



The Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History

The Movement: Danville's Civil Rights

An Object of Passion: The Library

Witness to Social and Cultural Evolution

The National Library Movement began in the late 19th century, largely propelled by women's groups. Such was the case in Danville.

Danville's first library was likely a tiny subscription one, run by Miss Carrie Pace. In 1909 the Library Association, a small but enthusiastic group of prominent citizens, established a larger subscription library in the lobby of Rison Park School.

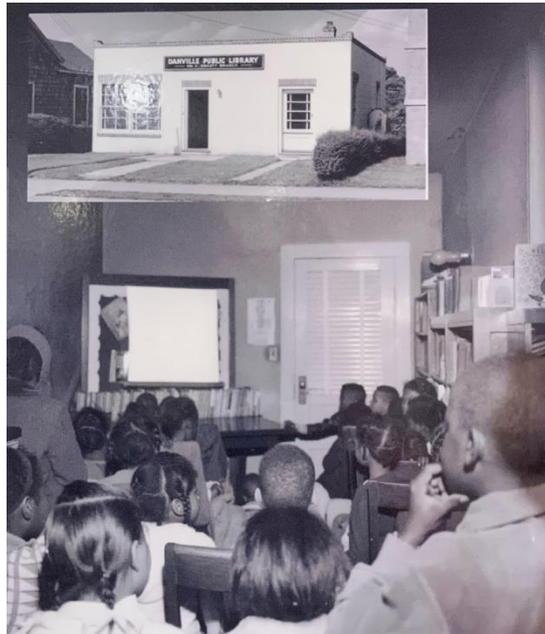
Four years later, the library moved into the west wing of the Sutherlin Mansion after it was secured by the Confederate Memorial Association. The City Council later authorized remodeling of the east wing of the Memorial Mansion to provide more room for the library. Then in 1927, the Friends of the Library, with the support of local newspapers, persuaded the city government to accept its books and equipment and open a free public library.

As soon as the City assumed ownership of the public library on January 1, 1928, a three-month long interior renovation of the mansion began. Contractors partially removed some interior walls to create on large rooms. They stored the original interior shutters in the attic and covered the hardwood floors with cork tiles. Workers also combined two of the former bedrooms on the second floor to create a permanent meeting room for the United Daughters of the Confederacy in recognition of their efforts in saving the house from destruction in 1912.

In the 1930s and again in the 1950s, the library was enlarged with two-story additions on the east and west sides of the building. In 1951, The Garden Club of Danville gave the grounds a facelift. The Club preserved the venerable oaks that were original to the property, created brick pathways and planted 181 shrubs, including the English boxwoods that adorn the landscape today. The Garden Club of Danville was awarded the coveted Massie Medal by The Garden Club of Virginia for the most outstanding restoration project of the year.



From many of its patrons over the decades, the Main Street Library was beloved as a “home away from home”: the aroma of its cork tile floors, the mustiness of well-thumbed books, the splendor of the ornate ceiling moldings, the Sutherlin family portraits by William Garl Browne and the marble fireplaces gave visitors the feeling of being in a gracious home. Yet, the library served only part of the community – whites. A small, African-American branch of the library, the Grasty, was located on Holbrook Street. With the advent of the 1960s, social and political change came to Danville.



In early April 1960, a group of African-American high school students staged a sit-in at the Main Street Library as a first step toward integration. On Saturday, April 2, sixteen black students entered the facility and began to work on school assignments. Chalmers Mebane, a spokesman for the group, recalls that after about 20 minutes the librarian announced that the library was closing for the day. Days later, several African-American teenagers were refused service at the library. On May 20, the city closed both the Main Street and Grasty libraries.

Following a ruling in federal court, the libraries were re-opened in September 1960; however, the city opened them on a “vertical” integration basis, meaning that all the chairs had been removed so patrons could not sit and spend time at the library. Eventually, Danville accepted that the days of segregation were over, and the two libraries were available to all citizens of the city.

In 1971 the city passed a bond referendum that funded the construction of a new library downtown and opened the way for the Sutherlin Mansion to begin its journey as a museum.