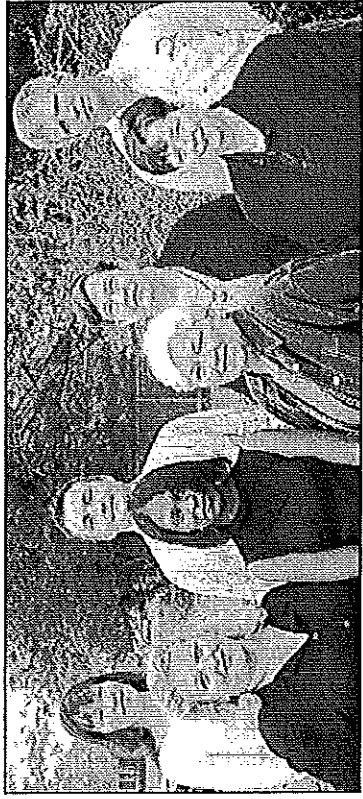


Wednesday, November 3, 2004

## History of Peach County Public Libraries



Library staff, front L-R: Gilda Stanbery-Cotney (Director), Coretta Prater McKemie, Jane Matthews, Nancy Raindon, Back, L-R: Karin C. Martin-Lopez, Frances Bowden, Ron White (Byron branch manager)

### By Billy Powell The Leader-Tribune

Fort Valley had library as early as 1878

A. C. Riley Sr. (Fort Valley mayor: 1888-90) wrote in *The Leader-Tribune*, dated August 12, 1880, that a library existed in Fort Valley during 1878 which "attractively housed 2500 volumes of choice and well-selected reading matter, eight first-class daily papers, numerous weeklies, and several standard magazines." Its name, location, and librarian are unknown.

### Thomas Public Library Organized: 1915

During the early 1900s, Dr. Edward Gray Thomas, a native of Butler and an Atlanta dentist, moved to Fort Valley and built a house on 312 College Street, the present home of Thomas and Cynthia Yount. Dr. Thomas practiced dentistry in what is now the Yount's living room. His wife, the former Lula Tyner, was a book lover who had amassed quite a collection of books. Mrs. Thomas assisted in her husband's dental practice and, from the reception desk, loaned books from the Thomas' personal library to patients and local citizens.

With interest growing toward establishing a public library, a meeting of 37 community leaders was held in the Thomas' home on September 15, 1915. From this meeting the Fort Valley Library Association was formed and the decision made to open a library. To provide an initial repository of books, Mrs. Thomas donated her collection of 500-books. She also encouraged others to donate books and equipment. Eight days later on September 23, 1915, the library opened its doors in a rent-free room on the second floor of the Evans Building on Main Street. Seventeen citizens pledged one dollar a month to pay the librarian's salary.

In 1916, in recognition of the contributions of Dr. and Mrs. Thomas, the library association was renamed the Thomas Library Association. In 1917, the Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Irons, a strong and persistent supporter, succeeded in getting the Fort Valley City government to commit 25-dollars a month to fund the library.

When Dr. and Mrs. Thomas both died in 1930, part of their estate (\$20,000 in 1930 dollars) was left to the library as a trust fund called the Lula Thomas Endowment Fund. A nephew of Dr. Thomas tried to break the will, but the Chairman of Board of Trustees, David C. Strother, successfully fought the suit.

During the early 1920s, the library association was replaced with a board of trustees. Its first chairman was Ralph Newton (first County School Superintendent) who served

until 1929. David C. Strother was chairman 34-years, from 1929 to 1963. Barnett Bleckley was chairman from 1963 to 1966. He was succeeded by Felton Hatcher who served until after the new library was built on the corner of Persons and Miller Streets. Others who served as trustee chairpersons since Hatcher are Sam Culpepper, Ann Blair Brown, and Sue Gillis Leslie, the current chairperson.

On July 23, 1971, an agreement was signed by Fort Valley Mayor Paul Reehling, J. D. Doles, County Commission Chairman, and Felton Hatcher, trustee chairman, regarding the appointment of library trustees and designating the Thomas Public Library as headquarters for the Peach County Public Library System with Byron serving as its branch.

### Succession of Librarians/Directors

- (1) Miss Parmelee Cheves: 1915 to 1924,
- (2) Miss Gena Riley (Fort Valley mayors A. C. Riley Sr. and A. C. Riley Jr. were her father and brother): 1924-1936, (3) Mrs. Gertrude Jones: 1936-1973, (4) Mrs. Ann Dalton: 1973-1974, (5) Jimmy Smith: 1974-1988, (6) Mrs. Gilda Stanbery-Cotney: 1988-present

### Locations of Thomas Public Library

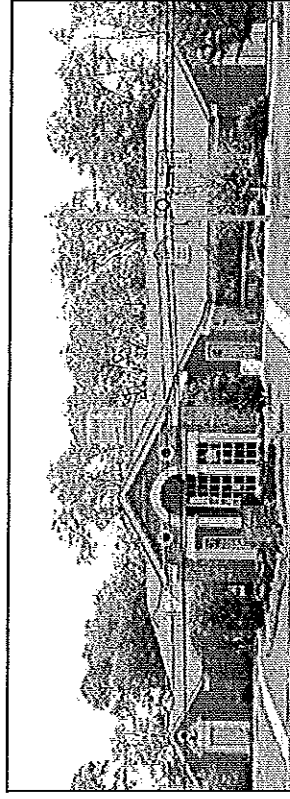
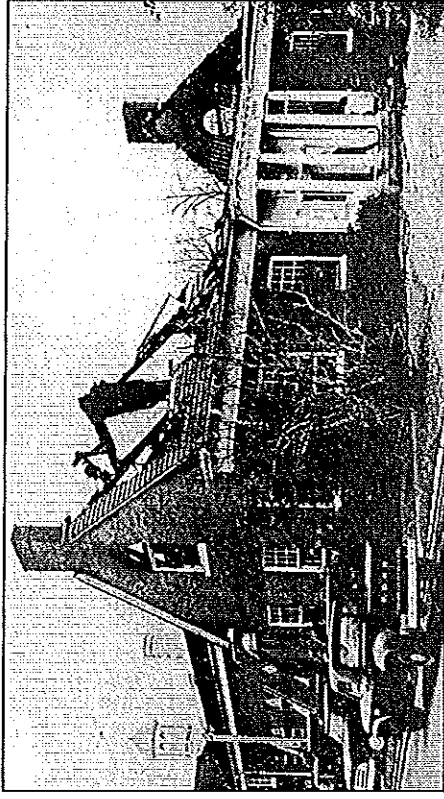
- (1) Evans Building (corner of Main Street and Camellia Blvd): 1915 to 1936, (2) Peach County Courthouse annex facing Central Avenue: 1936-1969 (destroyed by fire in December 1969), (3) Vacant residence on Central Avenue: 1969-1972, (4) New 5,600 sq. ft. library constructed on corner of Persons and Miller Streets: 1972-1998; expanded to 10,100 sq. ft. in 1984, (5) New 17,502 sq. ft. library constructed at 315 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive: 1998-present.

### Gano Branch

In 1961 a branch library was opened on State University Drive in a building adjacent to the Gano Building. This brought the resources of the public library to the black communities in the Gano and Tabor Heights Project areas. Mrs. Evelyn McCray, its first librarian, speaks in glowing terms of the reading enrichment and help on school projects the library afforded the children of that era. This branch closed in 1985.

### Byron Branch

Although Byron had a small library as early as 1930 beside Dr. James B. Kay's office, the Byron Public Library, with 400-books donated by the Thomas Public Library, opened in 1936 as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project under President Roosevelt's New Deal. At termination of the WPA, the Byron library was operated under the direction of the Thomas Public Library. The library served as a public



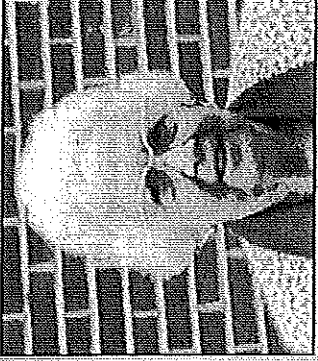
Courthouse library after 1969 fire (top) and new library on Martin Luther King Drive; opened in 1998 (bottom)



Miss Gena Riley  
The quintessential librarian: 41 yrs. service



Jimmy Smith  
The consummate librarian and local historian



Mrs. Gertrude Jones  
Restored library operations after fire



Mrs. Susie McViece  
Byron's longest serving librarian: 25 yrs



Mrs. Sara B. Batchelor  
Efficient and dedicated: 11 yrs. service



Mrs. Evelyn McCray  
Taught children the joy of reading

### Peach County Library System

The Peach County Library System maintains 43-computers (acquired and replaced solely with grant monies), fourteen for staff and 29 for use by library patrons. Patrons use the internet to access information on books, electronic journals, magazines and encyclopedias; conduct e-mail; apply for jobs, scholarships and take courses on-line; perform historical and genealogical research; participate in on-line book clubs; view community calendars and events; and keep abreast of state, national, and world news.

The summer reading program has achieved great success. Expanded beyond the traditional reading for fun and enlightenment, it now includes story-telling and guest appearances by artists and authors to inspire young people and engender learning.

The combined staffs of Fort Valley and Byron number eight fulltime and four part-time personnel. This professional and service-oriented staff maintains 57,130 titled books, serves 8400 registered patrons, and accommodates over 58-thousand visitors annually. Governor Zell Miller recognized the library for being in the top 10-percent in the state based on services provided. Approximately 60-percent of library funding is provided by the county, the remainder by state appropriations and various grants.

### Byron Librarians:

- (1) Mrs. Martie Dupree: 1930-1936, (2) Mrs. Iona Dupree: 1936-1939, (3) Mrs. Susie Allen: 1939-1942, (4) Mrs. Ella Pender: 1942-1944, (5) Mrs. H.M. Davis: 1944-1946, (6) Mrs. Susie McViece: 1946-1969, (7) Mrs. Sara B. Batchelor: 1969-1980, (8) Mrs. Catherine Smith: 1980-2000, (9) Miss Ashley Moore: 2000-2002, (10) Jeff Ervin: 2002-2003, (11) Ron White: Oct 2003-present

### Byron Locations

- (1) Woodlen bldg (former post office and telephone exchange) next to Dr. Kay's office: 1930-1936, (2) Dupree's Store (Main Street): 1936-1939, (3) Byron Public School: 1939-1944, (4) Old City Jail: 1944-1956, (5) Downtown Store: 1956-1975, (6) Byron City Complex: 1975-1985, (7) New 4,255 sq. ft. library built on Church Street: 1985-present; expanded to 6255 sq. ft. in 1997.

### Fire Destroys Library at Courthouse Annex

By the mid-1990s, space in the Evans Building was inadequate. In planning the Peach County courthouse built in 1996, Judge Millard C. Moseley, ordinary and county manager, proposed constructing an annex to be used as a library. Separated by a firewall, the library had a separate entrance on Central Avenue. From 1936 to 1969, the book volume grew from 7,000 to 24,000 books. On December 5, 1969, a fire gutted the library and burned 15,000 books with the remainder damaged by water. The *Leader-Tribune*, December 11, 1969, reported that arson was suspected. Mollie Jones Culpepper of Perry, whose mother, Mrs. Gertrude Jones, was librarian, remembers her mother working long and hard hours to salvage wet and smoke-damaged books. She said the library was moved into the Steed family home across Central Avenue—now the Grace House. Helping reopen the library at this new location were Mrs. C. A. Vinson, assistant librarian, and Mrs. Connie Flowers.

### New Thomas Public Library Built in 1998

By the mid 1980s, the library on Persons and Miller Streets had fallen below minimum space standards. Due to growing book volume and inadequate space to convert the archaic card catalog system to an automated program for cataloging and resource sharing with 56-library systems in Georgia, a new 17,502 sq. ft. library was opened on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in 1998, the first Superfund/Brownfields development project in Georgia.



Displayed in the Thomas Public Library is the famous kissing statue from Dr. Thomas' garden