

Though the two Norfolk libraries do not highlight the role of women in their histories, Virginia, like every state, has women who have made significant contributions to their development. [Louise Harrison McGraw](#) was the founding director of the Braille Circulating Library in Richmond; she also wrote at least a dozen religious novels. [Sarah Poage Caldwell Butler](#) was a member of the Women's Civic Betterment Club in Roanoke, which, in forming the Roanoke Library Association, chose her as the first chair. She led the campaign for a public library and, when it opened, she was the first director. Under her leadership, Roanoke opened a library for the town's African Americans. Having already served as a staffer there for ten years, [Ellen Coolidge Burke](#) directed the Alexandria Library for over two decades and brought bookmobile services to the town as one of the first Virginia libraries to do so.

[Bertha Mae Winborne Edwards](#) led the Portsmouth Colored Community Library from 1945 to 1963, every year it existed, at a time when the town's other library was segregated. (It continued to be segregated for almost a decade after *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that "separate but equal" was unconstitutional.) As its director, she lobbied for funding, she developed its reference collection and initiated its interlibrary loan service, she collected documents detailing the history of Blacks in Portsmouth, and she worked continuously to create connections with her community. In making her claims to city officials about the library's funding needs, she successfully asserted that, because Blacks comprised one-third of the town's residents, they deserved one-third of the funds dedicated to libraries. Her library was not segregated, and she welcomed whites to use it.

Bertha received her education in library science at Virginia's Hampton Library School which, in the 1920s, was the only library school issuing bachelor's degrees (accredited by the American Library Association, the ALA) in that field to Black students. She enrolled in Hampton shortly after the library school was closed due to lack of funding; she nonetheless sought out the classes of the library science professors who remained to learn about the profession. Beginning in 1960, Virginia required all library directors to have professional licenses. The state retroactively conferred the license to all library directors with the exception of Bertha, surely because of her race. After Portsmouth opened an integrated library in 1963, and the Colored Community Library was closed, Bertha joined the staff there. Her lack of the librarian license prevented her from becoming its director, or even its assistant director.

After devoting thirty five years to library service, and after writing nine books about Black history, [Bertha retired in 1980](#). "Those who worked with her said she was the kind of person who changed lives. Her colleague Mae Breckenridge Hayward noted that 'We are better people because of Mrs. Bertha Edwards'." The 900 square foot Colored Community Library is a [Black history museum](#), and in 2015 the [ALA declared the](#)

[library](#), and Bertha, as literary landmarks. Countless other women, we can be sure, devoted their careers to librarianship across the state, and I salute their service.