

## Looking Back: Blackwell Library From the Beginning

by Kathryn Kalmanson

This year as SSU celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Blackwell Library also marks its 25th year of service to the campus and community. Of course, a library did exist at SSU from the very beginning, but it was not until the construction of a true library building and the hiring of a full-time professional librarian that library services as we know them today became available on campus. Since that time, changes in



library services and resources have been dramatic. As we look forward to the next big development with the construction of a new electronic facility, it is interesting to see how a continuous pattern of growth and change has characterized the library throughout the lifetime of the University.

When the Salisbury Normal School opened in the fall of 1925, the library was assigned to an area on the first floor of the original building, occupying most of what is now the north wing of Holloway Hall. As was typical for a school of this size, the library seems initially to have been little more than a reading room with basic works in the subject areas of the curriculum. A collection of children's books was also maintained for the demonstration elementary school attached to the normal school. The library supervisor was Dorothy Doerr, succeeded in the second year by Miriam L. Kutz. After that, for the next 10 years, the library was operated by a faculty member, Lucy W. Bennett, who was also head of the English department. Mrs. Bennett instituted a one-semester course fondly known among students as "Lib Tech" in which students served as library aides while gaining useful skills for their teaching careers.

A 1929 inventory revealed an impressive (for that day) collection of about 6,000 books; however, by 1937, only about 1,000 books had been added even though the curriculum had continued to expand. Doubtlessly, the economic constraints of the Great Depression slowed library growth, but the greater problem seems to have been a policy whereby most of the library's book budget was being used to supply textbooks, leaving only a small amount for regular acquisitions. Nevertheless, the library was able to add two staff members, Anna Jones Cooper and Gladys May Lewis, who began in 1933 and 1934 respectively.

Important changes began in 1937 with the hiring of the first full-time professionally trained librarian, Grace Strickland (later Grace Chaires), who was given the challenge of expanding library materials and services for the new four-year college program and of bringing the library into compliance with standards of the American Association of Teachers Colleges. By 1941, the library collection had grown to the required 15,000 volumes, and the other standards had been met. Ms Chaires, having taken a leave of absence in 1943 to serve in the Women's Reserve of the U.S. Navy during World War II, returned to her campus position in 1946 to lead the library through its next major phase of development in the post-war years.

To Ms Chaires fell the responsibility of planning a new library building, which was to be constructed with an initial State appropriation of \$225,000. As funds became more and more of an issue, Ms. Chaires had

to struggle to keep various necessities, such as an elevator for conveying books to the second floor stacks area, in the budget. Her greatest ally was college president, Dr. James D. Blackwell, who had first envisioned the new facility in 1949 and in whose honor the building would later be named. With the initial appropriation in February 1954, construction on the two-story building began in the autumn of 1955, near the time of Dr. Blackwell's retirement. Work continued on this and other campus buildings under the presidency of Dr. Wilbur Devilbiss. Finally, in October of 1957, the eagerly awaited new library building opened its doors. Governor Theodore McKeldin, who was then leading a massive program of library construction on Maryland campuses, joined other state and local officials for the opening ceremony and first tour of the building. The new library contained a large reading area as well as circulation desk and offices on the first floor, while the second floor housed reading areas, book stacks, the children's collection, curriculum and audio-visual materials, a music room and exhibition areas. Salisbury Teachers College could now proudly claim to have one of the most functional, attractive and well equipped modern library facilities in the state. In December 1966, at a ceremony for the naming of campus buildings, the library was formally named for Dr. Blackwell.

As enrollment increased and new academic programs were begun during the late '50s and early '60s, the library worked diligently to meet increasingly complex research needs. During this time, the library staff gained several members, including its first full-time reference librarian, Constance Sickmund, whose talents for guiding students' research became legendary on campus. Nettie C. Bentley also joined the regular library staff, transferring from the library of the campus elementary school when it closed. Following the retirement of Grace Chaires, James R. Thrash was appointed director of the library in August of 1969, a position that he held for the next 30 years. Keith R. Vail joined the staff as an assistant librarian in August 1966 and retired as associate director in March 1999. During their years the library would again undergo major changes with a huge construction project, increased hours of service, a government documents depository, and the beginnings of computer technology.

By the mid-1970s with Salisbury State enrollment approaching the 2,000 mark and two master's programs in place, the library building could no longer adequately serve the needs of the campus community. In 1973, Blackwell Library began a \$2.2 million expansion that would triple the size of the building and provide suitable facilities for new media such as film and microforms. The existing building, rather than being demolished, was absorbed into the structure of the new and given a modern façade. The enlargement effectively doubled stack capacity to 165,000 volumes and provided seating for 650 students. Opening ceremonies took place on Sunday, September 14, 1975, with state and community leaders in attendance. Once again, Salisbury State had an attractive new library with the space and resources needed by an active faculty and student body.

Now, as we enter the 21st century, the library is once again experiencing growing pains due to developments in information technology and academic programs that require more sophisticated research support. And so Blackwell Library is preparing for yet another transformation with the construction of a modern learning and technology center just a few years away.

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