

# TWENTY YEARS AFTER: THE ARLINGTON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARIES, 1960-1980

By  
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When the Arlington Historical Magazine published *A Brief History of the Arlington County Public Libraries* in 1960, the Central Library was being built, ground had just been broken for Cherrydale's new building, and new libraries for Shirlington and Westover were in the planning stage. It is hard now, with seven modern buildings all functioning, to realize that only twenty years ago the library system maintained its book collections in an office building, a business block, an apartment-house basement, and a number of more or less fragile wooden houses. It is interesting to see how we got "from there to here."

It should be emphasized from the first that all this expansion didn't just happen. The work and hopes of many county citizens, mainly women, built the book collections and publics for the original branches. The women in turn enlisted concerned citizens in their cause, until the overwhelming need for new facilities was known county-wide. But the event that focused this need was the 1955-56 *Report of a Survey of Department of Libraries With Recommended Building Program* by Dr. Joseph L. Wheeler. Wheeler, former director of the Enoch Pratt Free Library and a noted library consultant, recommended that all seven libraries be kept and that all seven have new buildings. He believed strongly that a shopping center was the ideal location for a public library. "Go where the people are" was his advice; thus, for example, he wanted the new Glencarlyn Library to be moved to the Arlington Forest shopping center, and the Westover Branch to the Washington Boulevard and McKinley Road shopping center.

These ideas were not followed, as we know; local sentiments, site availability, and other factors mitigated against Wheeler's plans. But the impact of his report as a whole, with its specific recommendations for bond issues and a timed building program, made a deep impression on the county and led directly to the seven new libraries that have opened since the earlier library history was written in 1960.

Wheeler did not recommend a central library, though he envisioned the Clarendon Library as somewhat larger than the other six, with headquarters attached.<sup>1</sup> But in the two years before action was taken on the library building program, new thoroughfares had changed library use patterns in Arlington, and a new director, Jane B. Nida, strongly urged a central library.<sup>2</sup> The Library Committee of the Planning Commission backed her up and spoke for ample parking at Central, which Wheeler had felt unnecessary.<sup>3</sup>

On May 14, 1958 county voters passed the first bond issue for libraries, in the amount of \$560,000, to be expended for the Central Library building. The county acquired two and two-tenths acres of land on North Quincy Street for \$62,500 on May 5, 1959, and J. Russell Bailey was appointed architect. Allen C. Minnix and Sons was the contractor. Then things began to move a little faster. On January 17, 1960, ground was broken for the new Central Library, and a dream of many years — since the time the library system was organized in 1936 — was about to be realized.<sup>4</sup>

As the new building rose, library staff members (of whom the writer was one) made many trips to explore it, planning how they would use the luxury of 33,000 square feet of space after the cramped quarters on North Irving Street. (The Clarendon Library was in a large house, with a storage shed for overflow books in the back; and the administrative offices coped with a small white frame house across the street, two stories crammed full of activities to keep the Library Department running.) On May 14, 1961, the new building was dedicated. It was a sturdy, modern edifice, with walls of rose-red brick and cast-stone trim, built of prestressed concrete. It cost \$516,667.75. The capacity was 100,000 volumes, only a third of which the library had at the time of the move.

On the first floor were the adult circulating and reference collections, a young adult section, the Children's Room, and the Technical Processing Division. There were also two special noncirculating collections — one of business services, such as Standard and Poor and Moody, and a Virginia section. The director felt strongly that the library should collect and preserve Virginia and Arlington materials, especially anything pertaining to the history of Arlington, a county changing so rapidly that the past was in serious danger of being swallowed up in the present. The second floor housed the administrative offices, the Audio-Visual Division, and a meeting room seating 100 people.

The new library was a success from the beginning, with circulation far above the Clarendon Library's highest figure, the seating space for 150 readers and the parking lot for fifty cars both usually full. It was soon apparent that a projected addition, for which the construction of Central had made provision, would shortly be needed. This, however, did not reach fulfillment until 1966, and will be described in its proper chronological place.

The second county library to have a new branch was Cherrydale, the closest library to Central (just one mile away.) Wheeler had recommended a move from the decrepit old frame house at 4006 Lee Highway to the business area near the intersection of Lee Highway and Glebe Road. But Cherrydale citizens insisted that "their" library should stay close to its old location. In the event, land was purchased at North 22nd Street and Military Road, part of the "old Dudley" property. The seller was the late "Brick" Wood, and the price was \$16,802.<sup>5</sup>

Ground was broken September 5, 1960, while Central was being built. The land sloped steeply down to Military Road, and J. Russell Bailey, again the architect, took full advantage of the site. The library, of stone and wood, fitted in among the tall trees of the hillside. It had a balcony on the upper level and entrances to the building at both lower and upper levels. The cost was \$713,000, and the contractor was Earl K. Rosti.

The branch's 19,519 books were moved to the new, spacious facility, and dedication took place August 14, 1961, just a few months after Central's dedication. As at Central, circulation markedly increased, and to this day Cherrydale's patrons are loyal and enthusiastic. Occasionally over the years county officials have mentioned closing this library, because of its proximity to Central; but neighborhood users always strongly protest. Unfortunately, some of the charm of the hillside location was lost when townhouses went up behind and beside the library.

County citizens, pleased with the two new libraries, were happy to pass a bond referendum in November 1961 allotting \$495,00 to replace branches at Westover, Glencarlyn, and Shirlington. First of the three buildings to get underway was Westover, for which \$152,700 of the total was allotted. A site costing \$25,000 was chosen August 8, 1960, at 5807 North 18th Street. Ground breaking took place in July, 1962, and construction began immediately. The architect, J. Russell Bailey, designed a red-brick split-level structure, with the adult area on the upper level, the children's area on the lower level, and the circulation desk between them. The contractor was W. Bradley Tyree. The building, which has 5,625 square feet of space, was situated to preserve the large trees on the lot.

Library staff moved the 23,432-volume bookstock from the garden apartment ground floor where the library had been located, and the new building held its dedication ceremony on June 16, 1963. The Westover neighborhood has changed little over the years, and the library's attractive surroundings have been preserved. It has also been fortunate in receiving plantings for its grounds donated to it by the Waycroft Woman's Club and the Potomac View Garden Club.

The Glencarlyn Branch is in some ways the most interesting of the branches in the system. For one thing, it is situated in a small, longtime, apartmentless community isolated by geographical boundaries from the rest of the county. (Wheeler felt it was "very badly located.") For another, it is the one library founded by a single individual, General Samuel S. Burdett, a public-spirited Glencarlyn citizen. And, finally, the Burdett Trust Fund provided money to pay for special features unique to this library.

The original library was built in 1923 and became part of the library system in 1941. The Burdett trustees remained responsible for the building until April 1959, when they turned over to the county the land, the building, and the remaining money from the fund. This site, therefore, was one that didn't need

to be purchased. The old building was razed and the books and staff were temporarily moved around the corner to Carlin Hall, a building of historic interest itself, and one which, coincidentally, had once housed a community collection of books.<sup>6</sup>

Ground was broken in October, 1962, for a modified Williamsburg Colonial library designed by J. Russell Bailey and constructed by B. Scott Construction Co. Of the \$126,500 allotted to this branch in the 1961 referendum, \$116,282 was spent for 4,000 square feet of space. As mentioned before, \$18,725 was available for added features — a reading terrace, a locked case for General Burdett's book collection, a windowseat for story hours, a browsing area for adults, a marble circulation desk, and special furniture and shelving.

The library was dedicated June 16, 1963, in conjunction with the Westover Library dedication. As with the latter, its neighborhood has changed little, remaining quaint and attractive and low key. And as with Cherrydale, county authorities from time to time have considered closing Glencarlyn, because it serves so small a neighborhood.

Since \$215,900 was allotted Shirlington out of the bond referendum that built Westover and Glencarlyn, supposedly it should have been ready when they were. But before construction started at the site on the east corner of the county property yard on South Arlington Mill Drive, a permit for a car-wash facility was granted on the land directly adjacent. Feeling that a car-wash was not an ideal neighbor, the county moved the library site to the west side of the property yard, at 2700 South Taylor Street. Ground was broken at this site on July 21, 1962. Designated as a secondary reference center because of its distance from Central, the Shirlington Library was designed by J. Russell Bailey with a large adult and young adult area to the left of the entrances, the Children's Room in back, and offices to the right. Contractor Miller Bros. of Arlington built it for \$155,654, or \$25 a square foot for 6,210 square feet of space. The total book capacity is 30,000 volumes, of which 23,000 were available when the library moved from its cramped second-floor office-building space to the new facility.

Shirlington Library, dedicated April 12, 1964, has the unusual features of a drive-in window and a story-hour terrace adjoining the Children's Room.

Now, finally, with four new branches built and humming with activity, it was time for the addition to Central. It was financed with a \$440,000 bond referendum approved in November 1963, and a \$236,923 federal grant (these were the days when Title II of the Library Service and Construction Act enabled many libraries to realize much-needed building plans.) The library had been so built that addition was easy, and construction began in 1966. The new space doubled the size of the library and tripled the public space. The first-floor addition was completed and opened to the public in September 1967. It contained a separate, quiet Business Room, a large study area, a Virginia collection, and an expanded Children's Room. The Audio-Visual Division had

more space, as did the administrative offices, and the Technical Processing Division found its new second-floor location much more convenient. On September 30, 1968, a new public area opened on the second floor, housing the fiction and fine arts collections and the enlarged Virginiana section. At this time Arlington's Central Library had the largest circulation of any one library in the State of Virginia.

Two libraries still remained without new quarters — the Columbia Pike Branch, located in the Westmont shopping center at Glebe Road and Columbia Pike, and the Aurora Hills Branch, in a small county-owned building at the corner of 23rd Street South and South Eads Street. Their long-term needs were met with new and innovative solutions, illustrating a new trend in local government building: in both cases, the libraries were made part of a large complex that collected many county agencies under one roof. The Columbia Pike Library found its new home in a county school complex at 816 South Walter Reed Drive, former site of Patrick Henry Elementary School and Thomas Jefferson Junior High School. The new complex, covering a square block, housed in addition to the branch library the Arlington Career Center, the Charles R. Fenwick Human Resources Center, and Patrick Henry Elementary School. The Career Center offers a comprehensive career-education program for secondary students, including courses in such subjects as horticulture, stenography, electronics, food service, carpentry, and electricity. The library has large technical and career collections to serve these classes. Interaction with the Human Resources Center, which brings together Public Health, Mental Health, Social Security and Special Programs including drug-and-alcohol-related rehabilitation activities, has been less extensive than that with the Career Center.

The library, with 20,000 square feet on two floors compared to its former space of 2,600 square feet, opened June 4, 1975. The center was dedicated September 13, 1975.

The last library to achieve new quarters was the one in Aurora Hills. Citizens approved a bond referendum for a new branch as long ago as 1969, and for a fire station and community center in 1973. (The fire station was located across South 23rd Street from the former library.) Ground was broken for the new complex in August, 1976, and the basic construction took eighteen months. The total cost was \$1,300,000. Dedication of the new center took place February 26, 1978. In addition to the library and fire department, the center contains a recreation center for older children, teens, and senior adults; a Visitors Information Center; and a State Air Pollution Monitoring Center. The idea for this multipurpose complex is credited to Bert W. Johnson, former Arlington County manager.

The new library, which opened on December 12, 1977, two and a half months before its dedication, has 10,000 square feet, as compared to South Eads Street's 1,260 square feet. Its present bookstock is 24,634 volumes, with a

potential of 40,000 to 50,000. When the library first opened the public complained that the "spacious, well-lighted, attractive" quarters had too many empty shelves.<sup>7</sup> Time is gradually taking care of this problem. Another element, a sign of the future, makes the Aurora Hills Library more accessible: the proximity to the Pentagon Metro station.

The seven libraries, snug in their new buildings, have not been satisfied just with enlarged bookstocks and increased circulation. From their first days, all have developed and promoted programs of many kinds. The Central Library, as soon as it opened, began circulating records — vocal, instrumental, and language, plus recorded plays and poems. In 1961 the Audio-Visual Division began adult film programs, and now Central and several branches have children's film programs as well. The Central Library also has books in many foreign languages, and it, Columbia Pike and Shirlington have magazines and newspapers on microfilm.

Public libraries today are much aware of the needs of the handicapped. All of Arlington's libraries have street-level entrances, accessible to wheel chairs, and the Central Library's public elevator and restrooms have signs in braille. Central has two other services important to the handicapped — Talking Books, and Service to the Homebound. The Talking Books program started in 1968-69 with a deposit collection from the Virginia State Library. Then in September 1972 the Library of Congress designated the library a Sub-Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. Now, manned by a half-time librarian and a staff of volunteers, it distributes talking books (records that play at 8 rpm) and players, and cassette books and players, to 300 county residents. Service to the Homebound, which has a staff of two, began in 1975. It brings books and magazines not only to people confined to their own homes but to persons in institutions, rest homes, nursing homes, retirement sites, nutrition centers, senior day-care centers, and the Detention Center.

The oral history project of the Virginia section is an ongoing program of much interest. Like many other libraries throughout the country, Arlington has enlisted volunteers to tape interviews with older county residents, whose memories of the community might otherwise be lost. Similarly, genealogy programs have been popular at Central — especially since the Bicentennial. So have series of talks and lectures at some of the libraries on a wide variety of topics: gardening, stress, opera, consumer education — the list is endless. In the 1960s and early 1970s book and author teas at Central attracted local authors and local would-be writers who sought their advice. Performing musicians have ranged from brass ensembles to folk singers; audiences also enjoy poetry readings.

It goes without saying that all the libraries furnish a multitude of children's programs — story hours, movies, puppet shows, and pet shows are among the very popular activities.

And so this survey of an exciting and eventful twenty years for the Arlington County Libraries comes to an end. What does the future hold: more

computerization, cable TV, further growth? We will just have to wait and see.

Many of the dedicated women who worked so hard to found the seven struggling little libraries back in the 1920s and 1930s are gone now. But their deeds live after them. One worker who is still active and a library user at 90, Mrs. Dora Mae Hynes, has a good epilogue for this story of aspiration and achievement: "With hundred of borrowers, thousands of books, trained librarians and modern buildings ... the excellent Arlington County Library today is a long way from the dream and effort of a group of stalwart women volunteers working in that one little room."

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Harrison Kling, *Survey, Program and Projection; a Study of Public Library Progress in Arlington County, Virginia, Based on the Survey Made by Joseph L. Wheeler*, Catholic University, 1965. p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>M.H. Kling, *op. cit.*, p. 16-18.

<sup>3</sup>M.H. Kling, *op. cit.*, Appendix III.

<sup>4</sup>Arlington County. Department of Libraries. *Annual Report, 1959-60*.

<sup>5</sup>This land today, according to the Department of Real Estate Assessments, is worth \$65,000; and the land on which the Central Library is situated is valued at \$196,000.

<sup>6</sup>Jeanne Rose, "A brief history of the Arlington County Public Libraries," *Arlington Historical Magazine* (1960), p. 28-29.

<sup>7</sup>*Washington Star*, September 20, 1978, Section Z.

## SOURCES

Arlington County. Central Library. Virginia vertical file. Clippings by date and under name of branch library.

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Dedication programs for new library buildings and county complexes

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