Vista Colina Emergency Family Shelter, a nonprofit organization that provides emergency shelter and assistance to the homeless in the Phoenix area. The Gulf Coast Woman’s Club (Florida) keeps the Life Management Center of NW Florida, a mental health facility, stocked with appropriate books for the children’s waiting room. In addition to creating a library in the early 1900s, the United Women’s Club of Lakeland (Florida) had a traveling troupe in the 1990s that encouraged and educated clubs to start libraries in nursing homes, preschools, jails, detention facilities, churches, and hospitals. Libraries can be created anywhere where there are people to read, and GFWC clubs are making it happen.

Libraries are integral to GFWC’s identity, and this article only represents a fraction of the incredible work clubs have done to create, maintain, and support libraries for over a hundred years.