"THE LIBRARY IS FOR THE MASSES": THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE DEFUNIAK SPRINGS LIBRARY (1886-1926)

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Abstract: This article surveys the early history of the Walton-DeFuniak Public Library in DeFuniak Springs, Florida, from its founding in 1887 by the Ladies Aide Society (renamed the Ladies Library Association the following year) to the death of its first professional librarian, Alice Fellows, in 1926. This timeframe sheds light on the library's origins and founding, early staff and operations, building and facilities, and some of its services and clientele. This article argues that the DeFuniak Library (now the Walton-DeFuniak Public Library) is best understood in the context of the political, social, and technological changes that took place in the late 19th century, namely the developments of railroads and adult education programs in the postbellum South. This milieu helps explain how and why individuals from the Northeastern United States, especially New York, made their way first as tourists and then permanent residents to DeFuniak Springs. Aided by advancements in railroad transportation, a thriving Chautauqua program developed in the area that encouraged women to organize a social organization that birthed one of the oldest libraries in the state of Florida.

Keywords: DeFuniak Springs, Florida, Ladies Library Association, Alice Fellows, Chautauqua, Libraries in the Southern United States

The DeFuniak Library in DeFuniak Springs, Florida, now known as the Walton-DeFuniak Public Library, is a treasure for the history of librarianship in the state. While the St. Augustine Free Library (founded in 1874) is technically the oldest library in the state,[1] the library in DeFuniak Springs (founded in 1886, opened in 1887) has the distinction of being "the oldest library continuously operating in the state."[2] Based on research of archival materials and secondary scholarship, this article presents a survey of the history of the DeFuniak Springs Library (now called the Walton-DeFuniak Library due to its location in Walton County) from 1886 to 1926. These dates have been chosen because they cover the institution's founding by the Ladies Library Association and extend through the formative years and especially the tenure of its first professional librarian, Alice Fellows, who was a singular and major force for the library for 30 years before she passed away in 1926.

This timeframe also offers insight into the political, social, and technological forces at play in the library's early development, especially the development of the railroad system in western Florida and the resulting influx of tourists and then permanent residents from the north to the postbellum South. In particular, the success of Florida Chautauqua Association programming, brought to DeFuniak Springs by leaders from New York,[3] encouraged women to organize the Ladies Library Association. The Association proved indispensable in founding and funding the library in the late 1880s and led Fellows to lead and shape the institution and its programming from 1902 until 1926. In the course of research at the University of West Florida's West Florida History Center, it was discovered that Fellows—quite likely near the end of her life—wrote a short history of the library that proved to be incredibly useful in understanding its institutional history and her place within it. This piece is examined alongside more recent sources, both scholarly and journalistic, in order to better apprehend how and why this library formed and the ways in which it continues to serve the community of DeFuniak Springs long after the early players have passed from the scene. As this article seeks to demonstrate, the library became progressively more inclusive and open to the community as it moved from a social and subscription library to a resource available to all patrons in the area. As Fellows succinctly put it in her short history: "The library is for the masses."[4]

1. St. Johns County, 2017; City of DeFuniak Springs, 2023
2. St. Augustine Historical Society, 2024
3. Scott, 1999, p. 395
4. University of West Florida, ca. 1930

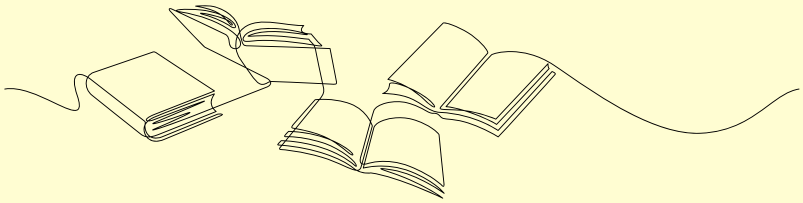
THE LIBRARY IS FOR THE MASSES

From North to South: Origins and Founding

The Walton-DeFuniak Library, originally known as the DeFuniak Library, was opened in 1887 in DeFuniak Springs, Florida.[5] It was initially a social library run by women volunteers from the Ladies Library Association (originally known as the "Ladies Aide Society"), which was instrumental in its founding and early management.[6] The archives of the Ladies Library Association of DeFuniak Springs are housed at the Walton-DeFuniak Library, with microfilm copies available at the archives of the University of West Florida in Pensacola.

Perhaps the single best scholarly source on the early history of the library comes from historian Ron Blazek's article in *The Journal of Library History* (1987). Although nearly 40 years old, it is an indispensable guide to the library's early years and, more importantly, the historical, technological, and cultural contexts in Florida that gave rise to the Florida Chautauqua and DeFuniak Library in the first place. As Blazek notes, the members of the Ladies Library Association of DeFuniak Springs were the "prime movers"[7] who worked diligently to fund and staff the nascent library on a volunteer basis. Their motivation on the basis of charity turned out to be a sharp and ironic contrast to the explicitly commercial interests that led to the settlement of the town of DeFuniak Springs. The village was named after Frederick R. DeFuniak, a Confederate officer in the Civil War who became an executive of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad (L&N) that made its way into northwest Florida by the late 19th century.[8]

Indeed, it was the development of the railroad in the region after the Civil War that brought a variety of demographic shifts in the form of northern tourists (especially from New York) who spent their winters in DeFuniak Springs, and gradually gave way to permanent residential communities. (Even Melvil Dewey set up a winter Lake Placid Club (also referred to as Lake Placid Loj [Lodge]) in Lake Placid (formerly Lake Stearns), Florida that operated from 1926 until his death in 1931).[9] Interest in starting a library among women volunteers originally from the north also came as a result of the educational programs that sprang up in the area soon after the arrival of the Florida Chautauqua Assembly, which began in 1885.[10] Two years later, the Florida State Normal College was founded in DeFuniak Springs (and would operate for eighteen years until its closing in 1905), attesting to the town's growing role as an educational center in the region.[11] The Florida chapter of Chautauqua, however, remained a dominant force and resembled its counterpart in New York with its emphasis on religion (i.e., Protestant Christianity) as well as adult programming that incorporated recreation and outdoor entertainment and took place "each year for six weeks from February to April."[12] The Florida Chautauqua programs continued in DeFuniak Springs for over four decades and were designed to reshape the town as the "Athens of West Florida."[13] It was hoped that the programs and entertainment "would draw middling and upper class citizens into West Florida" and bring a new source of income to the area aside from the lumber industry that was "the financial backbone of the region."[14] At its height in 1909 and 1910, "a new 4,000 seat auditorium [was built] to replace the 2,500 facility to accommodate the 4,000 tourists a day now arriving by excursion train to hear the greatest lecturers of the times," according to a historical timeline provided by the Florida Chautauqua Assembly.[15] The winter activities attracted many prominent speakers, including an invitation to Governor William McKinley of Ohio (in 1895, two years before the start of his presidency, though his attendance is unclear)[16] as well as "college presidents and congressmen" from across the United States.[17]



5. Blazek, 1987, p. 384; City of DeFuniak Springs, 2023
6. Blazek, 1987, p. 389
7. Blazek, 1987, p. 383
8. Merkel, 2008, pp. 13-32
9. Takeuchi, 1966, pp. 127-132
10. Florida Chautauqua Assembly, 2018; Scott, 1999, p. 395
11. Clifford, 1996
12. Hiller, 1991, p. 31
13. Blazek, 1987, p. 382; Levine, et al., 2009, p. 243
14. Esing, 2014, p. 113
15. Florida Chautauqua Assembly, 2018
16. Blazek, 1987, p. 382; DeFuniak Springs Visitor Center, 2026
17. Hiller, 1991, p. 31

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Over time, however, the Florida Chautauqua transitioned from its educational roots and began to offer popular entertainment (evening plays, for instance) in order to ensure large attendance and even larger income. Towns, for instance, has analyzed the history of Florida Chautauqua as one that combined "boosterism" (aggressive self-promotion and marketing), education, and entertainment "until it was replaced by the mass media" that emerged in the early 20th century.[18] Tourists from the north were also attracted to the town's fledgling health resort and the potential of its "spring water…said to equal in purity and restorative powers those at Poland and Waukesha [Wisconsin]."[19] As the Florida Chautauqua became more commercialized and an important dimension of the region's tourist industry, the Ladies Library Association appeared to have stepped into a more firmly educational role and "maintained its course as an adult education agency."[20] Indeed, the Ladies Library Association had a more permanent vision of itself as a force for self-improvement and charity in the nascent community, one that outpaced the Florida Chautauqua and served as a reflection of larger trends of librarianship in the United States. Dee Garrison, for instance, has discussed the "feminization of librarianship" that took place in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,[21] and Mary Niles Maack has written about the increased prominence of volunteer and professional women in librarianship during the era of Melvil Dewey as a form of proto-feminism that privileged "knowledge as power and power as empowerment."[22] Paula D. Watson, meanwhile, has researched the role of women's voluntary library organizations in this burgeoning postbellum period, observing that "women's clubs contributed in a very tangible way to the spread of the public library idea and to the foundation of numerous libraries in cities and towns across the country."[23] This was certainly true of the Ladies Library Association of DeFuniak Springs as it expanded its influence on its own terms and under its own leadership.

In 1886, the Ladies Library Association negotiated a remarkable 99-year lease for a new building on a "vacant lot adjacent to the Chautauqua" with the promise, made to the Lake DeFuniak Land Company, that the property "shall be used as a public library only and under no circumstances as a domicile for the librarian."[24] Initial building costs, according to its first librarian Alice Fellows, were $579.80 for the original building and $348.15 for an additional room that was added in 1893/1894.[25] By *public library*, the agreeing parties evidently meant a library facility whose services were available to the public in a general and generic way, since in reality the institution was a social and subscription library in its first decades. In 1924, the library became "public" in the sense that it finally began to receive funding from the city (though only $10.00 per month) and this support was marginally expanded in the following decade to include payment of the water bill.[26] Blazek discovered that "it was not until the 1960s that the subscription fees were finally eliminated and the county and city assumed total responsibility for its maintenance"[27] in line with a movement toward increased county, state, and federal funding for American public libraries from the 1960s and 1970s to the present.[28]

Library Building (Walton County website)

18. Towns, 1977, p. 228
19. Hiller, 1991, p. 31
20. Blazek, 1987, p. 388
21. Garrison, 1972
22. Maack, 1998, p. 59
23. Watson, 1994, p. 235
24. Blazek, 1987, p. 384
25. University of West Florida, ca. 1930; DeFuniak Springs Visitor Center, 2023
26. Blazek, 1987, p. 391
27. Blazek, 1987, p. 392
28. Wiegand, 2015, p. 193

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Alice Fellows (DeFuniak Springs Friends of the Library)

Staff and Operations: The Ladies Library Association and Alice Fellows

The library's first full-time and paid librarian was Alice Fellows, who was employed by the DeFuniak Library from 1902 until she passed away in 1926 at the age of 65.[29] She was 40 or 41 when she took over operations of the library. According to the City of DeFuniak Springs, Fellows had been a member of the Ladies Library Association since 1894[30] and Blazek discovered that she served as secretary of the association before taking on her full-time and salaried position as "the first professional librarian."[31] This status as secretary of the association was corroborated by research of the association's meeting minutes, where she is listed as such as early as November 28, 1896.[32]

The minutes from another meeting, held on November 30, 1918, indicate that "Miss Fellows was unanimously elected as librarian and a vote of thanks given her for her faithfulness,"[33] suggesting that the association, as a formality, voted on and re-affirmed her continued status and employment (apparently on an annual basis) without objection. Her professional compensation was meager and continued that way throughout her tenure in DeFuniak Springs. Fellows initially made "about $6.50 for a three-month period" (in 1902) and eventually earned $13.00 a month by 1926.[34] In a profile of the library for the Florida Library History Project conducted by the University of South Florida, it is reported that Fellows "declined more money, as she worked largely through her love of the task and dutifully serving the people."[35] In her history of the library, Fellows mentioned that the hours of operation varied but steadily expanded under her watch and maintenance. "In the early days [1887] the library was open four hours in the week" but by the 1920s she staffed it "a part of every day in the week."[36]

Despite this salary and schedule, Fellows was so committed to her role that, according to Blazek, it "spurred her to return to her native state of New York for an education at Dewey's State Library Training School at Albany."[37]After studying at Dewey's Albany school, she returned to Florida and appears to have served as the primary and sole librarian until her death. As Fellows described her manifold duties in an undated statement that appears to be from the early 1920s: "The librarian of a small library must be the head of the circulation department, children's librarian, reference librarian, cataloger, book keeper, statistician, collector, press correspondent, and janitor."[38] In addition, she continued to attend the regular meetings of the Ladies Library Association, whose monthly minutes featured a handwritten "Librarian's Report" provided by Fellows, complete with statistics about membership dues, expenses, and "book rent."[39] Decades after Fellows' death, her influence can be felt in a number of ways—from cataloging to programming, as explored below—and there is even a rumor that her ghost continues to haunt (or perhaps benevolently look over?) the building where she devoted a significant portion of her professional life.[40]

In connection with her role as the senior librarian—and the de facto chief fundraiser on behalf of the Ladies Library Association—Fellows wrote a short (5-page, type-written) history of the DeFuniak Library that offers insight into working conditions during the early years (especially from 1902 to 1926).[41]This history was originally written for use by a local newspaper to appeal to the community for financial support, but no evidence for the published article could be found. While there is "no indication of any impact on the funding authorities," [42] the document is important as a piece of library history and, to a lesser extent, autobiography. It notes, for instance, that the holdings of the library in DeFuniak Springs came chiefly from the donations of members of the Ladies Library Association; this is not too surprising and is corroborated by Blazek, who found "little mention of planned purchases" and a "reliance on book donations for stocking the shelves on opening day" in 1887 that appears to have continued as standard operating procedure throughout Fellows' tenure.[43]

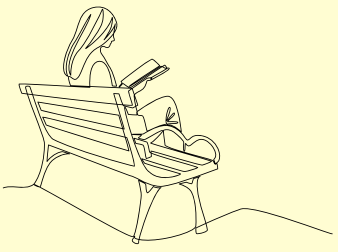
29. Blazek, 1987, pp. 389, 392
30. City of DeFuniak Springs, 2023
31. Blazek, 1987, pp. 385, 389
32. University of West Florida, 1896
33. University of West Florida, 1918
34. Blazek, 1987, p. 389
35. Jasper and McCook, 1998, pp. 433-434
36. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
37. Blazek, 1987, p. 389
38. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
39. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
40. *Northwest Florida Daily News*, 2017
41. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
42. Blazek, 1987, p. 393
43. Blazek, 1987, pp. 385-86

Fellows, to her credit, made do with the limited resources and effectively used her connections and library training to ensure that materials were properly cataloged under her watch. As she wrote in the third person: “Since 1902 the writer has been the only librarian in charge, and at present is on duty a part of every day in the week. Soon after being put in charge, and under the instruction of Salome Cutler Fairchild, of the New York State Library School, she classified and catalogued the books, using the Dewey Decimal system.” [44] Over time, the collection grew and nearly doubled: “When the cataloging was begun we had 2000 books [….] now they number 3950.” [45]

Fellows does not mention any library assistants in her brief history but this is perhaps because the library enjoyed the implicit assistance of volunteers drawn from the dedicated Ladies Library Association, which continued to meet on a monthly basis in the building.[46] With respect to working and financial conditions, Fellows observed in the 1920s that “[t]he library is handicaped [sic] by being of the subscription order. Its only maintenance at this writing is its membership and other fees. A merchant handles only goods that he can sell but the most expensive stock in a library brings no financial return.” [47] This is, once again, a testament to the precarious economic situation of this small library in the postbellum South. In addition, the operational predicament was quite likely exacerbated by the understandable but unfortunate set of circumstances that led the Ladies Library Association to decline Carnegie funding that might have otherwise afforded economic security, especially as the Florida Chautauqua began to wane in influence and income potential for the area.[48] Discussion of Fellows’ role in the Carnegie application process—which serves as yet another affirmation of her guiding hand and influence—is taken up in the following section.

Building and Facilities: Making History and Declining Carnegie Funding

The DeFuniak Library, now the Walton-DeFuniak Library, has remained in the same building since it was first opened as a social library in 1887.[49] The library continues to be housed in a small, quaint building and is one of only four libraries in Walton County. The other county libraries are the Coastal Branch Library in Santa Rosa Beach, Freeport Public Library in Freeport, and Gladys N. Milton Memorial Library in Flowersview.[50] Construction for the building began in 1886 and was completed in relatively short order in 1887; the main library space and adjoining reading room consisted of “a 16.5 by 24-foot room” [51] that was enhanced by the addition of an adjacent room in 1893/1894.[52] Further renovations took place nearly a century later in 1984; on the whole, though, the library has remained remarkably the same in terms of space and architecture since its opening and even retains the original pine wood flooring in the main room.[53] A profile for the Library History Project (University of South Florida) notes that the library continues to retain its “collection of swords and other weaponry that ranges from those used at the time of the Crusades to the rifles of the Daniel Boone era, as well as various significant historical scrapbooks, portraits, books, pictures, and antiques.” [54] This includes a battle ax from the 12th century that is now part of the Bruce Family Weapons Collection housed at the library after a previous host, Palmer College in northwest Florida, closed down in the mid-1930s and was unable to store the artifacts.[55] In 2018, a local news station in northwest Florida did a piece about the library that included an overview of its history and featured footage of the interior and exterior, including a view of the front door signage that still simply lists “LIBRARY” and another sign that reads “Established in 1886.” [56] According to a local news story corroborated by the Florida Library History Project, the library holds the distinction of being “the oldest continuously serving library in Florida, meaning in the same building intended as a library.” [57] This is confirmed by the City of DeFuniak Springs Visitor Center: “This is the oldest continuously operating library within its original structure in Florida–never closing since the day it officially opened on December 20, 1887 as a new addition to the Florida Chautauqua resort/campus.” [58]



44. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
45. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
46. University of West Florida, 1887-1932
47. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
48. Blazek, 1987, pp. 382, 391
49. Marasco, 2018
50. Walton County Public Library, 2026
51. Marasco, 2018
52. Blazek, 1987, p. 389; DeFuniak Springs Visitor Center, 2023
53. Marasco, 2018; Jasper and McCook, 1998, p. 434
54. Jasper and McCook, 1998, p. 434
55. Cobb, 2018
56. Marasco, 2018
57. Marasco, 2018; Jasper and McCook, 1998, p. 434
58. DeFuniak Springs Visitor Center, 2023

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The library at present (Walton County Tourism)

The main building and additional reading rooms were financed by the Ladies Library Association.[59] This association, as discussed earlier, was largely responsible for fundraising and sustaining operational costs during the library's early history. City and local funding supplemented the funding until the library became a publicly supported county entity in 1966.[60] Fellows writes in her short history that the namesake of the library and town, Frederick R. DeFuniak, "promised to give the library a generous support, and so it was named for him. This promise was not fulfilled."[61] In the foundational years, the Ladies Library Association discussed a range of fundraising strategies but these seem to have been mostly unsuccessful and untested.

Some of the ideas were quite creative however, such as a proposal from the December 30, 1911 meeting minutes that the association "hold a Bazaar the coming fall." At a meeting on October 31, 1914, members considered (but apparently rejected) the idea to rent out space to "Church Societies" in order to bring in additional income at a rate of 50 cents per rental without food setup and one dollar per rental if food needed to be prepared and served. On November 27, 1915, the association's officers "decided to ask Mr. Murray [a local theater owner] to give one night at the Movies for the benefit of the Library, and Mrs. Stanley and Mrs. P. H. Miller were asked to secure talent to supplement his program," though it is unclear whether this plan ever went into action. Even when fundraising bore fruit, the yield tended to be small and was presumably disappointing to the committed members. In a rather humorous entry to the meeting minutes found for May 25, 1912, though, there is mention that "thirteen (13) dollars and laughter and jokes were the proceeds" from a particular fundraiser that delivered less than might have been hoped.[62]

Under Fellows' leadership and with the backing of the Ladies Library Association, the library successfully applied for Carnegie grant funding on two occasions but twice turned it down. Given how indispensable Carnegie funding was in the development of thousands of public libraries across the United States, what circumstances would lead the DeFuniak Library, or any library for that matter, to decline such a grant? Wayne A. Wiegand's history of American public libraries acknowledged that "some communities rejected Carnegie grants" for a variety of reasons, including financial self-reliance as "a matter of pride," tense race relations and prejudice against including African Americans in Southern libraries (apparently not a cause for concern in DeFuniak Springs), and populist resentment from the working class toward Carnegie's philanthropic mission.[63] According to Blazek, the decision was based on a combination of "rising building costs," the desire of the Ladies Library Association to remain a social library (of "a quasi-public nature"), and the preference of association members to advocate for local funding from the city.[64] This implies, in other words, that the two Carnegie grant offers ($10,000 in 1910 and again in 1916), in combination with bureaucratic and tax liabilities, were insufficient and unrealistic for the small library in a town with other and apparently more pressing financial needs. Indeed, according to Fellows' short history, "In 1910, W. W. Flournoy [on behalf of the library] secured for us the promise of $10,000 Carnegie. The offer was made again six years later, but the city needed other improvements which were considered more essential." [65] These "other improvements" were left unspecified and, as mentioned earlier, the library would not receive support from the city until 1924—eight years after the second Carnegie grant offer—in the form of the rather paltry amount of $10.00 per month in order to "maintain the facility." [66] As a result, the library continued to rely extensively on "outright gifts and donations" [67] from the Ladies Library Association and its three or four dozen supporters and volunteers for most of the first four decades of its existence. In reading through the minutes of the association, one predictably gets the sense that members regretted having to decline the Carnegie funding, such as this entry for the October 30, 1915 meeting: "The matter of Carnegie Library was also walked over. No action being necessary." [68]

59. Blazek, 1987, pp. 388-389
60. Walton County, 2026
61. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
62. University of West Florida, 1912
63. Wiegand, 2015, p. 95
64. Blazek, 1987, p. 391
65. University of West Florida, ca. 1930; Blazek, 1987, p. 391
66. Blazek, 1987, p. 391
67. Blazek, 1987, p. 385
68. University of West Florida, 1915

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Library Services and Clientele: Education and Outreach on a Tight Budget

The first materials acquired by the DeFuniak Library, under the advisement of the Ladies Library Association, were magazines, reference materials, and educational books, all of which were considered useful in light of community needs and the library's early relations with the Florida Chautauqua.[69] Soon, the collection management workflow became more structured and systematized. By late 1887, soon after the official opening, the Ladies Library Association set up a "selection committee," as Blazek writes, made up of three women volunteers who operated "on a very limited budget" of only $13.30 at the start of 1888.[70] In the minutes of the Ladies Library Association, such as the handwritten record for the meeting that took place on December 30, 1911, this group is referred to as the "Book Committee." [71] The collection began to grow, however, thanks to community donations, to the point where Fellows recalled that the library had some 2,000 (albeit uncatalogued) books when she began her tenure in 1902.[72] This is confirmed by the 1923 edition of the *American Library Directory*, which lists 2,097 volumes and names Fellows as the librarian in DeFuniak Springs.[73]

By the time Fellows wrote her brief history sometime in the late 1920s—and quite possibly soon before her death in 1926—she reports that there were 3,950 items in the collection.[74] Apparently, a number of these items are still retained in the library today. According to a local television news story, the present-day library has "800 historically significant books, some dating back to the 1800s." [75] Fellows' record sheds further light on the types of early materials that were purchased or acquired through donations, including the following: "old time magazines" (such as *Ladies Repository* and *Atlantic Monthly*), a "Gazetteer of the U.S. of America," several dictionaries, *The Pleasures of Hope* (1804) by Thomas Campbell, and two Bibles dating to the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It appears that she was occasionally forced to answer questions about whether materials were immoral or indecent, at least based on an undated document entitled "CENSORING" that was also found in the archives of the Ladies Library Association. "Sometimes schools are censured because of ungodly teachers who are entrusted with the training of our children. Is the entire faculty condemned because of the few?" she asked rhetorically. Likewise, she continued, "Public libraries are censured because some one [sic] has heard that...'There are books in the library that are not fit for young people to read,' forthwith the tale is spread by others equally uninformed." [76] Her caution against rumor and innuendo reflects a measured outlook in favor of inclusion and against censorship that has come to be a preeminent theme in contemporary American librarianship, as seen in the values of intellectual freedom found in the Library Bill of Rights.[77] Curiously, the library's profile for the Florida Library History Project notes, without any source or qualifications, that "she [Fellows] persisted in keeping all questionable books out of the library." [78] This may be a reference to blocking some particular books at the insistence of the public—though, again, no specifics are provided—but evidence from her own history suggests an anti-censorship view on the whole. According to Dan Owens, a past director of the Walton County Library System, Fellows' nephew reported that "she was very severe and strict...he said she did not tolerate frivolity and especially young boys that were being silly." [79] But even if Fellows was strict as a librarian and disciplinarian, this does not necessarily imply a conservative attitude in general or one that would manifest itself by censoring material simply in response to subjective patron displeasure.

In any event, her own history also records—in reflection of a patron-driven acquisition model that engenders further questions of inclusion and censorship at DeFuniak Library—that "the first books to be cataloged were the 'Pansy' stories, very much enjoyed thirty years back [i.e., in the late 1890s/early 1900s], but never disturbed in these days of the moving picture show and the automobile. Now the demand is for action and plenty of it." [80]

69. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
70. Blazek, 1987, p. 386
71. University of West Florida, 1911
72. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
73. American Library Directory, 1923, p. 33
74. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
75. Marasco, 2018
76. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
77. American Library Association, 2026
78. Jasper and McCook, 1998, p. 434
79. Marasco, 2018
80. University of West Florida, ca. 1930

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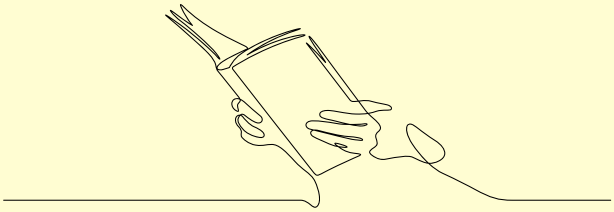
The library in 1916 (State Library and Archives of Florida)

Fellows' mention here of "these days of the moving picture show and the automobile" is also insightful because it indicates, yet again, the changing technological and transportation scene in the 1920s. While the interconnectivity made possible by the railroad system and the commercialism of the Florida Chautauqua was responsible for the relative population boom that led women to create a social library in the late 19th century, by the early 20th century railroads had been supplanted by early cars and entertainment tastes had shifted in the formative years of cinema. However, unlike the Florida Chautauqua, which closed down after about 40 years of operation,[81] the library, though struggling as ever, persevered and continued to serve its patrons and the broader community to "spread its gospel" with little financial incentive.[82]

With this mission in mind, who was the clientele of the library and what services were offered? In the earliest years, as a social library, the library first served as a meeting place for members of the Ladies Library Association and those who seasonally came into town for the Florida Chautauqua. This symbiotic relationship appears to have influenced the primary clientele and service model of the nascent library. In the end, the initially congenial and mutually beneficial relationship between the Ladies Library Association and the Florida Chautauqua soured as the former solidified its library plans and the latter waned in popular and economic influence. As Blazek writes: "Unfortunately, subsequent records [i.e., after 1889] seem to indicate an inconsistent policy toward Chautauqua visitors from then on, lukewarm at best and apprehensive at worst." [83] It is also quite likely that relations between the male-dominated Florida Chautauqua and the female-driven Ladies Library Association were damaged by the former's degree of institutional autonomy within a patriarchal postbellum culture. As early as the 1886 incorporation of the Ladies Library Association, the foundation was set for a volunteer organization in which women were empowered as social actors in a way that was likely not afforded to them outside the organization. In Article 10 of the association's articles of incorporation (1886), for instance, we find this revealing clause about membership dues: "Any lady may become a member of this society by paying an initiation fee of 10 cents and signing the Constitution. Gentlemen may become honorary members by the payment of 25 cents." [84] Quite interestingly, the minutes for the association meeting on May 19, 1920 reveal that a motion was considered (but rejected) to change the name to the gender-neutral "DeFuniak Library Association," apparently in order to encourage more men to participate.[85] However, given the support of many male donors to the organization (both husbands and friends within the community), not to mention the leasing of land for the building approved by the male-led Lake DeFuniak Land Association, it seems reasonable that any tensions were specifically directed at the Florida Chautauqua and its administrators. On the other hand, meeting minutes of the association from January 31, 1920 could be invoked as evidence for a reconciliation between the two groups: "...partial plans were laid for holding a reception for Tourists at the Library sometime during the Chautauqua." [86] Despite good intentions, the Florida Chautauqua ceased operations by 1928,[87] two years after Fellows' death. The parting of ways was probably not particularly surprising, given the divergent community mission of the social library and the ultimately failed commercial-entertainment model of the Florida Chautauqua as it moved away from "religious viewpoints" and adult vocational programming (including "art, cookery, elocution, and music") in the early 20th century.[88]



81. Blazek, 1987, p. 382
82. Blazek, 1987, p. 389
83. Blazek, 1987, p. 386
84. Blazek, 1987, p. 384
85. University of West Florida, ca. 1920
86. University of West Florida, 1920
87. Florida Chautauqua Assembly, 2018
88. Towns, 1977, p. 235

THE LIBRARY IS FOR THE MASSES

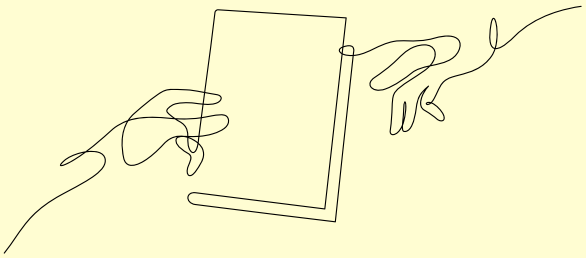
The library's primary clientele, especially as it moved into the early 20th century, consisted of middle and upper-middle class white patrons, especially women and children (i.e. students) who presumably learned about the building and its offerings due to the outreach efforts of the Ladies Library Association. Fellows notes in her history of the library: "Our circulation last year was 2 1/2 per capita of population, which compares favorably with other libraries. Sixty-three per cent [sic] of the readers were students." [89] According to Blazek and corroborated by a search in the archives of the University of West Florida, nothing indicates that the library excluded patrons, which is unusual for an emerging library situated in the postbellum South. As Blazek observed:

> It is well to note here the absence of any references in the documents to racial composition of the library clientele either at the outset or in the succeeding years. Although it is unlikely that blacks were among the leaders in the movement, there is a definite possibility that they were never singled out for exclusion. Although the issue may well have been academic as it related to a white middle-class institution such as the library, the fact that the membership or service clientele was not enumerated in racial terms represents a unique departure from the small-town Florida library of the nineteenth century.[90]

Moreover, this apparent movement toward inclusion is supported by rhetoric found in other archival documents from the Ladies Library Association, in particular Fellows' brief history. She writes, for instance, that "Everywhere libraries are recognized as integral parts of public instruction…It is open twelve months in the year and is for all ages. If all our schools but the elementary were abolished a classical education could still be obtained from a good library, but on the other hand if the library should be taken away there are few who would ever get beyond the eight[h] grade. The library is for the masses." [91] In evidence of the library practicing what it preached, Fellows provided books to local schools that were in need of materials in the 1920s, even if budgetary restrictions limited the intended dissemination. "For the last eight or ten years," Fellows reflected of the 1910s and early 1920s, "it has been our pleasure to supply the schools with supplementary reading. It is much to be regretted that we cannot give as complete a service as they need, because our funds are inadequate." [92] Additionally, Fellows made connections between a proper education made possible by the library's resources, improved morality, and decreased criminality in society. "Give the boys and girls plenty of good books," she implored, "and it will not be long before there will be fewer criminals. Surely it would be more economical and sensible to put the public funds into books than penal institutions." [93] The Ladies Library Association at large was likewise committed to this goal. The minutes for the meeting on November 29, 1913 mention a donation of 12 dollars intended exclusively for the "Book Fund for Educational Books." [94]

Conclusion

In 1966, the DeFuniak Library became the Walton County Public Library due to the funding it received as an institution within Walton County in northwest Florida and in 1975 was renamed the Walton-DeFuniak Public Library.[95] This brought to fruition a county-wide goal that Fellows had reported four decades earlier in her brief history: "With the commission and a County library law, DeFuniak library may become the center from which branches will be administered throughout the county—that is, if the regestered [sic] voters will put it across." [96] Walton County continues to be one of Florida's smaller counties in terms of population, with about 93,000 residents as of 2025.[97] In this region of the Florida Panhandle, DeFuniak Springs has grown since the decades after Alice Fellows' tenure ended in 1926. However, it remains relatively small, with a population of about 7,000.[98]



89. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
90. Blazek, 1987, p. 386
91. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
92. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
93. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
94. University of West Florida, 1913
95. Walton County, 2026
96. University of West Florida, ca. 1930
97. United States Census Bureau, 2025
98. United States Census Bureau, 2024

THE LIBRARY IS FOR THE MASSES

The public library is in the same place, in the same small building, and continues to offer its community services in the digital age, with, according to a 2018 journalistic piece, "around 39,000 different items—including books, DVDs and magazines…Card holders also gain access to computers, a 3D printer, projectors, digital books and other groups like computer programming and chess classes." [99] The library, unusually, also houses the Bruce Family Weapons Collection of antique and rare weapons and armor as well as a digital gallery.[100] There is no fee to use the public library for residents of Walton County, and there is a $35.00 fee for non-county users.[101] Given its history as one of the oldest libraries in Florida, the building has become a museum as much as a functioning library, a fact that has been repeated in recent journalistic coverage.[102] Indeed, today the library is located within the DeFuniak Springs Historic District, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.[103] The DeFuniak Springs Friends of the Library is active and continues the volunteer spirit that helped found the library in the first place.[104]

Beyond these basic historical considerations, however, the institutional history of the Walton-DeFuniak Public Library is significant because it offers insight into some of the social, political, economic, and technological changes that were taking place in postbellum America more broadly and in Florida in particular. Several such themes have been taken up in the course of this piece, such as the relationship between railroad transportation lines and the development of the small village of DeFuniak Springs in northwest Florida. Another important relationship was the one that emerged between the arrival of northerners (especially from New York), the male-dominated Florida Chautauqua, and the women volunteers who found roles within the Ladies Library Association. This "north to south" influence on the library's development only continued when its first librarian, Alice Fellows, returned to her native New York to attend Dewey's library program in Albany before returning for duty in Florida. Further evidence of progressive attitudes in the profession of librarianship emerged when considering the library's apparent absence of restrictions with respect to African American patrons in the Jim Crow era well before the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In addition, the library under Fellows' leadership made efforts to provide educational materials to local schools in evidence of an inclusive and forward-looking outlook on the place of the library in the broader community that it strives to reach and serve.

The original social and subscription library in DeFuniak Springs, then, represents an unsuspecting but rewarding case study of the broader forces and counter-currents that were at play in postbellum Florida as it sought to attract newcomers and build a self-sustaining community. Despite the success of attracting the railroad and then the Florida Chautauqua, the small town's luck turned out to be short-lived, as newcomers discovered other venues and opportunities for development in south Florida, including the more tropical Tampa Bay area and Miami. As Blazek observed, by the late 1920s, "the panhandle region had been forgotten by both tourists and prospective residents." [105] If it were not for more stable financial support, first from the city (in 1924) and later from the county (in 1966), it is quite possible that the library would have been unable to sustain itself, especially without the benefit of Carnegie funding that it decided (or was forced) to decline on two occasions. However, in some ways the library was ahead of its time and aware of its place in Florida's library community, for instance by becoming an institutional member of the Florida Library Association in 1925, just five years after that group was formally established with an organizational meeting in Orlando,[106] and remains a member today.[107] It is therefore a testament to the dedication of the early volunteers of the Ladies Library Association and to Alice Fellows in particular that this remarkable and historically valuable library has persevered and ultimately thrived. Although the DeFuniak Library did not fully partake in the benefits of the "Carnegie Era," [108] the success of the female-led social library represents a microcosm of the brand of local volunteerism that took place elsewhere and transformed American libraries into the open and widespread institutions they are today.

99. Cobb, 2018
100. Bruce Family Weapons Collection, 2025
101. Cobb, 2018; Walton County, 2026
102. Cobb, 2018; Marasco, 2018
103. City of DeFuniak Springs, 2026
104. DeFuniak Springs Friends of the Library, 2026
105. Blazek, 1987, p. 388
106. Florida Library Association, 2026
107. *Florida Libraries*, Fall 2025, p. 39
108. Wiegand, 2015, p. 75

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