
The Role of the State in the Organization of Statewide Library Service: Essae M. Culver, Louisiana's First State Librarian

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ABSTRACT

In 1925 the Carnegie Corporation granted \$50,000 to Louisiana, a state then "backward in library development," to fund a demonstration of rural public library development. Essae M. Culver, a California librarian, was chosen to direct the project. Culver arrived in Louisiana to find that the entire state needed organizing. She concluded that the parish (county) was the appropriate unit upon which to base a system of libraries and adapted California's demonstration system to the southern state's needs. Key to Culver's method was local funding after the demonstration period, and she convinced legislators to finance the state library agency. Similarly, voters concurred that their parish libraries were worth keeping, and, despite some early failures during times of flood and economic depression, parish libraries eventually were established throughout the state. Culver's demonstration method was credited with greatly influencing library development both in the United States and abroad.

A STATE "BACKWARD IN LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT"

A century ago, the phrase "public library" meant "city library," for few such agencies existed beyond the limits of municipalities. Throughout the United States, most residents of unincorporated communities and rural areas lacked access to library services (Held, 1973, p. 130). The situation in Louisiana differed from that in other states only in that it was exceptionally grim. A flurry of interest in the library movement had begun in 1909 with the formation of the New Orleans Library Club, and in December of that year the club organized the first statewide meeting of a Louisiana Library Association. Although the group fell dormant from 1913 until 1925, it

flourished long enough to draft and to secure the passage of Louisiana's first library law (Reed, 1938, pp. 26–27). Enacted by the state legislature in 1910, the law provided for the establishment of public libraries and library boards and for the use of public funds to support them (An Act to Aid Public Education by Providing a General Library Law for the State, Louisiana P.L. 149, 1910).

The existence of this enabling legislation positioned Louisiana well when, in 1925, a confluence of events led to the availability of funding to create a statewide system of rural libraries. First, as the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the American Library Association (ALA) approached, its leaders became increasingly concerned about the slowness of library development. Second, the League of Library Commissions (LLC), an organization of states working toward improved library service, stood ready “to help any of the states which, for one reason or another, had done little or nothing to help themselves”; however, with “little power or contact with those that were unconvinced” and with no funds, the LLC hardly knew where to begin (Ferguson, 1931, pp. 7–8). And third, the Carnegie Corporation, disappointed with municipalities that had accepted funding to construct buildings but failed to develop real library systems, was receptive to new alternatives. Discussions at the 1924–25 winter meetings of the ALA and LLC converged these interests, and, with support from ALA officials, league president Milton J. Ferguson obtained Carnegie funding in the amount of \$50,000 to promote library development (Ferguson, 1931, pp. 7–8).

A committee formed by the LLC to implement this effort “soon decided that the best results could be expected from concentrated sowing in one state, rather than dropping a few seeds in hopeful abandon throughout the nation” (Ferguson, 1931, p. 8). Louisiana appeared to offer fertile soil in which libraries might be cultivated. En route to his home in California after the ALA midwinter meeting, Ferguson detoured through the state to determine whether its populace would support library development. There he found the library law of 1910, which had not been implemented because no funds were available; additional legislation passed in 1920 that created the Louisiana Library Commission and provided for the appointment of members; more than one million inhabitants who had no access to library service; and prominent citizens who realized the importance of the project (Ferguson, 1931, pp. 8–9; An Act Creating a Louisiana Library Commission, Louisiana P.L. 225, 1920). Governor Henry Fuqua asked “whether the plan were not a ‘Yankee scheme to educate the heathen of the South,’” but upon learning that “success of the kind we were looking for would require local appropriations, he declared himself open to conviction” (Ferguson, 1950, p. 35) and pledged to appoint a library commission if Louisiana was chosen (Ferguson, 1931, p. 10).

As news of this “project of making a library ‘demonstration’ in states backward in library development” spread ([Untitled], 1925, p. 346), officials

in thirteen states hopefully offered their hinterlands for the experiment. In addition to explaining why their respective states merited selection, some of them, suspecting that Louisiana was the leading candidate, offered reasons why it should *not* be chosen. Their negative campaigning came to naught, for Ferguson and his committee selected Louisiana (Ferguson, 1931, p. 9). He found the state “attractive for several reasons: the people were enthusiastic and unbelievably hospitable, the ground was not encumbered by any structure which must be removed to make way for a newer edifice, and laws had been enacted so that money alone was needed to set the wheels in motion” (Ferguson, 1938, pp. 3–4).

True to his word, Governor Fuqua appointed a five-member library commission. Chaired by G. P. Wyckoff, a professor of sociology at Tulane University, it convened on April 8 ([Editorial], 1925, p. 411; Louisiana Library Commission, 1926, p. 4; Shortess, 1925, p. 418). Milton J. Ferguson attended the meeting and offered the Carnegie grant of \$50,000 to aid the commission to develop a model of modern library service in the South (Plan model library, 1925). He also addressed a newly reorganized and invigorated Louisiana Library Association, which, though comprised mostly of social workers and citizens interested in the social experiment of stimulating library service, promised its assistance in educating the people of the state regarding the value of the commission’s work (Shortess, 1925, p. 418; Culver, 1953, p. 42; Wilson & Wight, 1935, p. 1).

An essential element of the Louisiana program was who would administer it. Ferguson “had someone in mind for the job [of executive secretary], and there was never a rival candidate” (Ferguson, 1950, pp. 35–36). The commission accepted his recommendation of Essae M. Culver (Ferguson, 1931, p. 10). Culver offered extensive experience with rural libraries, chiefly in California where she had been employed since 1914, most recently in the capacity of Merced County librarian (Essae Martha Culver, 1940, p. 214). Ferguson, as state librarian of California, was aware of her work. He later asserted that her selection was “one of the most influential elements in the program of library development the State [of Louisiana] has experienced” (Ferguson, 1931, p. 10).

LEARNING “TO MEET THE GREAT NEED OF THE RURAL PEOPLE”

Described in 1940 as “a calm, self-possessed person” with “dark eyes and smooth brown hair” (Essae Martha Culver, 1940, p. 214), Essae Martha Culver was the youngest of four daughters and four sons of Joseph Franklin Culver (1834–99) and Mary Murphy Culver (1842–1920). Originally from Pennsylvania, Joseph Culver practiced law, pursued varied commercial interests that included banking and insurance, and served as a teacher and as principal of a normal school in Burbank, Ohio. A career move—descriptions of its nature vary—took Culver to Pontiac, Illinois, in about 1859.

There he married Mary Murphy, like him a former teacher, on December 12, 1861. The following August 2 Culver enlisted in the 129th Regiment of Illinois Volunteers because "I thought God & my country was calling me" to fight in the Civil War. Soon he was named first lieutenant of Company A, later achieved the rank of captain, and was mustered out on June 8, 1865. After the war, Joseph Culver participated in Republican politics, serving for two years as mayor of Pontiac and for four years as a county judge in Livingston County. In 1879 he moved his family to Emporia, Kansas, where he remained active in banking, law, and community affairs and where his daughter Essae was born on November 15, 1882¹ (Dunlap, 1978, viii-xi).

Essae Culver later described an apparently idyllic childhood in the embrace of a close-knit extended family that included grandparents and cousins as well as parents and siblings. "We lived in a large house on a hill called University Place," she recalled. "The hill sloped down to a river and on the slope was an orchard, with apples, peaches, pears, plums, a vegetable garden and two grape arbors, and berries of every description. We had horses to ride and drive, dogs and cats to play with so that most of my time was spent out doors." Her mother "always insisted if we started any project we must finish it if at all possible and no matter how discouraging the outlook," instilling a determination that would serve Culver well as she battled ignorance, poverty, and the rigors of rural travel to establish libraries in Louisiana (Culver, n.d., pp. 1-2).

The strongest influences in young Essae's life

were religion, education, and music. Every member of the family either played an instrument or sang, and we were all given an opportunity to study. . . . My father said we could have all the education we could take but he would probably not leave us much in his will. He died before I was ready for college and there was never any question of my not going to college, for the whole family pitched in to see that I got a college education" (Culver, n.d., p. 1).

In 1905 Essae graduated from Pomona College in Claremont, California, where she majored in piano and voice; she was a mezzo-soprano. Although she considered herself not proficient as a pianist, her mother envisioned her on the concert stage. While employed as a student assistant in the college library, however, Essae had decided to make librarianship her career. One of her brothers offered to pay her expenses to any library school in the country as a graduation gift, "so long," he added, "as you don't fly too high!" Her sister Harriett prophesied, "Being a librarian may be all right, but you'll never set the world on fire at it." Essae later told her, "If I ever accomplish[ed] anything, it may very well be due to that remark!" (cited in Taylor, 1962).

After working for the next two years in the Pomona College library and for two weeks at the Detroit Public Library to sample public library service, Essae entered the New York State Library School at Albany in 1907. A year

later, she left without obtaining certification to accept a position at the Salem (Oregon) Public Library.² In 1912 the young librarian returned to California, where she held various positions at the California State Library and in county libraries during the next thirteen years (Taylor, 1962). There she discovered “the joy of work which comes from the satisfaction of being able to meet the great need of the rural people” (cited in Essae Martha Culver, 1940, p. 214).

By the time Culver arrived in California that state was in the vanguard of county library service. Under the leadership of state librarian James L. Gillis, in 1909 the legislature adopted an innovative law that laid the groundwork for library service to all residents. This comprehensive legislation provided for a state library at the head of a system of county libraries that would provide the bulk of library services, complemented by the continued operation of city libraries. Strengthened in 1911 by additional legislation, the plan called for a central collection in each county, with highly visible local stations conveniently available to all residents and cooperation among all libraries to place books in the hands of every reader (Held, 1973, pp. 132–147).

When Milton Ferguson succeeded Gillis as state librarian after the latter died in 1917, he continued his predecessor’s mission to spread library services to rural areas. After securing Carnegie funds to finance the Louisiana experiment, he outlined the plan to Essae Culver and, to her amazement, asked her to direct it. She accepted the offer but, apprehensive about her ability to administer the project effectively, took the precaution of purchasing a roundtrip ticket (Shaw, 1987, pp. 12–13). Armed with a “belief in the importance of books being made available and easily accessible to all” (Presenting Essae M. Culver, 1945, p. 5), Culver arrived in Baton Rouge on July 20, 1925, to assume her new post (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 15).

PEOPLE “EAGER FOR THE ADVANTAGES OF LIBRARY SERVICE”

Culver discovered that no preparations awaited her—no facilities for the commission’s headquarters, not even a desk. Commission member Katherine Hill soon arranged appointments with superintendent of education T. H. Harris, Louisiana State University president David French Boyd, and Governor Fuqua to discuss potential locations. Boyd advocated space in the university’s library building, but, upon learning that part of the commission’s mission was to serve state officials and legislators, realized the importance of situating the commission at the State Capitol and pressured Governor Fuqua—his brother-in-law—to find space there. Fuqua proposed a ground-floor office that had been vacated by the adjutant general, and with relief Culver accepted it. Apart from the convenience it offered, this location made clear that the commission was not an arm of the university, for its primary service would be to people outside of academia (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 15, 26–27; Culver, 1925, July 24–29).

By August 26 Culver had borrowed a desk, chair, and typewriter table, and on that date she began to work in the commission's headquarters. A delay in the delivery of permanent furniture postponed its official opening until November 1. Meanwhile Culver assessed the existing book collection, ordered new publications, and surveyed library conditions throughout Louisiana (Culver, 1925, August 26; Dixon & Gittinger, 1950, p. 6).

Three thousand volumes gleaned from camp libraries after the Great War, which had been donated to the camps by publishers and then contributed to the state by the American Library Association, constituted the book collection. Most of the titles were outdated, and few held any value for Library Commission purposes; the most appalling example was seventy-eight copies of a book about growing cotton in Egypt. Only rudimentary and incomplete records of the collection's contents existed, and there were no professional resources or publishers' catalogs to facilitate the selection of new books. Slowly Culver built a functional collection (Culver, 1953, p. 42).

The purpose of surveying the state was "to reveal the extent of library development already made; to see at first hand the conditions under which existing libraries were working; to discover the type of organization which would most completely and adequately cover the field; [and] to study the type of people in the rural districts and their interests" (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 16). What the investigation revealed would enable Culver "to determine the most pressing needs and to adopt a project of work for the first year." She discovered that, aside from the long-established New Orleans Public Library, just four libraries had been founded under the provisions of the library law of 1910.³ "Everywhere," however, "the people seemed eager for the advantages of library service" (Louisiana Library Commission, 1926, p. 5).

Among the rural population, Culver found intermingled the descendants of French, Acadian (Cajun), and Spanish colonial settlers, as well as Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent. A substantial percentage of the citizenry was black. Some Louisianians were highly educated, but others were illiterate. "While, in certain sections, Louisiana could rightfully claim an unusual degree of culture, unfortunately, as one writer expressed it, she stood in the basement in regard to illiteracy. Libraries, except for the private libraries of the plantation home and the limited libraries of the public school, were entirely outside the experience of the two-thirds of the population which was rural" (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 20).

Early announcements of the Carnegie grant anticipated setting up a model system of traveling libraries ([Untitled], 1925, p. 346). This means of library extension usually involved sending mobile units out from a central library, conveying reading matter in horse-drawn wagons or motorized vehicles that stopped at crossroads and schoolyards to serve readers (Martin, 1998, p. 31). In 1921 the Louisiana Library Commission had attempted

to implement such a program, but lack of funding caused it to languish. Although utilized elsewhere decades earlier—California, for example, operated traveling libraries from 1903 to 1911—by the 1920s they were falling out of favor; Wisconsin, Oregon, and California all reported greater success with other methods. Culver's experience in two of these states enabled her to offer Louisianians another alternative (Rural "travelling libraries," 1921; Stephenson, 1957, p. 26; Held, 1973, pp. 106–107; Culver, 1953, p. 43).

Milton Ferguson returned to Louisiana to attend the Library Commission's meeting on October 26, its first formal session since Culver's arrival (it had been impossible to get more than three members together at one time), and reviewed with her the recommendations she proposed to present (Culver, 1925, September 21 and October 26). One of those recommendations was to base the Louisiana demonstration on the California model, which established a large central library at the state capital with a branch at every county seat and rotating collections of 50 to 300 books housed in a store or residence in every hamlet (State to receive Carnegie aid, 1925). "This plan," it was hoped, "would bring books and reading materials to all the people within the parish—those living in towns and small communities as well as those on farms" (Harris, 1952, p. 1). It was favored over "the traveling library, because it has been found in other states that while the traveling library spreads books quickly over a wider territory, it does not tend to bring about the establishment of libraries adequately supported. The traveling library at best gives a superficial service and cannot meet the needs of any community" (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 25).

Another significant recommendation was that libraries be organized at the parish (county) level⁴ "because," Culver explained,

it was the governmental unit which could provide support for permanent library development, and also because other services, notably public schools, were organized with the parish as a unit. It would have been impossible I believe at this time for a new and practically unknown institution to contravene tradition and organize regions crossing governmental lines. It was suggested and carefully considered that the state as a whole be adopted as the unit and regional branches established, but the State at that time had made no appropriation to the Library Commission and funds were too limited to experiment. (Culver, 1953, p. 43)

The transition from the state to the parish level of the demonstration idea or method was a natural one, designed to show people just what library service could mean to a parish community. Since there were so few public libraries in the state, the average person had no concept of what books and adequate efficient service could mean. Therefore the commission concluded that, if the people of a parish had a functioning parish library system with headquarters at the parish seat, as legally required, and branch libraries and stations in the towns and communities, with a bookmobile

to serve rural sections, a collection of attractive books administered by a qualified parish librarian with direction and general supervision of the project given by the Library Commission—then the people of the parish would recognize a library's value and be willing to support theirs after the year's demonstration. (Harris, 1952, p. 2)

The commission approved of Culver's recommendations and followed them consistently until libraries had been established in all sixty-three rural parishes. It also adopted a six-point program designed to maximize its limited resources during the crucial first year. The program consisted of (1) publicizing and organizing parish libraries throughout Louisiana; (2) maximizing the use of book resources by providing large loans only to libraries that maintained a location and a custodian; (3) providing an informational service to persons residing in areas with no library facilities, offering package library service for clubs and classrooms, giving supplementary book service and help with administrative problems upon request by librarians, and supplying reading lists to libraries and individuals in support of adult education; (4) formulating a more effective library law and presenting it at the next session of the legislature; (5) making the commission's resources available to state officials and legislators; and (6) promoting the establishment of a training course for librarians in Louisiana (Harris, 1952, p. 1; Louisiana Library Commission, 1926, pp. 5–6).

Pursuant to the first project, Culver and various commissioners undertook a publicity campaign through the press and through addresses at meetings of civic, cultural, and educational organizations, including rotary clubs, women's groups, parent-teacher associations, and parish assemblies (Louisiana Library Commission, 1926, p. 6), where they invited supporters to affirm their interest by signing petitions. It was almost a person-to-person effort. Little more than a month after the commission accepted her plan, Culver described in her journal a typical excursion to whip up support. On Sunday, November 29, she left for the southeastern Louisiana town of Franklinton, arriving the next morning at 10:40.

Mrs. Ott, Miss Bethune, Miss Gatlin met me & showed me program. Just after arriving I met Rep. Sylvest & he prepared & signed petition for establishment of a parish library. Afternoon Mrs. Ott & two other ladies took me to two communities Clifton & Warrenton. At Clifton about 6 ladies met us at the Church & I explained the plan. At Warrenton we interviewed one lady (Lee I think was her name) who signed petition & man (Smith by name) at Oil Station whose wife was formerly a teacher. (Culver, 1925, November 29–30).

During these visits to the parishes, Culver explained to everyone who would listen that "a demonstration library is a sample of library service" (Harris, 1952, p. 89). The Louisiana Library Commission's next important decision would be which parish sampled libraries first.

ONE IN THE NORTH, ONE IN THE SOUTH

Expressions of interest in the library plan came from all over Louisiana; twenty parishes made serious inquiries (Louisiana Library Commission, 1926, p. 6). The northeastern Louisiana parish of Richland, with a population of 20,860, an assessed valuation of \$11,347,340, and a comparatively low rate of illiteracy, was among the first. Cotton was the principal product, and Rayville, the parish seat, boasted but one paved street (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 28). On February 9, 1926, Culver addressed a meeting there. Attended by some seventy-five persons representing every community in Richland, it was "just a splendid meeting," she commented. "Response wonderful" (Culver, 1926, February 9). Members of the audience returned home to spread the word among their neighbors. At its next meeting, the Richland police jury⁵ passed a resolution establishing and funding a parish library in accordance with the library law of 1910 (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 28–29).

Implementing the library law revealed its deficiencies, notably that it lacked provision for adequate financing and administration. J. O. Modisette,⁶ an attorney and a trustee of the Jennings Public Library, had offered to further statewide library development in any way he could, and Culver recruited him to draft a new library law (Culver, 1962b, p. 15). Enacted by the legislature on June 26, it required parish governing bodies to establish and to maintain public libraries upon petition of 25 percent of property-owning taxpayers; enabled two or more parishes, or a parish and a municipality, jointly to support a public library; provided for the appointment of a parish library board and for the creation of branch libraries; specified options for financing and mandated that the governing body fund salaries and incidentals during the demonstration; and authorized the creation of a State Board of Library Examiners empowered to ensure that prospective librarians were qualified to fulfill their responsibilities (An Act Authorizing the Establishment of Public Libraries in Parishes and Municipalities, Louisiana P.L. 36, 1926; New library law, 1926).

Bolstered by the new law, the library movement forged ahead. With a demonstration already under way in north Louisiana, the commission intended that the next one would be situated in the southern part of the state so that interest could spread from two geographically removed and culturally different centers of development. Among the parishes considered seriously were St. Mary in south central Louisiana and Jefferson Davis in the southwestern rice-growing region. Despite increasing momentum in St. Mary Parish, however, it lost to Jefferson Davis, which was home of the Jennings Public Library and of J. O. Modisette, who was soon to be appointed to the commission (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 32; Parish library is plan, 1926; Believes parish libraries, 1926).

"Never in the history of the South," proclaimed the Jennings *Semi-*

Weekly News, “was such a forward-looking step taken by a parish board as was taken . . . by the police jury of this parish in creating a parish library” and submitting the matter of its support to the people (Our parish-wide library, 1926). On November 2 voters considered a proposition to levy a one-mill parishwide tax annually for a period of ten years to support the library. Despite Culver’s evangelistic efforts and the effusive support of the local press, the measure failed by a margin of slightly more than 100 votes. With success seemingly within reach, the commission decided to sponsor a six-month demonstration in Jefferson Davis Parish, beginning on February 1, 1927 (Jefferson Davis Parish votes, 1926; Vote on parish library, 1927; Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 36).

Headquartered at the Jennings Public Library, the demonstration established distribution points in eleven small towns, each housed in a convenient location such as the post office, gift shop, pharmacy, or physician’s office, and each administered by a custodian. The commission contributed 4,175 books which, in six months, circulated approximately 26,000 times. Schoolchildren, especially those from French-speaking households in which books were all but unknown, proved to be the most avid users, and their teachers observed a distinct improvement in the children’s reading ability. Parents who could not read English enjoyed studying the illustrations and encouraged their youngsters to read the books aloud to them. A high school principal reported that as a result of the demonstration nearly every pupil in his school earned a reading certificate, compared with just a handful the year before. Reaction, however, was decidedly mixed. On April 12, for example, Culver was “supposed to speak at [the] P.T.A. [meeting in Elton, but] . . . no one came out” (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 36–37; Rodgers, 1927; Culver, 1926, April 12).

Despite many triumphs and Culver’s personal attention, the demonstration failed to garner the support necessary to maintain it. In the weeks preceding the August 23 referendum on the library, the Jennings *News* and other Jefferson Davis papers barraged their readers with editorials extolling the importance and negligible cost of the library. The *News* opened its columns to any taxpayer who wished to comment on the issue, and both supporters and opponents responded with letters. Opposition was thought to center in Jennings, where a city library had existed since 1908, because of reluctance to relinquish local control. But it was the unwillingness, shared by voters parishwide, to increase taxes that led to the three-to-one defeat. In three of seventeen precincts, just one voter supported the library tax; in six more, no one voted for it. Culver spent the following week stoically packing up the demonstration library (Another view, 1927; Aguillard, 1927, p. 6; Let us reason, 1927, p. 6; Libraries in Jeff Davis, 1927; Library tax, 1927, p. 1; Culver, 1927, August 27–September 3).

Extraordinary circumstances contributed to the reluctance to incur additional taxes, for the great Mississippi River flood had occurred in the

spring of 1927 and had inundated much of Louisiana. Poor crops, a general economic depression, and the fear that everyone would be required to finance recovery in the flooded area all played a role. Viewed in the most positive light, the demonstration proved

to the people themselves and especially to the Commission, that the people were hungry for something to read and would read good books if they were made accessible to them. As a demonstration the undertaking was a decided success, even though conditions at the time of its close made it impossible to vote the necessary maintenance tax for the library to continue the service. It cost the Commission in addition to the books something like \$1,400 but it was well worth it, and as an investment in the library development of the State was one of the best the Commission has made. (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 37–38)

Culver explained that “many inquiries have come from neighboring parishes asking how a parish library can be obtained, indicating that Jefferson Davis parish has demonstrated far beyond its own borders” (Parish library demonstration, 1927).

Meanwhile the north Louisiana demonstration in Richland Parish carried on despite the flood, its success heartening in contrast to the difficulties in Jefferson Davis. “I would grow discouraged,” Culver recalled, “but I needed only to visit Richland Parish, site of the first rural library, and the enthusiasm of the people over their library would renew and encourage me” (Wright, 1973, p. 6–A). Through the efforts of the librarian, a member of the community named Lillian Morris who waded through high water and paddled a boat through higher water to get there, the library was one of two buildings—the other was the drug store—that remained open during the flood. “All of the books removed from the lower shelves in anticipation of still higher water filled all the chairs and tables, so that service was given under the greatest handicaps, and no invitation to linger could be extended, for four persons filled the remaining free space” (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 34).

Crowded conditions and floodwaters notwithstanding, patrons continued to make their way to the library as best they could. For some, that meant traveling by boat.

As the waters came up to the floor of the porch, the steps were removed in order that the boats could more easily unload their passengers, and each boat took away books to supply not only all the members of the family, but usually the neighbors as well. Sixty books per day in a community of 1,499 population would be a fair circulation under the best of conditions, but under the difficult traveling conditions it is a record that is eloquent. (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 34)

A farmer credited the flood with interesting his neighbors in books. “With everything a lake outside, people just naturally took to reading. Mrs. Mor-

ris had the library open, and I've seen boys carrying books away in flour sacks" (Stern, 1928, p. 2).

Other commission activities also proceeded apace. Direct service to individuals who lacked local access to libraries flourished, with 300 requests for books or information received from the inception of the service on November 1, 1925 through June 1926 (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 26–27). These queries covered a great variety of subjects, most of which reflected interest in Louisiana history and in practical needs such as child care, writing business letters, and cookery recipes (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 48–49). It is worthy of mention, that in this Southern state during the Jim Crow era, no one asked those who wrote requesting service their race.

Although the library laws did not mandate that the commission set up a law library, Culver found that with no other library located near the capitol, a need existed for reference service to legislators, and she established an informational service in time for the 1926 session of the legislature. This service was valuable to the library cause as well as to the legislators, for it helped to inform them of the seven-month-old commission's existence. It also demonstrated yet another type of library service to another constituency, and an important one: the one that voted on state appropriations. The Tax Commission's budget included a request for \$5,000 for the library for the biennium (\$2,500 per year) on the grounds that the legislature had established the Library Commission by law and therefore should contribute toward maintaining it. During the session, library staff put forth particular effort "to obtain material on the subject-matter of the bills introduced and to bring this service to the attention of the proponents of the measures, so at the end of the session there were few members who had not learned of the help to be had from the library" (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 31).

Because the need for librarians grew in proportion to library expansion, another of the commission's first-year projects was to encourage the development of a training course in Louisiana. Sarah C. N. Bogle, executive secretary of the ALA's Board of Education for Librarianship, surveyed the state and recommended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge (LSU) as the most appropriate location. Twenty-one students completed the summer 1926 session, and all who did not already hold teaching positions obtained library jobs immediately (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 30). After five more summer sessions, which gave the university experience in training for librarianship, in 1931 the program was expanded to a year-long (or three-summer) course, which was the genesis of LSU's School of Library and Information Science (Morton, 1955, pp. 126–127). In addition to supporting the establishment of the program, Culver lectured at LSU from 1928 to 1935. She also taught library science during summer

sessions at the University of Wisconsin (1930) and Columbia University (1935–1938) (Taylor, 1962).

“BOOKS—SERVICE—FREE TO ALL”

During most of 1927, the flood monopolized the public mind: anticipating it, surviving it, recovering from it. “It is not an exaggeration to say that one year of the three-year demonstration period was lost because no new work could be started, no publicity could be given space in the newspapers, and no books could be sent through the mails during the period of the Flood” (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 38–39). As Milton Ferguson observed, “It is hard to talk libraries to a man whose farm is under water, whose stock is drowned or scattered, and whose crops are destroyed” (Ferguson, 1931, p. 11). Because Louisiana’s dire economic condition jeopardized the progress made there to date, the Carnegie Corporation extended its grant funding for two more years to enable the commission’s work to continue. After early indications that no more than \$500 could be added to the state library budget in 1928, the persuasive powers of Culver and other library supporters resulted in an increase of \$7,000 in its allocation, to \$12,000 for the biennium (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 41; Culver, 1928, March 14).

By the spring of 1928, flood recovery had progressed enough that Culver could resume “talk[ing] libraries.” Mary Mims, rural organizer for the State Extension Department, encouraged each of the organized communities in the state to explore the possibility of establishing a library in its parish, and Culver crisscrossed the state, spreading the word at meetings of various organizations in one small town after another (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 41; Culver, 1928, *passim.*). An observer reported, “Although not a brilliant speaker, she is convincing, because she ‘is so thoroughly imbued with the value of what she’s doing’” (Armstrong, 1954, p. 18–A).

In Concordia Parish, bordering the Mississippi River in central Louisiana, the first demonstration after the flood opened on October 10, 1928, but soon was beset by funding problems and another flood scare. When the police jury refused to schedule a library tax election because the parish remained waterlogged, members of the Women’s and Rotary Clubs and the Parent-Teacher Association circulated petitions and swiftly secured enough signatures to force an election. “Success appeared doubtful because of opposition, due to crop and business conditions” similar to those that contributed to defeat in Jefferson Davis Parish, and “there were many prophecies of failure.” Nevertheless, the tax carried with a fair majority of votes and of property valuation. This first parishwide library tax approved in Louisiana (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 42–43) proved dramatically that “taxes and poverty do not keep people from voting for library service if they really want it” (Schenk, 1954, p. 70).

Inadequate local funding stymied the spread of libraries to other parishes. When the Rosenwald Fund offered financial assistance to some parish that met its requirements concerning budget, service to African Americans, the employment of a trained librarian, and Library Commission supervision, Culver recommended Webster Parish. Located in north Louisiana, Webster had a population of 29,458, more than 80 percent of whom were rural. Plans called for making library resources available to all the people of Webster, including the more than 50 percent who were black. Established on June 4, 1929, within a year the library operated twenty branches, nine of them for African Americans (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 43–49; Wilson & Wight, 1935, p. 32). The librarian's report on "Negro Service" noted that black children's interests paralleled those of children of other races. Adults requested books on the subjects of popular science, cookery, Bible stories and church manuals, all aspects of agriculture, animal stories, carpentry, games, and what would later be called black studies. Clergymen used library materials to prepare their sermons and encouraged their congregations to read the books they cited. Farmers discovered new procedures, their wives learned about child care and domestic science, and reading clubs formed (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, pp. 48–49). The Webster Parish Library's slogan, "Books—Service—Free to All," summarized the philosophy of the Louisiana Library Commission as well as that of the parish.

When the Carnegie demonstration concluded in 1930, three parishes—Richland, Concordia, and Webster—were operating successful libraries. In 1931 the commission launched a demonstration in Vermilion Parish, but it collapsed because of the economic depression of the 1930s.⁷ Two years later, stocked largely with books from Vermilion, the Sabine Parish demonstration opened, the last until economic conditions improved in 1937. At that time the commission organized a tri-parish demonstration in Winn, Grant, and Jackson as part of an experiment

to determine whether rural people would be better served by high school libraries or by a parish library. The State Department of Education placed book collections in fifty-seven schools of ten parishes and then appropriated \$10,000 to the Library Commission toward a year's demonstration. After about six months, use of the regional service showed overwhelmingly that the public library best reaches a rural population. (Harris, 1952, p. 3)

Parishes began to queue up for demonstrations. From these beginnings, library service spread throughout Louisiana to all the state's citizens.

After the five-year Carnegie demonstration concluded, the state became responsible for supporting the work of the commission, which maintained "the same high standard of service" and continued to progress (Barker, 1936, p. 18). The Louisiana demonstration's success "brought new recognition of the importance of the state library [as an] extension agency" (p.

2) and admirably demonstrated “what can be done over a relatively brief period of time by a forcefully administered state library commission” with “an active program of continuous field work” (p. 93). In 1946 the legislature changed the state library agency’s name to the Louisiana State Library and reconstituted the position of executive secretary as that of state librarian (An Act Relative to the Creation and Establishment of a State Library, Louisiana P.L. 102, 1946). Essae Culver continued to head the library agency in this redefined role.

As the State Library’s twenty-fifth anniversary approached, the U.S. government flirted with the possibility of sponsoring library demonstrations in bookless areas. Initiated by the ALA, the Public Library Service Demonstration Bill (H.R. 2465 and S. 48) proposed to capitalize on existing agencies of government on all levels “to stimulate state and local interest in libraries by setting up [federally financed] demonstrations of free library service to areas inadequately served or without any kind of public library service” (News round-up, 1948, p. 28). When hearings on the bill were held in the Senate on May 16 and in the House of Representatives on December 9 and 10, 1947, one of the librarians who spoke on its behalf was Sallie Farrell, a field worker at the Louisiana State Library who would succeed Culver as state librarian fifteen years later. In her testimony before the House, Farrell stated that “Louisiana has found successful and effective the same library demonstration plan that H.R. 2465 would make possible all over the United States” (U.S. Senate, 1947, p. 13; U.S. House, 1948, p. 19). She cited both statistical and anecdotal evidence of the efficacy of the Louisiana plan (U.S. House, 1948, pp. 22–24).

The Library Demonstration Bill passed unanimously in the Senate but fell short in the House (News in a nutshell, 1948, p. 1068). A revised version of the bill, providing for increased funding, training for library personnel, and a strengthened role for the state library agency, was introduced in the next (81st) Congress, but it failed in the House by three votes, the victim of efforts to balance the budget and a conviction that the state should bear the primary responsibility for library support (News in a nutshell, 1949, p. 184; News, 1950, p. 548). Had this legislation been enacted, the Louisiana plan would have become a model for the nation. In some areas, both domestic and foreign, however, it constituted an example for emerging library services.

“CULVERIZING” LOUISIANA — AND BEYOND

Recognition from abroad commenced as early as 1929, as librarians from other nations expressed interest in and admiration for the parish library system (Librarian from Russia, 1929). After World War II the trickle of inquiries grew into a stream of visitors as the American Library Association began referring foreign librarians who wished to study methods of library development (Louisiana State Library, 1948, p. 12). In 1950 and 1951, for

example, visitors came from states that included Nebraska and Mississippi and from the Philippines, Egypt, Thailand, Morocco, Malaya, Germany, and Tasmania (Louisiana State Library, 1952, pp. 2–3). By the early 1960s, the U.S. Department of State, the Carnegie Corporation, and the Ford Foundation, as well as the ALA, recommended that foreign guests visit the Louisiana State Library, and the Institute of International Education listed it as one of the top fifteen U.S. libraries that participants in the cultural exchange program should inspect (Louisiana State Library, 1962, p. 1). Among more than sixty foreign visitors in 1960 and 1961 was Dr. Osman Ersoy of Ankara, Turkey, for example, who spent four weeks examining the State Library's plan of development and touring demonstrations as he planned nationwide public library service for his nation (Foreign visitor, 1961, pp. 109–110). An earlier guest, W. G. Buick, librarian-in-charge of the County Lending Service of the Public Library of South Australia in Adelaide, also familiarized himself with the Louisiana system and returned home intending to employ the demonstration method to institute there a similar plan of regional libraries (James, 1958, pp. 111, 117).

Culver has been credited with "originating . . . a demonstration method which has greatly influenced library development both in this country and abroad" (Parker, 1959, p. 697). Why did librarians travel from distant lands to study it? First, its methods succeeded. Over the years, the state library agency developed policies and conditions for its extension activities, heeding lessons learned from experience. Personnel learned, for example, to select demonstration areas based on the apparent strength of local interest and leadership and on the prospect of ongoing support. They standardized a procedure requiring the parish to provide physical facilities for the demonstration, as well as maintenance and utilities, furniture and shelving, office supplies, and salaries of part-time employees, bookmobile drivers, and custodians. For its part, the state library agency directed the project and contributed "all books and magazines, some library supplies, a bookmobile and its operational costs, travel expenses for staff, [and] salaries of full-time and professional librarians" whom it had the authority to appoint. Before the demonstration concluded, the police jury was expected to provide financially for the new parish library's continued operation (Harris, 1952, pp. 89–91). To maximize the use of resources, the library agency avoided duplicating services provided by existing school libraries and moved books that failed to circulate in one community to another (Barker, 1936, pp. 154–155).

Second, the Louisiana system was adaptable, capable of being modified to suit different situations. The Louisiana State Library proved this by applying its public library system to institutional libraries, starting in 1947 with Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Like the parish system, the prison scheme featured a central library. Seven branches served the informational and recreational needs of inmates in each farm camp, and a bookmobile

transported reading materials to smaller camps. Care was taken to supply books on potentially popular subjects such as trades, sports, religion, literature, history, biography, and travel, as well as adventure stories, westerns, and romances—but no detective stories or murder mysteries (Louisiana State Library, 1948, pp. 28–32). In 1967, with parish libraries established or under way throughout Louisiana, the State Library began planning for libraries in other correctional and health institutions. Ten began operating during Culver's lifetime, all established as demonstrations (Aswell, 1974, p. 10–F).

Third, the Louisiana method was innovative, employing many ideas and policies that were ahead of their time. Schenk (1954) describes, for example, “one of the earliest attempts to apply sociological techniques in analyzing library problems[, which] occurred in Michigan in 1946 when a group of county librarians met in a workshop with rural sociologists to learn more about rural readers and nonreaders” (p. 75), but Culver did much the same thing two decades earlier when she surveyed the state and conferred with Mary Mims of LSU concerning the needs of rural readers (Culver, 1925, September 26). Using what would later be called needs assessment, Culver “compile[d] and analyze[d] basic data about [her] target group,” obtained critical information and perspective from the community, and employed community networking—all techniques recommended in 2002 by the ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (American Library Association, 2002, p. 2).

Under Culver's leadership the state library agency provided the people, wherever they were, with the books they sought, whatever those might be, “shift[ing] . . . emphasis from the importance of *book ownership* to that of *book use*.” A quarter-century later, “a full realization of the impact of this shift [was] not yet apparent in all quarters” (Schenk, 1954, p. 5). Today “the American Library Association believes that the sharing of material between libraries is an integral element in the provision of library service and encourages libraries to participate” (American Library Association, 2001).

Fourth, there was Essae Culver herself. When she arrived in Louisiana, “the weakest point in the library situation in the South” was “state leadership in library extension” (Barker, 1936, p. 95). Culver provided the leadership Louisiana needed and set an example for other states. Under her direction, the Louisiana Library Commission was the first state library agency in the United States to base statewide public library development on the demonstration method, funding it first with the Carnegie grant and then with state appropriations (Stephenson, 1957, p. 35). Certainly the demonstration method of library extension was not the right one for every area, but Culver showed the nation how it could be done. During her tenure, the state library agency went from a one-person operation with 3,000 books to a headquarters staff of more than 50 administering over 440,000 books,

and all but 9 of the state's 63 rural parishes established thriving libraries (Louisiana State Library, 1964, pp. 38–41, *passim*).

During the early years, however, the future state librarian must have doubted whether the Louisiana experiment would succeed. In Louisiana, Culver found an insular citizenry that did not readily accept outsiders. Three days after her arrival, "Miss [Katherine] Hill of the Library Commission came to call in evening. She asked me if I was a southerner. Said Mr. Ferguson promised he would send a southern woman, etc. etc." (Culver, 1925, July 24). Later she recalled, "During the first PTA meeting that I attended, they asked all the Yankees to stand up. I inquired, 'How long do you have to be in the South before you're considered a Southerner?' The answer was ten years. . . . It's said that to be a native one has to be either born, or reborn, in a state. I consider that I've been reborn in Louisiana" (Fontaine, 1962, p. 61).

Lonely in the beginning, for she knew no one in Baton Rouge when she arrived, Culver spent her first Thanksgiving Day in Louisiana working at the Library Commission (Culver, 1925, November 26). During a particularly low moment in 1932, she "felt life wasn't worth while to go on & would have taken [the] train for anywhere" (Culver, 1932, September 17). Nevertheless, she persevered. Judging by the many cultural and social events she attended and by the 300 greeting cards she received on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday (Stephenson, 1973), however, Culver eventually formed several wide circles of friends with whom she spent her scarce leisure hours (Taylor, 1962, p. 62). Many of those friends were library advocates and colleagues to whom she was fondly known as "Miss Essae." They enjoyed cocktails at one another's homes, dining in restaurants, football games (Culver avidly supported LSU), theater, concerts, and movies (Culver, 1946, April 20; Culver, 1945, October 14; Culver, 1932, January 6–8; Culver, 1948, August 16).

Shirley K. Stephenson, a professor of library science at LSU, recalled that Culver's "compelling personality" contributed to her eventual success by serving "as a motivating force in engaging the interests of people and cultivating friends in all walks of life. She challenged persons in various business and professional activities to devote themselves to community projects designed to improve individuals and to enrich the pattern of life in this region" (Stephenson, 1973). Others saw Culver as a dynamic leader who possessed "innate poise and [a] gracious manner," strength, courage, "an enviable zest for living" (Stephenson, 1973), determination, and "a vigor of purpose" (Fontaine, 1962, pp. 59–60). Gifted with "administrative genius, political acumen, and a measureless capacity for sustained effort" (Parker, 1959, p. 697), "she has achieved firmness without hardness, and if there is an iron fist in that velvet glove (which is very likely considering the scrimmages she has been through) it is never discernible" (Currier, 1959, p. 36). One Louisiana politician summed it up: "You just don't mess with Miss Essae," he said. "It ain't smart" (cited in Currier, 1959, p. 37).

On the occasion of Culver's retirement in 1962, six months before her eightieth birthday and three years after she initially declared her wish to retire, the Louisiana House of Representatives honored the one-time outsider as "one of the state's most outstanding citizens," and the Louisiana Library Commission created the position of state librarian emeritus for her⁸ (Miss Culver is honored, 1962). Louisiana had grown to love Miss Essae, and she had grown to love it (Taylor, 1962, p. 61). Jefferson Davis Parish finally established the last parish library in Louisiana in October 1968, in time for her to see the entire state "Culverized" before her death from respiratory failure on January 3, 1973, at the age of ninety (Wright, 1973, p. 6-A; Stephenson, 1973; Jones, 1968, p. 93).

When the Louisiana Library Commission commemorated its twentieth anniversary, Milton J. Ferguson described the grants to Louisiana as "the best [investment] the Carnegie Corporation made in an experiment of [this] kind" (Unpublished letter from M. J. Ferguson to E. M. Culver, July 3, 1945, SLL). Culver deflected praise for the library's success, attributing it to the people of Louisiana and their response to the idea, while modestly "discount[ing] her own role as merely that of 'having furnished a little leadership'" (Fontaine, 1962, pp. 59-60). When someone proposed writing her biography, she spent half an hour "persuad[ing] her it was not worth her time" (Culver, 1962a, January 28). She believed that "talkers are not doers; and that deeds and not words will provide an opportunity for librarians to work together toward the goal of freedom and opportunity to read for all the people" (cited in Essae Martha Culver, 1940, p. 214). Her protests notwithstanding, Culver was what Louisiana needed in 1925. It is difficult to imagine what the library map of the state would look like if she had used the return half of her roundtrip ticket.

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NOTES

1. Essae M. Culver's unusual first name was pronounced like the word "essay" or the letters "S. A." According to her longtime colleague and friend Vivian Cazayoux, she was creatively named after a relative, probably an uncle, named Sam; the sound of her first name, coupled with the initial letter of her middle name, spelled SAM (V. Cazayoux, personal communication, September 25, 2003). This is lent credence by a letter from a young grandniece addressed "Dear Aunt S.A." (Unpublished letter from N. Tyler to E. M. Culver, April 22, 1953, Louisiana Collection, State Library of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. [hereafter cited in notes and text as SLL]).

2. In 1931 Culver entertained the possibility of earning a master's degree at Louisiana State University. Hoping to apply toward it some of the credits she earned in 1907–8 at the New York State Library School, she requested a transcript of her record and was informed that she "did not complete the entire year's work and did not receive the certificate" (Unpublished letter from E. M. Sanderson to E. M. Culver, October 5, 1931, SLL). She replied that when she left library school she was unaware that she had left any course incomplete but later learned that she lacked one credit in bibliography (Unpublished letter from E. M. Culver to E. M. Sanderson, October 30, 1931, SLL). Culver never pursued the master's degree.
3. These libraries were located in the towns of Shreveport, Lake Charles, Jennings, and Alexandria (Louisiana Library Commission, 1926, p. 13). In addition, approximately ten women's clubs sponsored some sort of book collection, but these were not organized under the provisions of the library law. Most required users to pay a small membership fee (Louisiana Library Commission, 1931, p. 18).
4. Especially in rural areas, the parish, which corresponds to the county in other states, is the most important political subdivision in Louisiana because it serves as the administrative unit for many state functions (Avant, 1972, p. 44). Parish governments exercise more than fifty different functions and powers, among which are fire protection, road and bridge construction and maintenance, drainage, sewerage, recreation and parks, health units and hospitals, parish prison construction and maintenance, road lighting and marking, and many water works. They also house and maintain the courts and the offices of the assessor, coroner, clerk of court, district attorney, registrar of voters, and sheriff. In addition, parish governments promote economic development and tourism, regulate various business activities, and administer state and federal programs on the parish level (Police Jury Association, 1999).
5. In forty-six of Louisiana's sixty-four parishes, elected officials such as the sheriff share authority with the police jury, which administers the general government of the parish in the manner of the county board of commissioners elsewhere. This system "vests both legislative and administrative functions in the same persons. The jury performs the legislative functions of enacting ordinances, establishing programs and setting policy. It also is an administrative body in that it is involved in preparing the budget, hiring and firing personnel, spending funds, negotiating contracts and in general, directing the activities under its supervision. Police juries centralize administrative responsibilities to some extent in various ways, but generally have no provisions for a strong chief executive officer" (Police Jury Association, 1999).
6. James Oliver Modisette (1881–1942), a Jennings attorney and civic leader, served on the Louisiana Library Commission for sixteen years (1926–42), the last fifteen as chairman. Modisette advocated the availability of books for everyone and was much involved with library extension, notably the provision of state and government assistance and the legal framework within which library development might occur, and he generously contributed his legal expertise and political experience in support of libraries. In addition to his service on the commission, Modisette served as president of the Louisiana Library Association, which remembers him with an award named in his honor; as treasurer of the Southwestern Library Association; and on committees and boards of the American Library Association, which recognized his work posthumously with the ALA Citation of Trustees. Modisette's business card contained, in addition to the customary data, the statement "Interested in Public Libraries" (Morton, 1962, p. 5; Conrad, 1988, I:573).
7. The failure of the Vermilion demonstration could not be attributed to lack of interest, for, "from the point of view of service rendered, volumes circulated, and number of people benefited by the service, no one could question its success." A second demonstration, strengthened with a larger staff, a larger quantity of books, and a bookmobile staffed with French-speaking personnel, opened in 1941. Voters supported its continuation by a substantial majority the following year (Harris, 1952, pp. 67–82, esp. pp. 69–70).
8. Culver's honors had been accumulating for years. In her long career, she served as president of the Louisiana Library Association (1928/29), which in 1964 instituted a distinguished service award named for her; the League of Library Commissions (1931/33); and the Southwestern Library Association (1936/38). She was the seventh woman—the first from a southern state—elected president of the American Library Association (1940/41), which

in 1959 presented her with the Joseph W. Lippincott Award for distinguished librarianship. In 1954 Pomona College, her alma mater, awarded Culver an honorary doctor of letters (Richardson, 1954, p. 131; Dawson, 2003, p. 61), and five years later LSU conferred a second honorary doctorate. In both cases she was the first woman to be thus honored. The citation from LSU noted that Culver had shaped the Louisiana State Library into an institution “equaled by few in the nation and surpassed by none” and that her “influence on Louisiana libraries has been all pervasive” (Citation, 1959, p. 106).

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