

Phis, Dis Started Town's First Library
Ralph Watkins, Chapel Hill Newspaper, October 30, 1983

Because of the coming of the 25th anniversary of the Chapel Hill Public Library, this question is timely.

Could the average non-faculty citizen of our town borrow or rent books for recreational reading a hundred and more years ago?

Chapel Hill's reason for existence was, and is, the University and it more or less had control of any organized book collection, of which there were a number.

It seems fair to state that the first impetus came from UNC students. The University opened on January 15, 1795, Hinton James, the first student, did not arrive until February 12. But by June 1 of that year, 41 students were on hand.

That number was adequate for the formation of a student organization. This was promptly done on June 3, 1795.

All students were included at first in what was called "The Debating" or "Concord" Society. Almost at once it was split by a motion on July 2, 1795, and on August 25, 1795 the larger group formed Philanthropic Society; the rest translated the word Debating into Greek and became the Dialectic Society. They were commonly known as the Phis and Dis.

Their purpose was to foster debating within their own groups and, later, in competition with similar ones from other colleges.

To do this they had to have source material and began to collect books. These came largely from donations and were of what we would today call "heavy" reading.

Around this time, or a little later, the University started a library. Before 1812, sizeable book gifts came from Richard Beenehan, Joseph Blount Hill, The rev. James Hall, Joseph Cautier and others including General Davie who gave complete sets of Hume and Gibson.

By that year, each society owned 800 to 1,000 volumes and the University some 1,000, so there was available for use a total of 3,100 to 3,500 books.

The Phis and Dis had their meeting room and libraries together, at first in Old East. When Old West was built in the 1820s, the group separated and took their libraries with them.

In 1822, President Caldwell volunteered to pay his own way to Europe if the Trustees could raise \$6,000 for him to spend on books and equipment. They did and he came home with 929 books, costing about \$3000 and laboratory equipment using the balance.

From 1833 to 1841 the Record Commission of the English Government donated 83 folios, 24 octavos and 12 books, including a copy of the Domesday Book, compiled for Richard the Conqueror.

The University library in 1835 was kept in President Swain's lecture room and in librarian's sleeping rooms.

W.H. Owen, a tutor, was librarian in 1836. "Open" hours were few, perhaps three a day, longer on Saturdays.

Swain was more interested in building than in books. It is said that for 20 to 25 years of his presidency, the Trustees bought no books for UNC. Teachers had to supply their own.

The University's collection moved to South Building's third floor, in 1848 and in 1852 to Smith Hall (now Playmakers) which was new and had been built for a library (except that the students also used it as a ballroom). Special alcove had been installed for books.

The Reconstruction era came. The University was closed from 1871 to 1875. Caretakers were inefficient. Much vandalism by occupying Union troops and perhaps "Sherman's bummers" resulted in books and pamphlets being scattered through rooms and in village homes. The Dis had 500 fewer books in 1875 than before the war.

A typical incident: Based on the opinion of some people who said that "The University belongs to the State; I'm part of the State, so University property belongs to me," David Settle Patrick (UNC 1856) Professor of Latin Language and Literature, who was here for only a year (1869-70) "borrowed" a carpet from the hall of one of the Societies.

By 1885, the University and Societies had about 20,000 volumes. In 1886 the Dis and Phis donated their libraries to UNC. The collection contained medical and theological books. Borrowing increased from 3,657 in 1885 to 4,761 in 1886.

In 1894 the book count was 40,177 and there were 20,000 pamphlets. By 1907 when the Carnegie Library (Hill Hall) opened there were 59,000 books and 25,000 pamphlets.

Information for this Note: K.P. Battle, History of the University of North Carolina; Archibald Henderson, "The Campus of the First State University."