

The city's public libraries serve an essential role in the development of the community by introducing children to the educational process, facilitating informal self-education and encouraging the formal education of its residents. Libraries are one of the community's cultural assets. Libraries are a source of information for all segments of the community, in many cases providing the only free access to new technology, information and life-long learning. Special populations, such as blind and disabled citizens who are not able to make use of the branch libraries, are accommodated through specialized collections and services such as the bookmobile, books-by-mail and the Subregional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. Those needing assistance in developing literacy skills are helped through both the Library System's literacy program and Peninsula READS. Libraries today also serve as a bridge or community place for building social connections or networks bringing together different types of people who may not otherwise share experiences with one other.

### **Newport News Public Library System History**

Although Newport News was not chartered as a city until 1896, library services began five years earlier when a group of private citizens calling themselves the Subscription Library Association started a small book collection for their own use. This initial effort was enlarged 1903, when a second group of community leaders, the Public Library Committee, took over from the earlier coalition and set up a library at the YMCA on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street in downtown Newport News.

Because library opportunities were still limited, a third group, the Newport News Library Association, started in 1908 and assumed the assets and management of the city's small library. When the YMCA requested that the library collection be removed from its premises due to lack of space, it was moved in 1914 to the rear of a cigar store on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street.

Financial help came from the City Council and Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, and Harry B. Bailey was hired as the first librarian. Those years also saw the beginning of the Virginian Collection, a collection of books and documents on Virginia history. Building on this

strong base of support, the library was moved in 1918 to a new home on 26<sup>th</sup> Street (part of the old bowling alley moved from the Casino Grounds two blocks away). It also enjoyed adequate funding from its subscribers' fees and from monies donated by the city, the school board and various civic clubs.

In 1927, a new group called Newport News Public Library Inc. was incorporated and went to work to create a "real" library. Construction was started based on a \$45,000 pledge from the City Council and \$6,200 in donations from Newport News Public Library Inc. and land donated by the Old Dominion Land Company. The building was dedicated and opened to the public in 1929. In 1968, some 10 years after the City of Newport News and Warwick County merged, the building became the West Avenue Library under the new consolidated system.

Library services in the southeast community began with the establishment of Branch No. 1 in 1949 at the urging of W. Hale Thompson, an attorney who requested that the city library be open to citizens of all races. In 1952 both the West Avenue Library and Branch 1 were opened to all citizens. Branch No. 1 was moved to the Wickham Avenue facility in 1974, and in 1984, the Pearl Bailey Library was built. It opened in 1985 and was named the Pearl Bailey Library in honor of the famed entertainer who was born and spent the first four years of her life in Newport News.

In 1936 the Hilton Village Woman's Club took the lead in providing public services by establishing a small library in the basement of Hilton Village Elementary School, Warwick Village office complex. A new building was constructed in 1952, added on to in 1964 and an entirely new 26,500 square foot building opened on the old site in 1996.

The Grissom Library, named after Korean war ace and astronaut Virgil I. Grissom, was established in 1961. The building was only 1,800 square feet. In 1976, a new building was constructed in the Municipal Complex off DeShazor Drive. It is the most heavily used library facility in Newport News and the only one located north of J. Clyde Morris Boulevard. An expansion was requested in the city's long-range capital improvement plan.

Other library services include a Public Law Library established in 1964 and currently located in the court building on Washington Avenue but scheduled to move across the street; a Family Literacy Program; Technical Services; a Subregional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped; and a bookmobile that operates out of the Main Street Library.