

## A History of West Georgia Regional Library System

West Georgia Regional Library System (WGRLS) is a dynamic community-focused system that serves a population of almost half a million residents in Carroll, Douglas, Haralson, Heard, and Paulding counties. It offers premier library service for 19 member libraries that serve a geographic region spanning 1,600 miles.

However, WGRLS did not start out that large. It was one of Georgia's three pioneer pilot regional library systems originally funded under the State Department of Education. Opened the summer of 1944, the original name of the system was Carroll-Heard Regional Library. Headquarters was located in the basement of the Sanford Hall on the West Georgia College campus, and the initial collection consisted of 1,000 books borrowed from the Extension Department of the Georgia Department of Education.

**The Early Years:** Edith L. Foster was named the system's first director. A writer, teacher, historian, and librarian, her work in developing a regional rural library system became a model for the nation. Her achievements earned her a 2007 induction into Georgia Women of Achievement.

Raised in Carrollton, GA, Foster served as Head of English departments in four schools in Alabama and Georgia before being tapped by state officials to helm an experimental regional library devoted to serving residents in rural counties. She accepted a scholarship to earn her Masters in Librarianship at Emory University and in '44 established the first physical public library in the basement of Sanford Hall on the West Georgia College campus. At the time, books primarily were gotten to residents through extension services to local gathering places like schools and stores. A few small deposit libraries were established to make accessing materials easier.

However, it was quickly evident service needed to grow to serve the needs of the region. Haralson County joined the system in 1946 and the system name changed to West Georgia Regional Library System. Needing a better way to get materials into the hands of residents, Foster launched the first bookmobile in 1946. At first she drove a Ford station wagon from town to town, but by the early 1950s she acquired a more conventional bookmobile.

She also worked with a multi-racial planning committee, chaired by African American businessman Croghan Mullins Sr., to establish in Carrollton the first permanent branch library in Georgia for African Americans on King Street. In the late 1940s, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority cited the library system for its work with African Americans and donated a bookmobile to the library. With her encouragement, Leroy Childs, a local African American teacher, pursued a degree in Library Science. He went on to become director of the King Street Branch then served under Foster as Associate Director of WGRLS before succeeding her as director when she retired in 1977.

**The System Grows:** Douglas County joined WGRLS in 1951 followed by Paulding County in 1958. Both counties had existing library systems, but no bookmobile service for outlying areas. Also in 1958, system headquarters moved to a small building on Maple Street in Carrollton with over 45,000 volumes available to the public.

In 1963, Tallapoosa became the site of the first all-steel library in the country built by Dixie Steel, Inc. Headquarters moved once more to its current location on Rome St. thanks to land being made available by WGRLS Board of Trustee Chairman Hubert Griffin. Local industrialist William Lomason was instrumental in getting the new headquarters built. He donated \$100,000 which went toward the local funding required to receive two federal building grants.

Throughout her career Foster continually strived to develop service throughout the five counties. School media centers were developed, as well as the ever-evolving branch libraries. Foster worked with local government leaders, business leaders, educators, civic clubs, and other community organizations to promote and develop library services. She also worked on the national scene, chairing the American Library Association's (ALA) Adult Services group and serving on ALA's executive board. For her efforts, she was awarded the Georgia Library Association's Nix-Jones Award for Outstanding Library Service and was named Director Emeritus of West Georgia Regional Library System upon her retirement in 1977.

**The 1970s and 80s:** Foster's successor, Leroy Childs, also worked tirelessly touting the importance of libraries to state and federal legislators. Bremen in Haralson County and Bowdon in Carroll County both were constructed in the early 1970s and named after Warren P. Sewell, a local farmer, textile industry leader and banker who supported libraries and education. Under Child's leadership, the library system opened new libraries in Franklin in Heard County plus Lithia Springs and Douglasville in Douglas County.

James P. Cooper became the third library director in 1987. Two more libraries were established in Paulding, one in New Georgia, the other in Hiram. The latter was named after Maude P. Ragsdale, a favorite teacher of the citizen who donated the land for the library construction project. Villa Rica in Carroll County also opened a branch. In addition, a courier service was launched in 1987 to provide more efficient delivery of materials to branch libraries and school media centers seeking material to support curriculum. The courier service today consists of two vans and four drivers who make daily runs Monday through Friday.

**The 1990s and the Advent of the Digital Age:** Computer technology was installed to circulate books in the early 1990s. As the public became more aware of the internet, all system libraries began installing public use computers that provided free internet access along with a variety of other applications such as Microsoft Office products.

In 2001, WGRLS joined PINES (Public Information Network for Electronic Services), a Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS) initiative that provides a state-wide electronic catalog to member libraries. With a free PINES library card, any Georgia resident can request and borrow material from over 300 affiliated institutions in 53 library systems in 146 counties. Additionally, card holders can download digital resources such as e-books, audiobooks, and e-magazines, and access a wide range of research databases.

**Continued Growth:** New libraries continue to be built to improve access to physical collections in this large geographic region, and existing libraries are being renovated to adapt to new user needs.

- Carroll County - Several cities saw locations open in the 2000s. Mt. Zion opened a new library in 2007, Whitesburg in 2008, and Temple city government repurposed its former city hall for a library in 2015, naming it after local teacher, author and librarian Ruth Holder.
- Haralson County opened its third location in 2003. The Buchanan-Haralson Library was located in the historic Haralson County Courthouse which was built in 1892 but had not been in use since the 1970s.
- Douglas County opened its third location in Douglasville's Dog River Park in 2011. The architect worked to make the library blend into its natural surroundings. Efforts paid off as the Dog River Library was named one of Georgia's 10 Most Beautiful Public Libraries by Georgia Public Library Service. The public nominated libraries across the state, and a panel of library and architecture professionals made final selections.
- Paulding County added its fourth location, the Crossroads Library in Acworth, in 2011.
- Heard County added two locations bringing its total to three. Ephesus opened its doors in 2009, and Centralhatchee has the distinction of being the system's newest library, opening its doors in 2018 in the building that used to serve as city hall.
- In 2015, WGRLS launched the STEAM Engine, a mobile makerspace that travels to schools and libraries providing hands-on science, technology, engineering, art and math education experiences to students of all ages. Made possible by a state grant, the STEAM Engine provides outreach year around and also makes appearances at community events.

**New Leadership:** The 2000s also saw the fourth change of leadership with James Cooper retiring in late 2011. He was succeeded by Roni Tewksbury, a long-time WGRLS librarian who had worked as Carrollton's branch manager and was Assistant Director prior to being named Director. She served until late 2017 when she retired and was succeeded by Jessica Everingham, who was Assistant State Librarian at GPLS at the time. Everingham previously had served as Director for Okefenokee Regional Library System based in Waycross and for Altamaha Technical College in Jesup.

Now WGRLS is 19 member libraries and strong and the service area covers 1,600 square miles! Staff is committed to meeting the educational, informational, and recreational needs of the West Georgia public. WGRLS boasts a collection of 837,700 items and has 163,000 library card holders. It offers an array of digital resources accessible from anywhere, anytime. Member libraries provide programming for all ages year round. Everything from early literacy storytimes and homeschool clubs for kids, to computer classes and book clubs for adults, and game nights and craft workshops for teens.

In 1944, Edith Foster promised Carrollton Mayor T. J. Lawler, "I intend eventually to create a structure of merit. It will take time. Some day we will all be working together in a broad library service area, with a fine headquarters building in Carrollton, with good facilities and a comprehensive collection of materials, as well as a program of services to enrich total community life." Her dream for the library system has been realized, but WGRLS continues to adapt, establish partnerships, and embrace change to better serve the growing needs of the West Georgia community.