

## The Women of Rutherford College, North Carolina

One town in North Carolina – Rutherford College – no longer has a library at all. That they had gotten a Carnegie grant is a wonder. In 1906 Emma Moore, the town's assistant postmaster, made her modest request to Carnegie: "Several citizens of this community have promised, that if you subscribe \$300 for setting up a suitable place, that they will supply 400 to 500 volumes of books...for a circulating library for the benefit of the citizens and the people in the vicinity..." [Throughout this book, a principal source of information on Carnegie libraries comes from the digitized archives of the Carnegie Corporation, accessible through the Columbia University Libraries. All correspondence for each grant is in a single file. Unless otherwise specified, quotes regarding the formation of Carnegie libraries come from these letters.] She offered to host the library in the Post Office, where she would be both postmaster and librarian, and to call it the Carnegie Circulating Library "if you so desire."

Bertram responded to Emma ("Madam") that Carnegie funded only library construction for towns willing to provide taxpayer support and that, if they wanted a grant, town officials would need to be the ones contacting him. The mayor did write Bertram to say that the town was on board, and the town's residents were "of high grade intellectually, refined, [and] cultured..." He asked for \$2500. Bertram then asked the obvious question: Is Rutherford College a town, or is it a college? The mayor informed him that Rutherford College, along with Valdese and Connelly Springs, were all part of one residential unit, formally named Rutherford College and that the library would indeed be a town library. Carnegie awarded it the \$2500 requested, in one of the smallest grants he gave (Ridge Farm, Illinois, wins the gold with \$1000). The mayor's request was vital yet it was Emma, the assistant postmaster, who threw the first stitch.

All was not well in that small town. After the library was built, a resident wrote to Carnegie to complain that Rutherford College – the college, not the town – was "absorbing" the library and, as the college was Methodist, that "nothing would be more repulsive" to Carnegie, a Presbyterian. More troubling was a letter in 1926 from Mrs. Paris (Anna) Rutherford, the town's librarian, who noted that the college had moved to a new location outside of town, what little commerce the town had followed, and

so the library began to fail. For six years I was the librarian and I did everything in my power...to keep it a vital part of the community. But I lost my eyesight and had to give it up. Now the library is rarely opened...

Anna asked Carnegie if the library's books could be given to local schools and the library could be christened "Carnegie Hall" and be used as a community center "so the beautiful building will not be wasted."

Bertram answered in a way that did not drip milk and honey: “The community in question never kept its pledge...it appears to be the truth that the library should not have been asked for...”

Anna replied that she “could appreciate your state of feelings...Where you have sounded your highest note of disgust you have not reached the compass of some of us who have been helpless to avoid the circumstances.” She went on at great length (in my eyes, as I remember how often I received work emails that contained two pages when two sentences would have sufficed) and by the end she apologized for her “very lengthy unbusiness like letter.” She allowed as how her Scotch-Irish temper had twisted her up as she gave the college’s president her “private opinion of him” and “he laughed at me.” She complained that the town had diverted most of the library’s taxes to build roads, and explained that she gave what little she was paid to two young women who had taken care of the library in her absence.

Still, Anna maintained a small library “at my own expense” and she “tried to arouse a library spirit.” Somehow, she remained optimistic: “We women have organized ourselves into a Community Club with the aim of building up our community.” She wanted to distribute many of the library’s books, keeping the best ones, and she again asked if the library could be converted for other community purposes.

Whether it was because Bertram’s library work was mainly done – Carnegie had stopped making library grants in 1919, shortly before his death – or he had mellowed with age, his reaction was surprisingly empathetic. Whatever practical merit Anna’s request contained, granting it “would seem to me to be condoning a delinquency...At the same time, I personally have the greatest sympathy with your efforts and that of your associated ladies to take the most practical efforts to make the library serviceable.” Still, “you must not consider this sympathy and interest as official approval...In view of the several thousand beneficiary libraries throughout the country...it would be out of the question to set a precedent by giving such an approval.”