

100 years



A CENTURY OF SERVICE:
THE STATE LIBRARY *of* LOUISIANA AT 100

1925-2025

STATE LIBRARY EMPLOYEES Frank Burns (standing), Iberia Babin (seated), and Debora Abramson (standing under globe) work in the reference department in the 1940s.



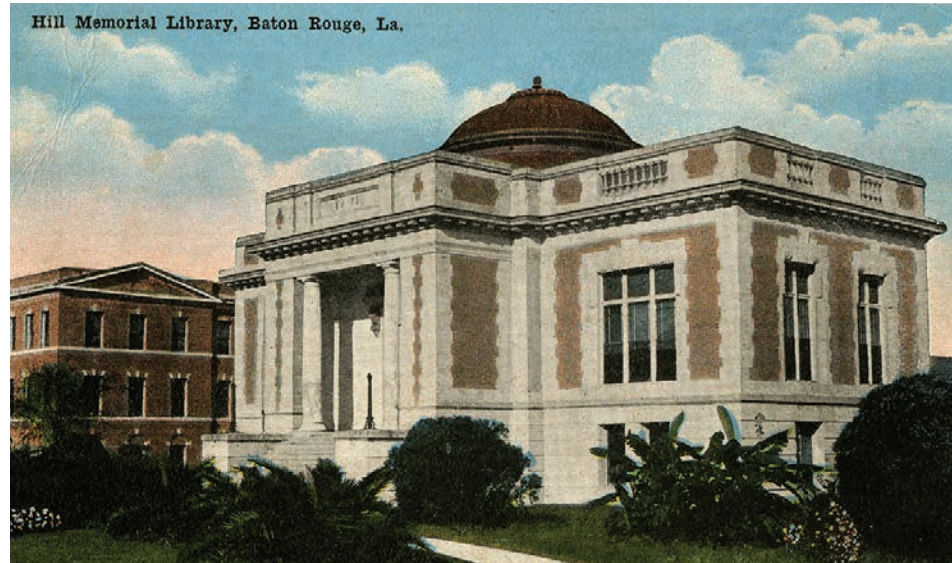
A YOUNG BOY waits for the State Library bookmobile in the 1940s.



A CENTURY OF SERVICE: THE STATE LIBRARY *of* LOUISIANA AT 100 1925-2025



Edited by
Daniel Monteverde
and
Dorothy White



EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH LIBRARY ARCHIVES



STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES



DANIEL MONTEVERDE

PICTURES FROM THE PAST: Hill Memorial Library, the State Library's third home. An early Louisiana Library Commission bookmobile. Students visit the Louisiana Collection.



100 YEARS

STATE LIBRARY of LOUISIANA

LIBRARY.LA.GOV
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BATON ROUGE, LA 70802

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LOOKING FORWARD WHILE HONORING THE PAST

It's exciting to serve as Lieutenant Governor during the 100th anniversary of the State Library of Louisiana. What started as an experiment a century ago has become a valuable resource for all Louisianans.

The State Library of Louisiana provides access to more than eleven million items through its own excellent collection and electronic resources combined with a statewide online lending network of public libraries. It remains committed to creating ever-increasing opportunities for citizens to experience the value of libraries and reading.

Every year for the past 20 years, the streets of downtown Baton Rouge in front of the State Library are filled with literary enthusiasts enjoying the state's flagship literacy festival—the Louisiana Book Festival. Just this past year, more than 22,000 people attended the festival continuing its steady

growth as one the Louisiana's most popular cultural events. Every year, the State Library staff puts together an incredible lineup of authors and presentations.

Each year also sees nearly 15,000 Louisiana students read more than 40,000 books as part of our Louisiana Readers' Choice program. And one of my favorites, Homework Louisiana hosts nearly 60,000 online tutoring sessions totaling nearly 9,000 hours of instruction for our students to improve performance across all grade levels.

It's this dedication to Louisiana that will see the State Library of Louisiana serve all Louisianans for the next 100 years.

Billy Nungesser

BILLY NUNGESSER
Lieutenant Governor



BILLY NUNGESSER,
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

A centennial anniversary is always a reason to celebrate, but this is a particularly significant milestone for the State Library of Louisiana.

In its early days, there were serious doubts about whether the State Library would survive. Essae Culver, the first state librarian, arrived in Louisiana a century ago with such uncertainty about her mission that she kept her return train ticket—just in case things didn't work out.

Thankfully, she never needed it.

Not only did the State Library survive, it thrived, laying the foundation for the success of public libraries across Louisiana. Data we collect from each public library system in Louisiana shows tremendous use by the public which increases every year. This success has, in turn, strengthened the state as a whole.

Today, a modern library is much more than a place to find a good book or conduct research. It is the heart of healthy communities and plays an essential role in educa-

tion, innovation, and democracy.

Yet, through all the changes of the last century, the mission has remained the same: to build an informed and educated society.

This centennial is not just a celebration of the past—it is a call toward a great future. As we reflect on a century of progress, I am proud to carry on the tradition Miss Culver began and eager to see how libraries will continue to evolve to meet the needs of future generations.

Here's to the next century for Louisiana and its libraries—and to the enduring power of knowledge and community they represent.

Meg Placke

MEG PLACKE
State Librarian



MEG PLACKE,
STATE LIBRARIAN



STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

CHILDREN IN CONCORDIA PARISH pose with the Louisiana Library Commission bookmobile in 1928. A *Times-Picayune* article (below) from June 18, 1922, notes the struggle to start the Commission.

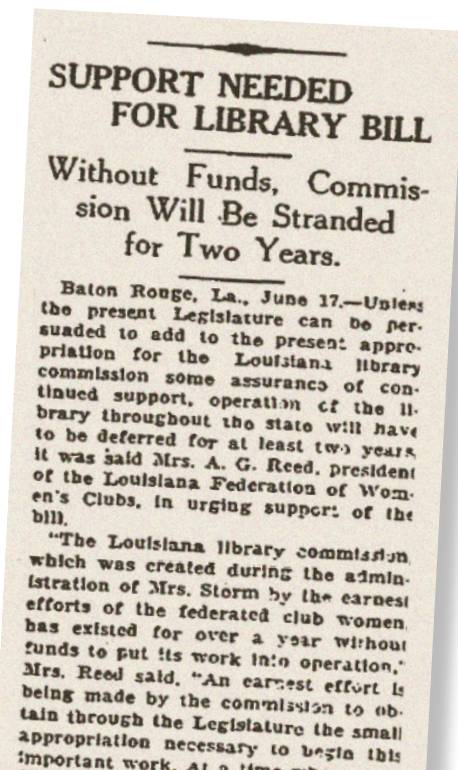
A BOOKLESS STATE

The history of library development in Louisiana embodies the history of a movement and the creation of the State Library of Louisiana, in that the development of the State Library and public libraries in Louisiana was parallel.

Originally established in 1838 and located in New Orleans, the Louisiana State Library experienced varying levels of support over the years. After a period of neglect, it was ultimately closed in 1911, and efforts to revive it stretched on for years.

By 1925, the state's five public libraries were woefully underfunded and poorly equipped. More than half of Louisiana's population—1.2 million people—lacked access to books.

That reality was about to change.



HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The State Library of Louisiana started as a fragile pilot program.

In 1925, Milton J. Ferguson, president of the League of Library Commissions and California's state librarian, invited a librarian he knew, Essae M. Culver, to Louisiana to undertake an ambitious experiment.

He secured a \$50,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to fund a three-year demonstration of free library services in a state with inadequate access to books. The project was later extended to five years, with the hope it would inspire similar initiatives in other states.

Louisiana, one of the most "bookless" of the 48 states, was chosen as the demonstration site. Ferguson was impressed by the emerging interest in libraries in this largely rural state, which had legislation in place since 1920 to assist with library development. Until then, no one had acted upon it.

For the project leader, he selected Culver, a 43-year-old librarian from California who had extensive experience working with rural libraries in that state. She later admitted feeling "somewhat amazed" at her "temerity in undertaking so mammoth a task."

Culver arrived in Louisiana "on a white hot day in July" to find few books, no office, and minimal resources for the new venture.

Appointed as executive secretary and the entire staff of the newly formed Louisiana Library Commission, she refused to be discouraged.

Borrowing space in the Old State Capitol, she found a desk, chair, and typewriter and began her work. Still, she confessed, she was "more than slightly dismayed at the prospect" and had purchased a round-trip train ticket, uncertain of success.

Her initial worries proved unfounded.

Culver was met with enthusiasm and a widespread desire for books throughout the state. Recognizing the unmet demand, she launched a book-lending program by mail, making books accessible to people anywhere in Louisiana.

The state's five existing public libraries—located in New Orleans, Lake Charles, Jennings, Alexandria, and Shreveport—served 600,000 people but lacked sufficient resources to meet their needs.

At her first meeting with the Library Commission board, key priorities were set: establish parish libraries statewide, create a library school, provide library services to legislators, and draft new public library laws.

James O. Modisette, an attorney from Jennings whose business card proudly declared, "Interested in Public Libraries," soon joined the cause.

In 1926, he drafted new public library legislation that became law in July of that year. Modisette joined the Library Commission board, where he served tirelessly for 16 years until his death in 1942.

Together, Culver and Modisette laid the foundation for a statewide public library system. However, the journey to open libraries throughout Louisiana would prove neither quick nor easy.



ESSAE M. CULVER, Louisiana's first state librarian.



JAMES O. MODISETTE, an early supporter of public libraries in Louisiana.



NEWSPAPER HEADLINES from around the state in 1925 and 1926 heralded work by the Louisiana Library Commission and interest from the public in starting libraries in their communities.

DEMONSTRATION METHOD

One of the first challenges Culver faced was determining how to build and fund libraries in Louisiana.

The demonstration method emerged as the most effective strategy for achieving the Commission's objectives. This approach showcased to local communities the benefits of library services. Once local citizens expressed interest and the parish police jury passed an ordinance to establish a library, the Commission stepped in to set up a parish library system.

The guidelines for these demonstration libraries were strict. The Commission set up the parish library and operated it for a year, bearing the greater part of the expenses.

The local government was responsible for "providing housing, furniture, equipment, utilities, building, and some administrative supplies, and local part-time assistants for branch libraries." The state provided "all books, magazines, most administrative supplies, a professional staff of librarians and full-time assistants, and a bookmobile."

If the parish committed to supporting the library through a dedicated tax—something most parishes eventually did—the Commission would leave the entire book collection and bookmobile on indefinite loan.

The first two demonstration libraries were established in 1926: one in Richland Parish in north Louisiana and another in Jefferson Davis Parish in the south.

Both libraries initially proved successful among the communities they served. However, at the end of the demonstration period, only Richland Parish secured ongoing support. Its police jury allocated funds to continue the library. Voters in Jefferson Davis Parish rejected the proposed tax levy. It would be almost four decades before a parish library would open there.

The Richland Parish library became so popular that even during the catastrophic Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, the demand for books made headlines.

"With most of the parish under water, the borrowers paddled their way over high spots and low ones and waded miles through puddles to get books," *The Times-Picayune* reported on June 12, 1927.

ON THE ROAD

While books could be mailed to people, a larger effort was needed to raise awareness about public libraries and the Commission's work.

At the time, many residents associated libraries with universities—institutions that felt irrelevant to them. To promote public library services, the Commission purchased a bookmobile. Its exterior was painted with illustrations of books on shelves, while the interior housed a collection of 500 volumes.

The bookmobile traveled across Louisiana, visiting fairs and towns in every corner of the state, bringing "its message of romance, inspiration, and service" to communities eager for access to books. This program became an essential tool for generating excitement about libraries, especially in rural areas.

The first bookmobile, purchased for \$834, traversed Louisiana's dusty back roads, ensuring library access wherever it was needed. Today, bookmobiles remain vital, operating in 22 public library systems.

Despite the challenges of the Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and the Great Depression, the five-year Carnegie-funded project produced remarkable results. Parish library systems were established in Richland, Concordia, and Webster parishes.

Additionally, people in 23 other parishes expressed interest in library services and sought to implement the demonstration method. Perhaps most significantly, state lawmakers began funding the Commission's work, starting with an annual appropriation of \$2,500. State funding continues to this day.

The project's success set the Commission's course for the next 40 years: establishing public library services in all 64 parishes using the demonstration method.

Culver's detailed report on the project garnered national and international attention, with requests for copies coming from across the United States and even abroad. Visitors traveled to Baton Rouge to interview her and document Louisiana's groundbreaking efforts in library development.

GETTING STARTED

There are 68 public library systems in Louisiana's 64 parishes today. The State Library worked to open many of them beginning in the mid-1920s with the demonstration library program.



Acadia Parish Library 1945	Madison Parish Library 1945
Allen Parish Libraries 1957	Morehouse Parish Library 1940
Ascension Parish Library 1960	Morgan City Public Library 1934
Assumption Parish Library 1968	Natchitoches Parish Library 1938
Audubon Regional Library 1963	New Orleans Public Library* 1896
Avoyelles Parish Library 1949	Opelousas Public Library 1967
Beauregard Parish Library 1947	Plaquemines Parish Library 1959
Bienville Parish Library 1964	Pointe Coupee Parish Library 1941
Bossier Parish Library 1940	Rapides Parish Library 1941
Calcasieu Parish Library 1944	Red River Parish Library 1961
Caldwell Parish Library 1953	Richland Parish Library 1926
Cameron Parish Library 1958	Sabine Parish Library 1933
Catahoula Parish Library 1949	Shreve Memorial Library* 1923
Claiborne Parish Library 1951	S. St. Landry Community Library 1993
Concordia Parish Library 1928	St. Bernard Parish Library 1957
DeSoto Parish Library 1941	St. Charles Parish Library 1955
East Baton Rouge Parish Library 1939	St. James Parish Library 1966
East Carroll Parish Library 1954	St. John the Baptist Parish Library 1966
Eunice Public Library 2023	St. Martin Parish Library 1955
Evangeline Parish Library 1948	St. Mary Parish Library 1953
Franklin Parish Library 1950	St. Tammany Parish Library 1951
Grant Parish Library 1959	Tangipahoa Parish Library 1945
Iberia Parish Library 1947	Tensas Parish Library 1952
Jackson Parish Library 1937	Terrebonne Parish Library 1953
Jefferson Davis Parish Library 1968	Union Parish Library 1955
Jefferson Parish Library 1949	Vermilion Parish Library 1942
Jennings Carnegie Public Library* 1885	Vernon Parish Library 1956
Krotz Springs Public Library 2007	Washington Parish Library 1946
Lafayette Public Library 1946	Webster Parish Library 1929
Lafourche Parish Public Library 1935	West Baton Rouge Parish Library 1965
LaSalle Parish Library 1952	West Carroll Parish Library 1967
Lincoln Parish Library 1962	West Feliciana Parish Library 2003
Livingston Parish Library 1946	Winn Parish Library 1939

* Denotes public library system founded before the State Library.

A BOAT PULLS UP to a Louisiana Library Commission bookmobile parked along a bayou in Terrebonne Parish in the 1930s.



Gov. Huey Long also showed an interest in the State Library, often using it to borrow reading material, and he publicly supported its efforts. "If I had only a small amount of money to spend on public improvements, I would put it all in a library," he wrote in a letter to the Commission in 1929.

GROWING INTEREST

In the 1920s, two major projects the Commission advocated for quickly came into being: the establishment of a library school at Louisiana State University and the launch of a school library development program within the state Department of Education, led by a State School Library Supervisor.

By 1932, the Commission relocated from its cramped, dilapidated office in the Old State Capitol to a more spacious and well-furnished location on the 18th floor of the newly constructed State Capitol.

Public libraries across Louisiana were thriving, sparking interest from residents of parishes without libraries. Many began advocating for demonstrations in their own communities.

In 1937, Gov. Richard W. Leche expressed interest in expanding library access, particularly in areas without existing services. His initial proposal was to place books in school libraries, but the Commission did not view this as the best solution. To address the issue, a compromise was reached.

The Department of Education placed books for adults in 56 high school libraries across 10 parishes. The Commission, meanwhile, used \$10,000 from the Department of Education, supplemented by additional funds, to establish a regional demonstration library serving Winn, Grant, and Jackson parishes.

After six months, the results were telling. The 119,292 residents of the 10 parishes served by the school libraries borrowed 14,355 books. Meanwhile, the 31,610 residents of the three parishes served by the demonstration library borrowed a staggering 101,236 books. Despite this success, only Winn Parish voted to continue supporting the regional library.

In 1938, the Commission underwent an organizational change. The demonstration library program was placed under the newly created Extension Department, and a qualified librarian was hired to oversee demonstrations and provide support to established libraries.

From 1939 to 1942, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) played a significant role in Louisiana's library development. In partnership with the Commission, the WPA established small libraries across the state. It provided staff, including trained librarians, to oversee clerical workers, book repairers, and bookmobile drivers. WPA funds were also used to buy books for libraries.

When the WPA disbanded in 1942, its closure had minimal impact on the state's public libraries, and none were forced to close since the program worked so closely with the Commission.

GROWING PAINS

In 1940, the first state aid bill for public libraries was passed, providing a biennial appropriation of \$400,000, separate from the Commission's budget. Unfortunately, the bill was vetoed by the governor due to insufficient funds.

That same year, the Commission faced another setback when it was forced to vacate its offices in the new State Capitol, reportedly because too many people used the elevators to get to its offices.

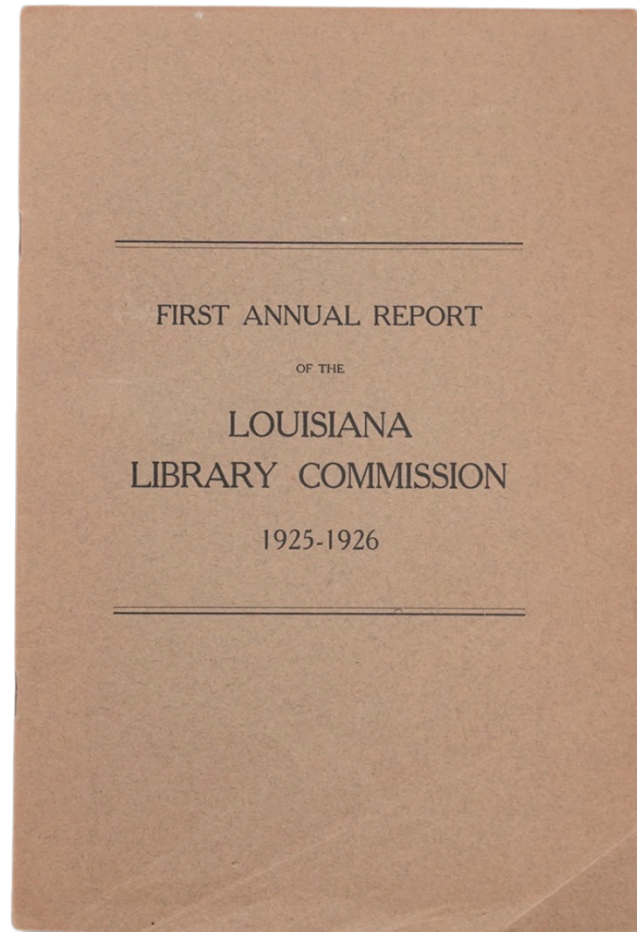
The move to the old, cramped Hill Memorial Library on the Capitol grounds—which had been the first location of LSU—caused significant challenges. While the 1904 building may have served the university well in its infancy, limited space slowed the preparation of books for demonstration libraries and led to the refusal of several special collections would-be donors offered to the Commission.

With the onset of World War II, the importance of libraries in Louisiana grew significantly. Libraries became essential not only for providing books to soldiers in training camps—ranging from technical manuals to recreational reading—but also for serving the general public. Civilians sought information on topics such as the countries where soldiers were deployed or resources for women preparing for wartime jobs.

In 1943, an important new service was introduced: the Library Service for Colored People. The following year, it was renamed the Negro Reference and Loan Library. Due to space constraints at the Commission's office, the service operated out of Southern University in facilities provided by the university president, Dr. F. G. Clark. Usage steadily increased, and in 1958, the service moved into the new State Library building. Renamed the Negro Services Department, it was absorbed by the Reference Department in 1964.

In 1946, the Louisiana Legislature renamed the Louisiana Library Commission as the Louisiana State Library to eliminate confusion with another state-operated library. The law library in New Orleans, previously also called the Louisiana State Library, was renamed the Law Library of Louisiana.

That same year, Sallie Farrell, a native of Mississippi with Louisiana roots, began to work at the State Library as a field representative. A graduate of the University of Illinois library program, Farrell



"It is encouraging that citizens all over the state have manifested an interest in obtaining for themselves and their children the cultural benefits and opportunity for a liberal education which a well equipped library affords."

—Essae M. Culver

First Annual Report of the Louisiana Library Commission

A STATE LIBRARY STAFF MEMBER, identified as "Mrs. Murray," (seated) helps a patron in the Negro Services department. Housed on Southern University's campus, this department was absorbed by the Reference Department in 1964





HUEY P. LONG
GOVERNOR

STATE OF LOUISIANA
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
BATON ROUGE

NEW ORLEANS OFFICE
1107 WHITNEY BANK BLDG.
NEW ORLEANS

September 14, 1929

Louisiana State Library Commission,
State Capitol,
Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Dear friends:-

Replying to your letter of September 5th, relative to my stand on libraries in the various parishes, I give you the following statement, which you can publish:

In my opinion, there is nothing that can greater serve the cause of convenience, happiness and uplift of a community than a public library. It places within the reach of every child, as well as older people, the literature which enables them to become informed, and through which they may entertain themselves more delightfully, and to aid their mental and spiritual development.

If I had only a small amount of money to spend on public improvements, I would put it all in a library.

Sincerely your friend,

G O V E R N O R

GOV. HUEY LONG wrote this letter in support of the Louisiana Library Commission as work to publicize its efforts continued.



STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

LIBRARIAN BRENDA DEAN packs braille books for shipment in the 1940s.

became Director of Field Services in 1954, collaborating with local officials and citizens to establish new libraries.

In 1947, a unique demonstration library project began at the State Penitentiary. Unlike previous efforts, this library included a headquarters and branch libraries within the inmate camps. It proved highly successful, with inmates eagerly borrowing both fiction and nonfiction as they would in

any parish library.

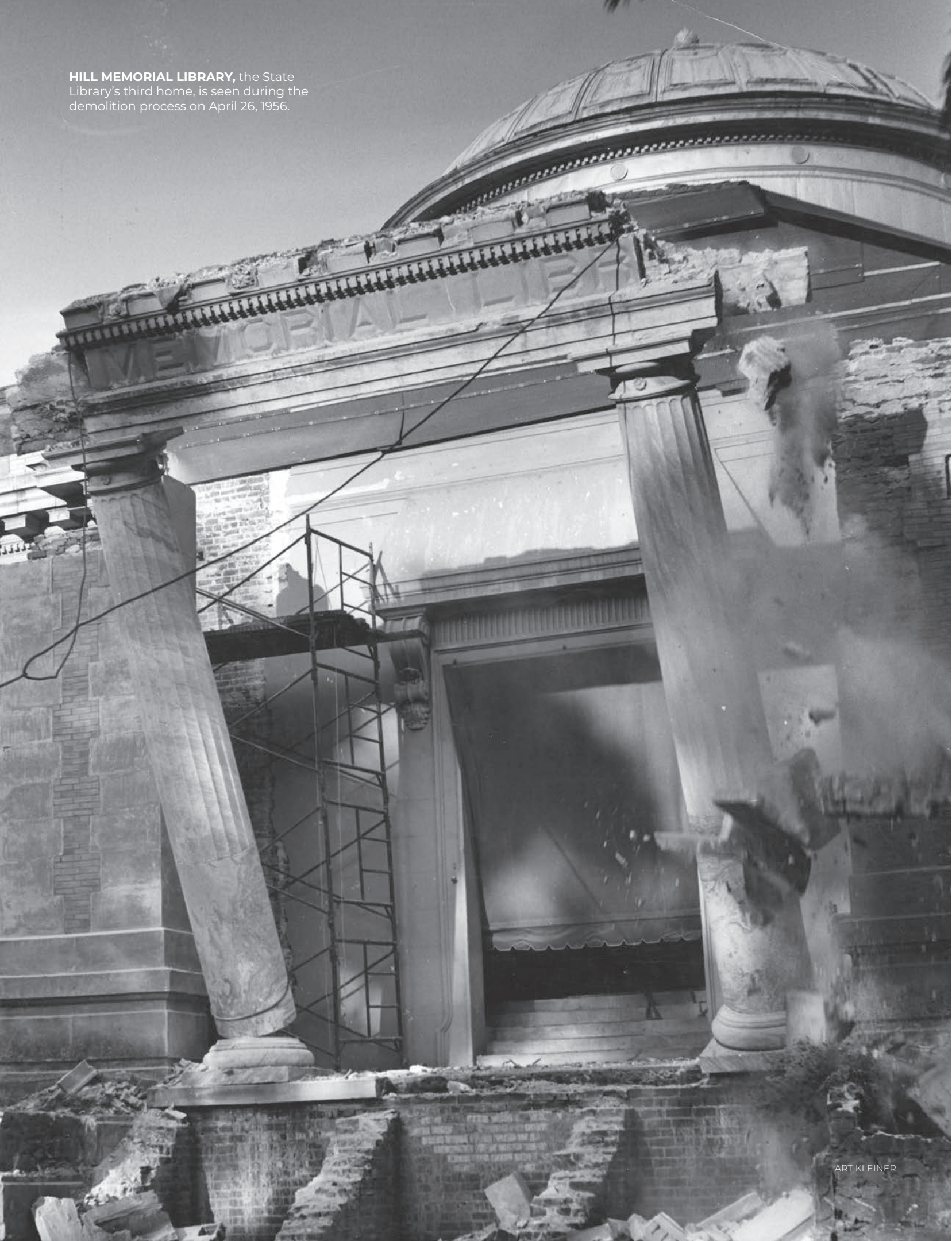
Although Angola officials acknowledged its value, they were unable to provide financial support after the demonstration period ended, leading to the closure of the library and the withdrawal of its books.

That same year, the Louisiana Collection was established to preserve books about the state, historic documents, and photographs. To this day, department staff

members assist the public and state agencies conducting research related to Louisiana.

Despite various growing pains, Louisiana's library development gained national recognition. In 1950, a representative of the Carnegie Corporation, which kick-started the Commission, described the state's efforts as "one of the finest expenditures of Carnegie money ... on record."

HILL MEMORIAL LIBRARY, the State Library's third home, is seen during the demolition process on April 26, 1956.



ART KLEINER



STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

THE STATE LIBRARY'S NEW BUILDING was a welcome upgrade from the old Hill Memorial Library, which was located on the same site.

A NEW HOME

In 1954, the state allocated \$2 million to construct a new State Library building on the site of the old Hill Memorial Library, but the process proved neither quick nor easy. The Associated Press highlighted the urgency of the project in 1954, noting that the antiquated space the State Library had occupied since 1940 left librarians “more worried about termites than bookworms.”

Two alternative locations were initially debated and rejected before the decision was made to demolish the old library and build the new structure on the same site. Plans called for the staff to work in Hill Memorial as long as possible.

But an emergency evacuation of the building happened after early demolition work made it structurally unsound and it was condemned. Staffers had just days to remove everything from the building while the library's leaders found temporary space.

This situation improved drastically in November 1958, when the move into the new facility was completed.

The modern building brought significant advancements, including space specifically designed for the Department for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, now known as the Talking Books and Braille Library. This department, previously man-

aged by the New Orleans Public Library for both Louisiana and Mississippi, became part of the State Library.

Service for the blind in Louisiana began in 1931 and was expanded in 1966 to include individuals unable to use standard print materials due to temporary or permanent visual or physical limitations. The service would grow to have thousands of patrons.

Around this time, public libraries across the state also began to improve their facilities, which were as inadequate as the old Hill Memorial Library. In the early years of the demonstration program, many libraries operated in improvised spaces.

In Tallulah, the seat of Madison Parish in northeast Louisiana, an unused jail served as the library. In Hahnville in St. Charles Parish, a former saloon known as The Bucket of Blood was converted for library use. Elsewhere, old schools and funeral homes were retrofitted into libraries.

Federal funding eventually helped many of these communities transition to more suitable and purpose-built library spaces, marking a significant step forward in public library development across Louisiana.

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Culver retired in 1962 after 37 years of service, just before she turned 80. By this time, the Louisiana State Library had succeeded in creating autonomous, locally supported library systems in 51 of the state's 64 parishes.

Culver was a remarkable figure, both as a person and a professional, with a significant impact on the library profession, not just in Louisiana but across the country.

During her extraordinary career, she was beloved by people throughout Louisiana and was known as a dynamic leader. She was well respected and admired by her colleagues in Louisiana and throughout the United States.

She spearheaded the creation of the LSU library school when, in 1926, she established a summer training course for 21 young women. She is credited with reviving the dying Louisiana Library Association (LLA) during her presidency in 1928–29. She is also recognized as the first woman heading a southern library to serve as the president of the American Library Association. In 1959, she became the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from LSU.

The Louisiana Library Association named its most prestigious award after her: The Essae M. Culver Distinguished Service Award.

After Culver's retirement, Farrell was

appointed as the new state librarian. She had excellent and relevant experience, having been directly involved in the establishment of library systems in 44 parishes, including the three demonstration libraries she set up and directed in Winn, Rapides, and Calcasieu parishes.

Farrell, known for her charm, was a persuasive advocate for public library service. She became known as "the super salesman of Louisiana libraries."



SALLIE FARRELL, Louisiana's second state librarian.

A rare defeat did occur, however, in 1966 when St. Landry Parish voters rejected a library, the first time that happened in 26 years.

Instead of a parishwide library, the Opelousas-Eunice Public Library was established on Oct. 1, 1967. Materials from the demonstration library were used to support the new municipal system. The State Library also added several hundred new volumes to help the library get started.

A NEW ERA

One might think that following Culver would prove daunting, but Farrell had no

trouble making a place for herself in Louisiana library history.

She seamlessly continued the work, overseeing the establishment of library services in the last 13 parishes without them. By 1968, the Jefferson Davis Parish demonstration library — the last demonstration library — became permanent, decades after voters first rejected its creation. (A handful of parish and municipal libraries would open decades later.)

Still, Farrell's work was far from over.

She chaired the LLA Federal Relations Committee and played a crucial role in the passage of the Library Services Act (later the Library Services and Construction Act) by working behind the scenes and testifying before congressional committees.

She also directed the creation of multi-parish library systems like Trail Blazer, Green Gold, and Bayouland, which facilitated interlibrary loans and continuing education across regions.

During the Cold War, Farrell represented the ALA in a library exchange mission to the Soviet Union, and she worked with leaders in the Department of Corrections and the Department of Hospitals to establish libraries in state institutions. She used her charm and political savvy to promote state laws supporting libraries.

After the dedication of the Jefferson Davis Parish Library, Farrell said, "Now that our commitment to the establishment of public libraries is discharged, our efforts will be directed to the improvement of these libraries through cooperative and coordinated endeavors."

She added, "Although we take justifiable pride in local library service being available to every Louisiana citizen, we are not unmindful of the job ahead. Now we will be concerned with devising ways for better utilization of total library resources and personnel."

In 1971, she was awarded the Essae M. Culver Distinguished Service Award.

NEXT STEPS

Once the demonstration libraries were set up and funded locally, the focus of the Library Development Division shifted.

Consultants continued to visit every public library in the state, providing telephone consultations on topics such as tax elections, bookmobiles, book selection, and personnel management.

To further improve public libraries, the State Library in 1966 commissioned John and James Humphry to conduct a comprehensive survey of the Louisiana's public libraries.

The resulting report, *Library Service in Louisiana: Keeping Pace with Progress in the State*, recommended major improvements, including the establishment of a pilot library system by the State Library, a statewide survey of library resources, and the expansion of the rapid communications network.

In 1974, the state constitution mandated a reorganization of the executive branch, which resulted in the State Library becoming an office within the Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, under the Office of the Lieutenant Governor. The Board of Commissioners, made up of seven appointees by the governor, became advisory but retained the authority to appoint the state librarian.

Another significant change came in 1977 when the Recorder of Documents was moved from the Secretary of State's office to the State Library. This office ensures public access to state government information through depository libraries across the state. Copies of state documents submitted to the Recorder are kept in the Louisiana Collection. Some of the oldest date to the 1800s.

MARKING 50 YEARS

Farrell retired in 1975, the same year the State Library marked its 50th anniversary. Thomas F. Jaques was named her successor. Before coming to the State Library, Jaques was an administrator at the Rapides Parish Library, followed by a position as assistant director for library development at the Mississippi Library Commission, comparable to the State Library.



STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES
FUTURE STATE LIBRARIAN SALLIE FARRELL at work in a bookmobile in Rapides Parish in the 1940s.

Jaques was a great communicator and salesman who advocated for library interests. Early in his tenure, he wrote, “We’re grateful for the past. Its accomplishments have placed Louisiana’s library program on a firm foundation. Now we must search with vitality and imagination for ways to expand the horizons of service.”

Jaques saw a need to make library services more interconnected. Under his leadership, Louisiana’s libraries grew to meet the increasing demand for services, especially as technology rapidly evolved.

DAWN OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Before 1985, the State Library was entirely analog. Things would quickly change. That year, the first computer was installed to perform interlibrary loan services.

The card catalog began its digital con-

version in 1986, when 35 public libraries began to use the Lasernet Interlibrary Loan System, which held information on 12-inch laser disks. In 1988, the card catalog was put on CD’s, and interlibrary loan requests were sent through a modem connection.

By 1991, anyone with a modem at home or work could access the State Library’s catalog, place requests for items, and send messages to the library.

Two years later, a grant from the U.S. Department of Education was awarded to the State Library. Part of it was to provide internet access to the headquarters of every public library system in the state. The State Library’s website went live in 1994, the same year staff members got email.

In 1996, Lasernet files were moved to an online database and transactions were done online since each parish library had

an internet connection. But there was still a lot of work to do to make sure patrons could access the web.

A major initiative in 1998 was Louisiana Libraries Connect. This project provided all public libraries in the state with high-speed internet and database access. A \$7 million grant from the Gates Learning Foundation ensured computers were put in place in every library for use by patrons. That funding was matched by \$2 million in state money. The work to connect libraries was done by December 1998.

The State Library began the program for payment of the public libraries’ connectivity charges for their wide area networks and their internet service. The same year, the Louisiana Library Connection website launched, allowing anyone in the state to access dozens of databases and services.

A FOCUS ON LITERACY

As much as technology became a key focus, attention to books and literacy never waned. If anything, that aspect grew as the State Library added programs and departments.

Library Development created a state-wide summer reading program for students and adults. The Louisiana Readers’ Choice program, which began in 1999, encourages students to read and vote for their favorite books. Young people have read nearly 1.5 million books and cast more than 460,00 votes since the award program started.

The Louisiana Center for the Book, the state affiliate of the Library of Congress Center for the Book, was created in 1994 to promote books and reading, literature and culture, and libraries. Its formal debut was a glitzy gala on March 17, 1995, headlined by historian and author David McCullough.

The Center began a series of successful programs and events.

The first Louisiana Book Festival—a marquee event for the Center and the State Library—was held in 2002. The festival and its associated programs drew an estimated 22,000 people in 2024.

Since 2000, the Center has presented the Louisiana Writer Award to an individual from the state whose work has contributed to the state’s literary heritage. The first recipient was novelist Ernest J. Gaines, a native of Pointe Coupee Parish.

In 2024, the Center created the Louisiana Literary Icon Award, presented to others who have worked to advance the state’s literary heritage. The first recipients were Ann Dobbie, an author and professor emerita of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and Susan Larson, former book editor of *The Times-Picayune* and host of WWNO-FM’s *The Reading Life*. The award also recognized their contributions to the Center and Louisiana Book Festival.

The Center also celebrates Louisiana poets with a National Poetry Month reading, held in conjunction with the state poet laureate. Virtual programs are produced for Women’s History Month and Black History Month.



DANIEL MONTEVERDE

FORMER STATE POET LAUREATE MONA LISA SALOY reads during the 2024 National Poetry Month celebration.



JESSICA WILSON

CHILDREN MAKE SHOEBOX FLOATS during the 2024 Louisiana Book Festival with author Brenda Baker Robert, who wrote *King of the Shoebox Parade*. The festival places a heavy emphasis on books for young people.



STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

TOM JAQUES was named state librarian in 1975, the same year the State Library celebrated its 50th anniversary. Jaques is seen speaking during that anniversary celebration.

GROWING AGAIN

Programs and departments were not the only things growing. An \$8 million renovation and expansion of the State Library building resulted in 50,000 additional square feet. That addition was first attempted in 1983, no funds were available until 1988. Work to renovate and expand the library finally began in late 1995. A dedication was held in March 1999. The State Library building now totals 130,000 square feet.

As part of a larger project to enhance the Capitol Park area, the front of the library was reoriented to North Fourth Street. The building also carried a new name over the door: State Library of Louisiana. Gov. Buddy Roemer signed the name change into law in 1991 after years of the public confusing the Louisiana State Library with Louisiana State University's library.

While the expansion was badly needed, the project was not without its inconveniences. The building remained in use except for a few weeks to move materials. That meant staff members often worked alongside construction crews. To complicate matters, plans were modified during construction to accommodate changes in technology. More than 60 work stations for the public were added to the building.

"It is in this decade, the '90s, that we have seen a sudden ... change," *The Advocate* quotes Jaques as saying when he announced the Gates grant. "And we marvel at what we can now provide through the magic of computers and information networks."

The Times-Picayune apparently knew big changes were on the way thanks to the new technology. "Thanks to the generosity of Microsoft magnate Bill Gates, Louisiana public libraries will expand beyond their traditional role as centers of knowledge," the paper wrote in an editorial after the grants were announced.

Jaques retired in 2005 after 30 years of service. His work was recognized in 1984 when the Louisiana Library Association awarded him the Anthony H. Benoit Mid-Career Award. In 1990, he received the Culver Award.

Rebecca Hamilton was selected to be



STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

A SIGNIFICANT EXPANSION of the State Library building in the 1990s added 50,000 square feet and reoriented the entrance to face North Fourth Street.

"It is in this decade, the '90s, that we have seen a sudden ... change. And we marvel at what we can now provide through the magic of computers and information networks."

—Tom Jaques
Announcing a Gates Library Foundation grant on Feb. 25, 1998

the next state librarian. Prior to becoming state librarian, Hamilton served as the director of the St. Mary Parish Library and as the associate state librarian.

New challenges for public libraries quickly presented themselves.

READY TO ASSIST

Two months after Hamilton was appointed, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated many public libraries. In the aftermath, the State Library worked in partnership with Solinet to help libraries recover from the storms. The State Library also secured grants to help libraries.

A \$12.2 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation helped libraries establish temporary facilities, provided support for rebuilding damaged or destroyed libraries, and paid for new computers. The Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund made \$5 million available to support new construction and recovery.

Post-Katrina infrastructure work allowed the State Library to provide internet access to workers and safety officers in the

Capitol Complex when Hurricane Gustav hit Baton Rouge in 2008.

In 2010, the State Library received word that it had been awarded an \$8.8 million grant from the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program. "Louisiana Libraries: Connecting People to Their Potential" provided more than 760 computer workstations to every public library, established wireless hotspots, and provided four mobile computer and training labs for internet and job skills training

During the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, the State Library received more than \$420,000 in recovery funding that was distributed to all public libraries.

Storm-damaged libraries to receive \$17.2 million grants

BY JOE GYAN JR.
New Orleans bureau
METAIRIE — A foundation set up by Microsoft founder Bill Gates said, "safe, secure, and healthy" into our vision for a better future," she said, adding that libraries offer

Gateses offer grants to rebuild libraries along coast

BY EMILY KERN
Advocate staff writer
Libraries along the Gulf Coast that were damaged or destroyed by hurricanes Katrina and Rita will have the opportunity to apply for \$12 million in grants funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
Thirty-one public libraries in Louisiana and Mississippi were destroyed by the hurricanes. Many more remain closed or are operating with limitations, according to the Southeastern Library Network Inc., the non-profit agency chosen to administer the grants
Representatives from several Louisiana parishes and Mississippi counties are attending a three-day summit in Baton Rouge this week where they are exploring the opportunities that come with the funding and sharing ideas for rebuilding
Jill Nishi with the Gates Foundation said the \$12 million in grant money was announced in June and will be administered

in three parts
First, libraries can apply for money to establish temporary facilities, either in trailers or bookmobiles. The money can be used to help with planning for new facilities, and the foundation also has a commitment to replace the approximately 500 computers damaged in the storms
Nishi said the foundation hopes the first temporary building will be operating by Jan 1
The summit is the first part of the planning process for new permanent facilities, she said. "to get them (librarians) thinking about what could be possible."
The money for planning could be used to hire consultants, architects or to survey residents, Nishi said.
The grant process is non-competitive. All libraries that were destroyed or heavily damaged by Katrina or Rita qualify.
Nishi said
State Librarian Rebecca Hamilton said that in Louisiana, 121 out of 339 public libraries were closed initially due to hurricane damage
"Today, only 22 are closed, but those 22 are pretty much destroyed," she said
The idea of temporary buildings for libraries was brought up because it could take years to rebuild in heavily damaged areas, Hamilton said.
"Libraries will be one of the components that draw people back," she said.

MAJOR GRANTS the State Library received to help public libraries recover after hurricanes in 2005 made headlines.

about 500 public computers were lost in Louisiana (271) and Mississippi (228).
Louisiana library officials estimate the cost of rebuilding the state's public libraries at \$203 million. Mississippi library officials put that state's costs at \$40 million.
Library systems along the Gulf Coast...
The Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund's \$5 million grant will focus on the physical repair and reconstruction of up to eight public libraries across Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.
The grant will target the repairs of facilities ready for immediate use.

A State Library before the State Library

Any history of the modern State Library of Louisiana would be incomplete without mentioning the first iteration of the State Library, which existed from the mid-1800s until the early 1900s. It dissolved after years of mismanagement, poor funding following the Civil War, and even disease.

While Louisiana was often considered a "bookless" state, New Orleans provided a variety of libraries in the early 19th century. Initially, these were subscription-based libraries, and in 1828, the Louisiana legislature incorporated the Law Library Society.

But with no library supporting public service, Gov. Edward D. White signed Act 93 in 1838, creating a "public library of the State of Louisiana." The law mandated that it be headquartered in New Orleans, where the state government was based, and located in the Capitol.

In a letter published in *The Daily Picayune* on May 13, 1838, Peter L. Jore, whom White appointed state librarian, wrote that while there was funding to support the State Library, there were already challenges.

"The location (the State House) as present is not at all suited... to accommodate either the library itself, or convenience of the public," Jore's letter read in part. "I mention this merely that the citizens (whose expectations are raised thereby) may not be disappointed—but will wait and bear with patience until arrangements are made to carry out measures intended to benefit this community."

It appears little was done to address these concerns, however, and in 1844, Gov. Alexandre Mouton signed Act 80 to expand the existing legislation.

The new law detailed the appointment of a state librarian with an annual salary of \$600, the library's budget, the creation of two catalogs (one for items that should be kept; another for those items that should go), and exhaustive collection priorities, including the preservation and organization of Louisiana's colonial, territorial, and early statehood records.

In 1846, newly-appointed Secretary of State Charles Gayarré, who also served as president of the Louisiana Historical Society, began to manage the library as part of his official duties. A supporter of Mouton's legislation, Gayarré applied meticulous care to its development, curating rare books and collecting and distributing state documents.

When the capital moved to Baton Rouge in 1849, Gayarré suc-



HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION, 1970.11.119

CHARLES GAYARRÉ was known as 'Father of the State Library.'

cessfully relocated the library, which grew in scope until his term ended in 1853.

The Civil War upended the State Library's operation and halted its progress. After Union troops captured Baton Rouge, they moved part of the collection to New Orleans for safekeeping. Much of what was left behind was destroyed, lost, or stolen. After the war, the library experienced a nomadic existence in New Orleans, followed by decades of mismanagement. Yellow fever outbreaks in 1878 further harmed the library and the state.

Gayarré eventually proposed a plan to merge the State Library with the New Orleans city library and the library at the University of Louisiana, a predecessor of Tulane University. After the war, he had trouble finding work because of his support for the Confederacy. He likely envisioned himself as the head of the combined library, but none of the parties accepted the proposal, and by 1886, he had abandoned the idea.

Meanwhile, the State Library continued to struggle with inadequate funding, a disorganized and stagnant collection, and seemingly little interest from the state.

Baton Rouge became the capital again in 1882, but the State Library remained in New Orleans on the university campus, apparently as an afterthought. In 1884, the state school became Tulane University and moved to its current location on St. Charles Avenue in Uptown New Orleans.

The State Library remained on the old campus until 1905, when the building it occupied was torn down to make way for an expansion of the Grunewald Hotel, now the Roosevelt Hotel.

What remained of the State Library moved into a cramped space on the second floor of a building at Union and Baronne streets, a few blocks away from the old campus, in the former headquarters of an electric company. It remained there until 1911, when it relocated once again, this time to the new state courthouse, now the Louisiana Supreme Court building, in the French Quarter.

At that point, the State Library quietly ceased operations after its remaining collection merged with the Law Library Society, which the state legislature renamed the Law Library of Louisiana in 1946.

Gayarré's devotion earned him the title "Father of the State Library." While his State Library is often viewed as the predecessor to the current State Library of Louisiana, its mission to serve as a public library was never fully realized. Achieving that goal would require a new generation of library pioneers.

—Angela Cinquemano and Daniel Monteverde



DANIEL MONTEVERDE

THE SECOND FLOOR of this building at Union and Baronne streets in New Orleans is where the State Library found space after its home on the University of Louisiana Campus was torn down.



DANIEL MONTEVERDE

ASSOCIATE STATE LIBRARIAN MICHAEL GOLRICK presents paperwork to the Eunice Public Library board that formally recognized the library in 2023.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

In 2022, Meg Placke was appointed interim state librarian. The board selected her to serve as state librarian in September 2023. Previously with the Lafourche Parish Library, she served as deputy state librarian, associate state librarian, and as the e-rate consultant in Library Development at the State Library.

Placke worked with the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation to provide better access to telehealth services around the state with a \$50,000 grant. Eleven library systems were able to offer free telehealth services, use of medical equipment, and private booths in library branches for people to meet virtually with their doctors and other medical

professionals.

Check Out Louisiana State Parks allowed public library patrons to check out a park pass with their card. Databases were added to the Louisiana Library Connection. New, mobile-friendly websites were launched for the State Library and book festival. And an increased social media presence allowed the State Library to inform more people than ever about these initiatives and more.

As the State Library neared the century mark, it returned to its roots in 2023 when it assisted the Eunice Public Library with becoming an officially recognized public library, the 68th in Louisiana, continuing a proud tradition of service that began when one librarian took a leap of faith.



DANIEL MONTEVERDE

A TELEHEALTH BOOTH was installed at the West Baton Rouge Parish Library in 2023. From left, Associate State Librarian Michael Golrick, West Baton Rouge Parish Library Director Tami Martin, and State Librarian Meg Placke discuss the booth after its debut.



STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES

THE SNAKE RIDGE BRANCH of the Richland Parish Library in 1928.

A CENTURY OF SERVICE. A CENTURY OF PROGRESS.

What might Essae M. Culver, the pioneer of Louisiana's public library system, think about the state of libraries today? It's safe to assume she would be delighted and amazed.

She would certainly be pleased to see that Louisiana now boasts 68 public and municipal libraries, a far cry from the "bookless Louisiana" she encountered when she arrived. The fact that these libraries now welcome millions of visits annually would bring her immense pride.

At the same time, Miss Culver would likely be astonished—and excited—by the advancements in technology that have transformed libraries.

She would marvel at how libraries now provide digital resources and internet access, serving as community hubs

that offer much more than just reading materials. These spaces have become centers for learning and community support.

Events like the Louisiana Book Festival and the State Library's ongoing efforts to promote literacy and literature would also resonate deeply with her vision.

As we reflect on the progress made over the past 100 years, we draw inspiration from pioneers like Essae Culver. Her dedication to establishing public libraries reminds us of the importance of adaptability and resilience as we look toward the next century of library service.

The future is always uncertain, but, just as the first state librarian of Louisiana boldly began her work nearly a century ago, we remain committed to meeting the evolving needs of Louisiana.



LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR BILLY NUNGESSER
Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism

LOUISIANA'S STATE LIBRARIANS

Essae M. Culver, 1925 — 1962

Sallie Farrell, 1962 — 1975

Thomas Jaques, 1975–2005

Rebecca Hamilton, 2005 — 2022

Meg Placke, 2023 —

STATE LIBRARY STAFF

ADMINISTRATION

Giovanni Tairov, *Deputy State Librarian*

Aaron Anderson, *Business Manager*

Tracy LeDoux, *Executive Assistant to the State Librarian*

Daniel Monteverde, *Communications Director*

ACCESS SERVICES

Kytara Gaudin Christophe, *Access Services Coordinator/
LoanSHARK Administrator*

Trenton Long, *Circulation Specialist*

Shirley McCoy, *Circulation Specialist*

Tonya Davis, *Interlibrary Loan Specialist*

Shontate Jackson, *Interlibrary Loan Manager*

CATALOGING AND ACQUISITIONS

Lesli Wilson, *Cataloging & Acquisitions Coordinator*

Wendy Bourg, *Original Cataloger*

Eric Cartier, *Recorder of Documents*

Michelle McCall, *Library Specialist Supervisor*

Karissa Bailey, *Cataloging Specialist*

Kirsten Campbell, *Cataloging Specialist*

Wendy Loup, *Acquisitions Specialist*

CENTER FOR THE BOOK

Jim Davis, *Executive Director*

Robert Wilson, *Assistant Director*

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Jeirico Howard, *Director*

Ian Barnett, *Network Administrator*

Riley Bordelon, *Library Consultant*

Dusty Lizana, *IT Support Analyst 3*

LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT

Michael Golrick, *Associate State Librarian*

Emily Davison, *Administrative Coordinator*

Jamie Hebert, *Administrative Coordinator*

Michele Jones, *Library Consultant*

Katelin LeBleu, *Library Consultant*

Brittany Whitfield, *Library Consultant*

LOUISIANA COLLECTION

Charlene Bonnette, *Louisiana Collection Head*

Samuel Ayers, *Document, Preservation & Reference Librarian*

Angela Cinquemano, *Preservation & Reference Librarian*

Sara Cage, *Library Specialist 2*

REFERENCE

Errin Levingston, *Head of Reference*

Brittany Russell, *Reference Librarian*

Addyson Smith, *Reference Librarian*

TALKING BOOKS AND BRAILLE LIBRARY

Shelia Coleman, *Coordinator of Special Services*

David Rainey, *Library Manager, Special Services*

Ray Brister, *Reader Advisor*

Gordon Loyd, *Materials and Machine Unit*

Charlene Moore, *Children and Teen Services Librarian*

Skye Norwood, *Reader Advisor*

Sneha Padumane, *Reader Advisor*

Alyssa Sanchez, *Reader Advisor*

Kevin Williams, *Materials and Machine Unit*



STATE LIBRARY OF LOUISIANA STAFF in 2025.

100  **years**
STATE LIBRARY *of* LOUISIANA

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