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## Helen V. Stelle and the Tampa Public Library: A case study in the development of Florida public libraries during the 1920s

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# Helen V. Stelle and the Tampa Public Library:

A case study in the development of Florida  
public libraries during the 1920s



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# Overview

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State of Library  
History Scholarship

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Libraries in the  
American South

03

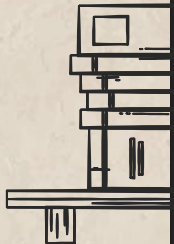
Tampa Public  
Library

04

Helen V. Stelle

05

Final Thoughts &  
Next Steps



“Most of twentieth century library history scholarship promoted the ‘public library myth,’ [which] celebrated noble, selfless librarians and ignored or glossed over issues of class, race, and gender in the history of libraries and librarianship.”

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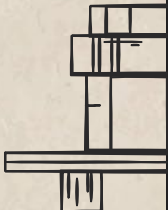
—Thomas Glynn

*Libraries without borders: New directions in library history*  
(2024)



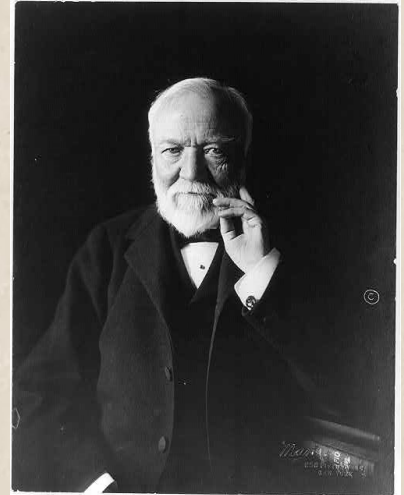
# Southern Libraries

- **1907** Anne Wallace's presentation at the American Library Association (ALA) meeting on "The Southern Library Movement", Florida has a "most unsatisfactory record for so large a state"
- **1926** Southeastern Library Association (SELA) presidential address by Louis Wilson "The Library in the Advancing South" and the need for a regional representative
- **1930** Carnegie Corporation of NY gives ALA a 5-year grant for regional fieldwork in the South & Tommie Dora Barker is appointed as field agent to the South
- **1936** Barker publishes *Libraries of the South: A report on developments (1930- 1935)*

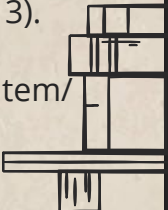


# Carnegie Libraries

- Donated more than \$40 million between 1886 and 1919 to fund 1,679 new library buildings across US
- Carnegie libraries had a different layout than other libraries at the time emphasizing public service
- Controversies over accepting money for Carnegie libraries
- 10 public libraries and 3 academic libraries built in Florida with Carnegie funds in the early 1900s



*Andrew Carnegie (1913).*  
Library of Congress,  
[https://www.loc.gov/item/  
2003669740/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2003669740/)





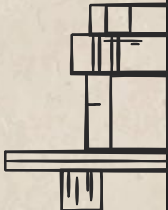
*West Tampa Free Public Library, 1718 North Howard Avenue. (1918). Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System Digital Collections.*



*Tampa Public Library, 102 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue East. (April 18, 1919). Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System Digital Collections.*

# Tampa Public Library

- 1900 Willie Miller Lowry (Tampa Women's Club) writes letter to Carnegie requesting funds to build a library
- Controversy over accepting Carnegie money and difficulty in deciding on the site for the library delayed efforts
- 1912 Carnegie offers \$50,000
- Building completed in 1915 (no books, furniture, and no funds to run it)
- Mr. and Mrs. L.H. Lothridge donated 4,000 books
- Library formally opened April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1917
- 1925 West Tampa Library merges with Tampa Public Library System



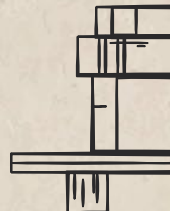


# Helen V. Stelle: Biography



*Portrait of Helen Stelle.*  
(1946). Tampa-Hillsborough  
County Public Library  
System Digital Collections.

- Born in Alton, IL in September 1884
- Attended Pratt Institute Library School, graduated in 1913
- Moved to Tampa in 1917 to accept position as library director of the Tampa Public Library
- Established first branch libraries
- Started book mobile services in 1930
- Active member of Florida Library Association (FLA), completed state survey of Florida libraries for FLA in 1935
- Worked at Tampa Public Library for more than 30 years
- Died September 1947





*Children and staff in front of Tampa Urban League, Harlem Branch Library  
Tampa Public Library. (1923). Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library  
System Digital Collections.*



*Children at Tampa Public Library bookmobile while nearby library staff checks out books at Ragan Park. (1939). Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System Digital Collections.*

# Florida

## Library Survey 1935

A report prepared for  
the Florida Library Association  
by Helen Virginia Stelle

This survey accomplishes the first objective in the Florida State Plan for Library Service. It was authorized at the annual meeting of the Florida Library Association in Orlando, April 11-12, 1935. It covers the year June, 1934, to June, 1935, which time was chosen to conform to the fiscal year for libraries established under the state law. Some private libraries and others operating under special charters use the calendar year and in these instances the figures for 1935 were used.

The first questionnaires were mailed July 26, 1935, and the last information included was received in March, 1936. The report was presented at the annual meeting of the Association in Jacksonville, March 26-27, 1936.

Publication was authorized January 9th, 1937, at a special meeting of the Florida Library Association in St. Petersburg. The project was financed by the Association.

I wish to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Mrs. Grace L. Sparkman, of the Tampa Public Library staff.

HELEN VIRGINIA STELLE.

Tampa Public Library,  
Tampa, Florida.  
February 20, 1937.

*Foreword* (1935). Image from HathiTrust

From a very careful study of the replies from the libraries of the state, together with a knowledge of the situation gained from twenty years contact with the librarians, as well as observation of the development of the libraries over that period, it seems fair to conclude:

That while there may be a latent desire for reading matter by the people of Florida, it has not evidenced itself sufficiently to have secured state-wide library service to any appreciable extent.

That the few citizens interested enough to have achieved libraries of sorts in their communities have not, in most cases, had sufficient power to secure continued or adequate support.

That the total expenditures by existing libraries for books and magazines are insufficient to procure adequate reading matter to achieve an informed citizenry.

That book collections are not kept up-to-date or in good repair.

That librarians are decidedly underpaid.

\*That librarians are insufficiently trained.

That most libraries are understaffed.

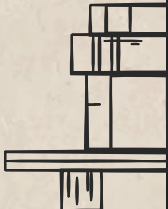
That many libraries are poorly housed.

That in many instances library records are inaccurately and inadequately kept.

*Florida Library Survey (1935). Image from HathiTrust*

# Next Steps

- Florida Library Association Archives research
  - Challenges of growing library during depression
  - Bookmobile and traveling libraries in FL
  - Development of services to immigrant communities and African Americans
  - Effects of the 1935 survey
- Public vs. academic library development in Florida during that period (Louise Richardson and the Florida State College of Women)



# Thank you!

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