HAMIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: AN OVERVIEW

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Foreword

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Libraries in The Bahamas have had an uneven development. The archipelagic nature of the country, the boom and bust of the economy, coupled with the absence of legislation and effective government policies and sources of funding have stunted any viable ongoing development of libraries. This publication "Bahamian Public Libraries: An Overview", the first in a proposed series of Bahamas Library Publications, provides an overview of the developments in the public library service in the country. In the past, social, economic, and political influences had a tremendous impact on the ability of libraries to sustain their attempts to deliver acceptable levels of service. Today, there have been modest improvements.

This publication focuses primarily on five early libraries in the country, namely Nassau Public, Harbour Island Public, Haynes Public (Governor's Harbour), Inagua Public (Erickson), and Southern Public. The establishment of these libraries came about essentially as a result of community efforts to bring to the populace opportunities for education and exposure to the wider world. Such efforts are continuing today, as seen in New Providence (Kemp Road Library, Flamingo Gardens Public) and in the Family Islands (Long Island, Cat Island, and The Berry Islands). With the government's vision and commitment to modernization of the infrastructure, today's new libraries are likely to be more enduring than some of their predecessors.

Bahamas Library Publications will serve as the arm through which a number of future initiatives of library activities are published. The monograph series will cover topics such as digitization, research methods, trusteeship, training, and library development (by type).

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Bahamian Public Libraries: An Overview

Public libraries were dubbed the “people’s university” by Scottish-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. A self-made millionaire, Carnegie’s donations of funds to build free public libraries throughout the United States and other English-speaking countries at the turn of the 20th century were instrumental in spreading the public library movement throughout the world.

In a time when not everyone had access to an education or was able to complete more than a basic education, the main avenue to self-improvement was by reading books and magazines at the public library. Libraries helped those who helped themselves.

In addition to the educational benefits of a library, the building itself was seen as a commitment by a town or village to education, to history, to culture, and to the future. In smaller, more remote areas, the library might also have been a community center, a museum and local history archive, and a place to go for entertainment and self-improvement.

Public libraries of the 19th century in the Bahama Islands faced similar problems as their counterparts in the United States. Libraries needed premises and on-going governmental funding, otherwise they had to rely on local benefactors or civic improvement clubs. In the Bahama Islands, the Colonial government provided premises, however the funding allotted to libraries was never sufficient to allow for more than hiring a part-time librarian, subscribing to a few magazines and, occasionally, ordering some books. Nor were there ever enough funds to expand services such as longer hours, reading programmes for special groups or other promotional events to encourage people to use the library.

Despite these odds, libraries in communities throughout the Bahamas survived. This study will trace the history of four of the first libraries established in 19th century Bahamas. It will then look two libraries established in the mid-20th century and the Ranfurly Out Island Library Service. Consideration will be given to contemporary developments in Bahamian libraries: attempts at rewriting legislation, efforts to establish a national library and the development of a national public library system. The final section of the paper will briefly examine school and academic libraries in the Bahamas and library education.
The First Libraries in The Bahamas

The earliest mention of a library in the Bahama Islands was an advertisement in the Royal Gazette of 1804 for Thomas Williamson’s “circulating library” of 500 novels and plays. These books could be borrowed for three months upon payment of a fee. One can speculate that Mr. Williamson might have been a bookseller or shopkeeper of some kind, as most of such “circulating libraries” were housed in a corner of a shop. (Boultbee, 1978, p. 3). As the young city of Nassau grew in size and population through the 19th century, so did its cultural and intellectual life. British colonial administrators and colonists re-created or adapted several institutions from their homeland to provide forums for education, discussion, and entertainment. Distractions in the “Capital of a Backwater Colony” were few and far between. (Craton and Saunders, p. 74) No doubt the lectures of the Bahama Institute, discussions held at reading circles and literary societies as well as amateur dramatics, concerts, dances and card games were welcome. (Craton and Saunders, p. 85). The Nassau Guardian regularly reported on the events of the reading society, the Bahama Institute and, eventually, the library.

Toward the middle to late part of the 19th century, several communities outside of Nassau petitioned the House of Assembly for libraries and reading rooms. These petitions were due in part to their increasing populations and greater prosperity as well as the need for civic and educational institutions for the general population. By the end of the 1800s there were five public libraries and reading rooms in the Bahama Islands: Nassau, New Providence; Dunmore Town, Harbour Island; Matthew Town, Inagua; New Plymouth, Abaco; and Governor’s Harbour, Eleuthera. The population of the Bahama Islands was just 53,735, of which 43.7% were considered to be literate. (Craton and Saunders, p. 30). In the United States, the public library was still a rare institution, there being only 400 public libraries in 1894. (Jones, p. 15.)

Nassau Public Library

The Nassau Public Library building is one of the most unusual libraries in the world. Housed in a 200-year old prison, the library has operated continuously from these premises for more than 125 years. The cells of the old “gaol” were converted into alcoves to house the library’s 28,000-volume collection. Shaded by tall royal palm trees, the library is located in the main public square in the heart of historic central Nassau, near the Supreme Court of the Bahamas and the House of Assembly. Through the years, visitors to the Bahamas have been charmed by the curious, pink, eight-sided building capped by a cupola. Late 19th century guidebooks described the library as “…a rather picturesque building resembling a mosque…” (Benjamin, p. 15).

The establishment of a public library in Nassau resulted from a union of the Bahamas Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge (BSDK) and a reading society. The BSDK began in 1835 and had premises at the Public Buildings where a Mr. Dalzell “would be in daily attendance there, [and] had kindly offered to take charge of [apparatus, books, etc.]…” (Proceedings, p. 94). Although the library was founded in January 1837, it was only legally established in 1847 by the passing of the Nassau Public Library Act. Its first location was in a suite of rooms in the Eastern Public Buildings over the Bank of Nassau. (Boultbee, 1979 p. 3). Reports of the Library’s Trustees to the House of Assembly through the subsequent 35 years bemoan the lack of space, an inconvenient location and, naturally, an insufficient budget. (Boultbee, 1979, p. 5).

As a subscription library, members would pay a fee to join the library. Reports to the House of Assembly give brief details of numbers of members of the library and the size of the collection through the years: from 50 members and 1550 volumes in 1850 to 175 members and 5000 volumes in 1873. Membership cost 20 shillings sterling annually which permitted borrowing 5 volumes for 15 days at a time.
Without access to library catalogues of the day, we do not know what type of material the library held. Reports through the years state that the collection included “admirably selected volumes” and that the Reading Room was “…supplied with the leading English newspapers, magazines, &c.” (Almanack, 1879, p. 74).

In the early 1870s a new prison was built in Nassau, freeing up the old “gaol” for other purposes. The Surveyor-General, Captain Peck, prepared designs to renovate the old prison to make it habitable as a library and “…the books &c in the old library over the bank were transferred thereto.” (Almanack, 1879, p. 74).

The Hon. Harcourt Malcolm, lawyer, parliamentarian, and Speaker of the House of Assembly for over twenty-two years, was a devoted historian and Bahamian patriot. Throughout his lifetime, he amassed a large and valuable collection of historical documents, manuscripts, maps, prints, postage stamps and books relating to the Bahamas. He served as trustee on the board of Nassau Public Library from 1928 until his death in 1936. He left his collection to his niece, Miss Enid Boyce who in turn donated it to the Nassau Public Library. Miss Boyce was member of the Board of Trustees of the Nassau Public Library for many years until 1982, when ill health forced her to resign.

Service to the public in Nassau continued through the years of the 20th century and, as the needs and demands of a growing population increased, new libraries were established in areas outside the central core of Nassau. The Grant’s Town Public Library, built in 1930 and destroyed by fire in 1942, was replaced in 1951 by Southern Public Library. Through the 1950s and 60s literacy in the Bahamas much improved, (Craton and Saunders, p. 203) which in turn placed even greater demands on libraries in New Providence. The Eastern Public Library on Mackey Street was built in 1958 and a library in Fox Hill was built in 1970 to satisfy the population’s need for libraries.

In October 1977 the Nassau Public Library was forced to close temporarily when its debts mounted to over $30,000. (Library shut, 1977). The 6 full-time and 1 part-time staff were laid off and the library was closed to the public for a week. The Government had not fully paid its annual grants to the four libraries in New Providence for several years, which hastened the financial crisis. The Nassau Public Library resumed service after the Government restored $9,000 of the annual grant, and promised more funds later. However, shortly thereafter the library was forced to cut back its hours of service due a shortage of staff.

In 1981 the Nassau Public Library was again in the news because the building was in need of major renovations and repairs. The need for painting, re-tiling of floors, replacement of rotten wood and shutters, and crumbling walls was a feature story in the daily newspaper. (Devaney, 1981). As a result, a group of concerned library users struck a committee to raise funds for the needed renovations.

Despite persistent financial difficulties and a chronic lack of space, the Nassau Public Library managed to keep pace with new technology. The library acquired microfilm readers in the 1970s, photocopiers in the 1980s and computers in the 1990s, largely as a result of donations.
from service clubs and special fund-raising projects.

Over the years, the Nassau Public Library benefited from the work of its devoted staff. In her book *Reminiscing*, Valeria Moseley Moss book recalls that John Matthews was the Librarian at the Nassau Public Library in the 1930s and that he had been a “mentor” to her and her friends. Miss Isabelle Hamilton, from Scotland, served as librarian for 15 years, from 1962 through to 1977. In the 1980s, Mrs. Edna Rolle, an American, who worked at the Nassau Public Library for nine years, served as acting head for three years. She was followed by Anthony Kriz, from 1980 through 1981 and Mrs. Vanrea Thomas-Rolle, who served as part-time director from 1987 through 1990. Since then, Mrs. Winifred Murphy has been in charge of the Nassau Public Library.

The Nassau Public Library is the major public library resource in Nassau. It is patronized by residents of Nassau from all walks of life who come to do research, to read the daily newspapers or to seek leisure reading materials. The collection today has strengths in contemporary fiction, children’s literature and a wide range of Bahamian publications. In addition, the Nassau Public Library maintains numerous newspaper clipping files on Bahamian personalities and a variety of current and local topics.

The library has been undergoing minor renovations since 1997 to refurbish the second floor reading room and eventually the entire building. However, as in the 1800s, today’s library still lacks space to adequately accommodate its collections and its readers nor can it offer the wide range of services demanded by its patrons.

The First Libraries in the Out Islands

Fortunately for researchers of Bahamian history, the local commissioner posted on each major island or settlement was required to prepare a comprehensive annual report for the Chief Out Island Commissioner in Nassau. These reports, many of which were handwritten, provide details about the community and its population, health conditions, weather, social conditions, education, births, deaths and, of course, libraries. Although most library reports were limited to a brief paragraph, others contained detailed financial accounts or longer narratives about the efficacy of the library and its benefit to the community in which it was located.

From a reading of the Out Island Commissioner’s reports through the 20th century, it is clear that life outside of New Providence was difficult. There were such hardships as frequent unemployment, droughts and famine, not to mention periodic devastation by hurricanes and tropical storms. In 1929 alone, there were three major storms, which left many Out Island communities battered. In the rebuilding process, scarce resources would have been redirected to the more essential needs like homes, food and health care.

Communities with strong links to the outside world and relatively large populations, such as Inagua, Harbour Island and Governor’s Harbour petitioned the House of Assembly for libraries in the mid- to late 1800s. Smaller communities in the islands were able to establish libraries with the financial support provided under the Out Island Public Libraries Act of 1909. The Act’s intent was to establish libraries throughout the islands, in part to allow equitable access to reading materials for all inhabitants of the Bahamas, to reinforce education initiatives in the islands, to encourage self-improvement and to foster a sense of community identity.

Inagua Public Library

Inagua is the most southerly island of the Bahamian archipelago, located some 50 miles equidistant from both Haiti and Cuba and over 400 miles from New Providence, or in 19th century terms, about two-week’s sailing distance from Nassau. Although it is a large island, almost all of its population lives in the settlement of Matthew Town. The population of Inagua has
remained fairly constant since the mid-1800s to today, ranging between 900 and 1250 inhabitants.

In the late 1800s, Inagua was an important provisioning point for trade between Haiti, Cuba and the United States. As a port of entry, there was considerable traffic and local commerce, making it a relatively wealthy island. Many local Inaguan men worked as stevedores aboard the passing schooners and steamships, or they worked in the local salt industry or as migrant labourers in Cuba or Panama. (Cлатon and Saunders, p. 155). The island suffered an economic down turn after 1884 when the United States imposed crippling customs duties on salt. At the height of Inagua’s economic boom, 3-4 steamships per week visited the island and inhabitants had access to the latest newspapers from New York and London. (Craton and Saunders, p. 40)

The 1926 Commissioner’s Report stated that the Inagua Public Library was established in 1854. This date cannot be confirmed except for a brief mention in the Votes of the House of Assembly that the citizens of Inagua had petitioned for a library in 1855. (Boulbee, 1979, p. 8)

In 1908 the Commissioner on Inagua wrote that the library “…continues to be highly appreciated.” The collection already numbered over 3800 volumes by this time. The same year, the Trustees of the library made a children’s corner “…for the especial benefit of young people”. The report stated that “five hundred suitable volumes arrived on 31st December.” The library’s annual report proposed that the books would be available to all young people and that they had hopes that at least 100 new readers would join the library. The scheme seems to have had some success, as there were 71 children (juveniles) registered as users in 1911 and 63 in 1912 compared with 38 adults for the same two years. A further innovation was to adopt evening hours twice a week for the reading room, which, according to the 1912 report “…seemed to be appreciated by the subscribers.”

Subscriptions dropped through the 1920s, no doubt a direct response to the decline in Inagua’s population owing to reverses in the economy. In 1926 the librarian, Bertha Bethell, was paid £30.00 for her services and the library was “…patronized by all the leading people.” The library stocked the local papers and the leading English and American papers and magazines. The 1928 report states that although there were only 17 subscribers, “…the public have free access to the library during working hours.”

There were no reports available for the 1930s save that of 1936 where the Commissioner complains that the library could enjoy greater use. “…’Tis true there are regular subscribers, but I am convinced that the younger generation is not as interested as it should be.” Nonetheless, the reports from the 1940s make it clear that the library was used as a reading room regularly. It was opened daily from 10 am until noon and again from 4-6 p.m. Out of the total population of 890, there were only 28 subscribers in 1944.

Inagua Commissioner J.V. Brown neglected to include notes about the library in his 1948 report. The Chief Out Island Commissioner in Nassau requested by return telegram that a library report be sent immediately. The page-long addendum sent soon after proved to be a gold mine of information about the library and its collection. It reported that the collection of books was now approaching 5000 volumes and included “works...”
of the old Authors.” The report also noted that visitors to the library were surprised to find such a number and variety of titles. Unfortunately, funding from the central government in Nassau did not permit the purchase of new books in the 1940s. We further learn that Miss Gladys Alexander resigned as librarian in 1948 and that Miss Dorothy Steele was appointed. Also, the library building was painted, and in another report, the Commissioner reported that the installation of a clock tower on the administration office created a leaky roof, and the librarian had to spread out canvas to protect the tables and magazines.

The 1950s Commissioner’s reports painted a more positive picture of reading and libraries in Inagua. The library had received boxes of books from Lady Ranfurly’s Out Island Book Service. The books had been enjoyed by young and old, and had stimulated an interest in reading in the community. In 1955 the Reading Room was renovated and the windows were screened in, surely a welcome respite from Inagua’s mosquitoes. It was also in 1955 that the Old Salt Theatre opened its doors, across the street from the library, providing a much-needed addition to the social and cultural life of this remote community. Meanwhile the population of Inagua remained between 900 and 1000 throughout the 1950s, many being employed by the West India Salt Company, which was later to become the Morton Salt Company.

As the salt industry expanded in Inagua in the 1960s, so did the population, leveling off at about 1250 inhabitants. In this period, reports on the library were limited to recording expenditures and revenues from subscriptions, sales of books, fines and the annual government allotment. Unfortunately, there were no narrative accounts to illustrate the reports.

The 1971 report tells us that the library received a grant of $680.00 from the Ministry of Education and a part-time librarian was employed to provide service. The collection was described as a “very large collection of books and magazines which make interesting reading.” In an attempt to attract more readers, some popular magazines were added to the collection, but this did not attract more paying subscribers though it may have attracted readers.

One of the writers of this report lived in Inagua in the late 1970s and early 1980s and recalls that the library would open several evenings each week. The library was located in an airy reading room up a flight of stairs above the Commissioner’s Office, the Batelco office, Post Office and Custom’s Office, in the center of the town. Books could be borrowed on a subscription basis and there was a strong collection of the classics. Miss Dolores Symonette worked at the library from 1955 until her retirement in 1987.

In 1995 Morton (Bahamas) Limited presented a brand-new library facility to the community of Matthew Town, Inagua. The Ericksons Public Library and Museum was dedicated on August 6th, 1995. Miss Elsa Harris took over responsibility for the library following Miss Symonette’s retirement and is now the community librarian in the new library. Between the original library above the Inagua Commissioner’s office and the new Erickson library, the people of Inagua have enjoyed library services more or less continuously for close to 150 years.

**Harbour Island Public Library and Reading Room**

The settlement of Harbour Island was first established by descendents of the Eleutheran Adventurers some 300 years ago. There is scant information about these early settlers and the institutions that they may have established. After the end of slavery and the fall of the plantation system, settlements in the Out Islands became racially and economically separated; the whites were typically fishermen, while the black population were more likely to be land-based, subsistence farmers or labourers. (Craton and Saunders, p. 132) The community of Dunmore Town, the only village on Harbour Island, was well developed, with a number of churches, schools and businesses. Given its protected harbour, it was also a center for agricultural trade and fishing.
Records of the Votes of the House of Assembly for 1850-1854 indicate that the community had petitioned the Governor for funds to establish a public library and museum. (The previous year, they had requested funds to enlarge a church, establish a police force and build a new jail.) In a letter published in the Nassau Guardian “a correspondent” writes, “A reading room has been established with Rev. W.C. Duncombe as Chairman of a Committee, appointed to superintend the transactions, &c.” He explains that the Late Governor Gregory had enlightened “some gentlemen to the benefits likely to accrue from, and the desirability of such an institution as a Reading Room.” The Governor had also promised to double whatever amount of money the community was able to raise. Although this initial effort was a failure, in September 1853 the Lieutenant Governor granted the community £6 to go toward the establishment of a library and reading room. (Harbour Island, p. 3)

A review of the North Eleuthera District and Out Island Commissioner’s annual reports for the following 150 years reveals that the library at Dunmore Town, Harbour Island enjoyed a modest, but presumably loyal, following. Through the years, the library was funded by the government with an annual grant and additional funds were raised by subscriptions (memberships), sales of old newspapers and fines from overdue and lost books.

The 1861 library report identified subscriptions to the Nassau Guardian, the Nassau Herald, the Illustrated London News, Blackwood’s Magazine and 4 other quarterly reviews. There was mention in later reports that the newspapers from the United States were delivered regularly by boat from South Carolina.

As in Inagua, in 1911 an effort was made to attract young people to the library by offering them reduced subscription rates. This resulted in an increased number of library members, from 45 to 65. As well, about 200 new volumes suitable for young people were imported. The effort to attract younger library members appears to have paid off as the number of subscribers remained relatively high for several years. According to the Island Commissioner’s reports, the Harbour Island Library was “greatly appreciated” and requests for more funds seemed to be an annual refrain. Although grants from the government never seemed to be sufficient, orders for subscriptions to periodicals and magazines were maintained rather than purchasing books. One can guess then that in the days before radio and television, the local library and reading room was a place to find out the news of the day, news of the wars in Europe and Asia and news of places far from idyllic Harbour Island.

The Librarian at the Harbour Island Library, Miss Maria J. Roberts, retired in 1922 after 30 years of faithful service. A special enactment of the Legislature had granted her a pension, a pattern that had to be followed for Miss Lillian Coakley some 70 years later. (In 1992 Miss Coakley retired following 37 years as Librarian of Southern Public Library and also had to be granted a pension by an Act of Parliament). Unfortunately, Miss Roberts did not live for very long after retiring. Miss Bessie Rogers was the librarian in 1926 and her salary amounted to £22.18.4 for the year. Throughout the period, grants from the Legislature were so small that books could only be purchased every other year.

The reports through the 1940s and 1950s repeat much of the same information year after year, noting that the five libraries in the District (Harbour Island, Spanish Wells, Bogue, Bluff and Current) were open regularly and were
stocked with a variety of newspapers and magazines. The number of library users increased in the mid 1950s; however, expenditures remained in the range of £250-260 annually. In 1958, the Ranfurly Out Island Library Service began to make an impact by providing boxes of books for school children and adults at all libraries and in all communities in the district.

Commissioner’s reports up to the late 1950s did not comment in detail about the Harbour Island library or its services, giving just a brief financial report. In the 1963 report, the Commissioner noted that the number of subscriptions and use of the libraries in his district were not “satisfactory” and that children made very little use of the libraries. In the 1964 report, he further states that although new books were supplied to the library, there were not the “anticipated results.” According to the survey made by Turner (1968), the Harbour Island library was not open to the public in 1966, perhaps because of damage incurred from Hurricane Betsy of 1965.

In 1968, the new Sir George W.K. Roberts Memorial Building was opened to house both a library and a museum. It was named to honour G.W.K. Roberts, a native of Harbour Island, who had been President of the Legislative Council. The library encouraged some sense of community spirit as friends, winter and local residents contributed to its establishment. It was at this time too that the Harbour Island Day Nursery was established.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, the Harbour Island library received a small annual grant from the Government. The annual grant was only sufficient to pay the librarian $25.00 per month and pay the electricity bill. There were never sufficient funds to allow the library to purchase new books, magazines or newspapers. According to reports on the library made by Ministry of Education officials in the mid-1970s, the library was open only 6 hours each week, most of the books were old and musty and there were very few subscribers. The library today continues to be housed in the Sir George W.K. Roberts Memorial Building, it is open to the public and offers programs for school children.

Haynes Library, Governor’s Harbour, Eleuthera

The settlement of Governor’s Harbour, located on a protected cay and hill in central Eleuthera, was the agricultural heart of the Bahama Islands in the 19th century. Planters would bring their produce to the town where it was packed for shipment to Nassau, the United States and Europe. The fertile soil of Eleuthera lent itself predominantly for the production of pineapples, oranges and sisal.

In 1896 the Haynes Institute was established in Governor’s Harbour on the initiative of the Governor William F. Haynes-Smith in an attempt to do something concrete for those living in the Out Islands. According to accounts in the *Nassau Guardian* (The Haynes Institute, p. 1) “…a large gathering of inhabitants of Governor’s Harbour assembled on the Parade to witness the laying of the Foundation Stone of the Haynes Institute.” In his remarks, the Acting Resident Justice G.A. Preston hoped that the new building would bring the people of Governor’s Harbour “…in closer touch with education and literature”. Not everyone welcomed the new library. The Rev. C.W. Smith bemoaned the loss of his view of the sea and the loss of the public park. The Haynes Institute Library was slated to be a subscription library, as were all libraries in the Bahamas and Europe at the time, however residents of the community were free to use the library to read the magazines, newspapers and books. “ …those who might be unable to pay large subscriptions might yet visit the library and see the magazines and newspapers and take a book to read. Thus the benefits of the library would be open to all.”

Only a few months later, Arnold T. Bethell wrote to the *Nassau Guardian* from Governor’s Harbour complaining that the building was still incomplete, but he hoped that once the House of Assembly granted funds, the dream of a library in Governor’s Harbour would be realized.

At the turn of the 20th century, the population of Eleuthera was close to 9,000, while that of the village of Governor’s Harbour was about 3,000.
By the 1930s, five libraries had been established in the South Eleuthera district: at Governor’s Harbour, Savannah Sound, Palmetto Point, Tarpum Bay and Rock Sound. As at Harbour Island, the community libraries appeared to be places where local people could read newspapers and magazines from abroad. The report for 1930 stated that “A supply of both local and foreign newspapers and periodicals has been maintained in all” and that “good use” was made of the facilities. The 1936 Commissioner’s report noted that it was surprising that children who had left school continued to use the facilities for reading.

There are several reports missing from the 1940s in the holdings of the Archives. The 1949 report states that the librarian was Mrs. Ethel E. McFarland and she was paid £30.00. The collection of books in the Haynes Library was 3038 volumes and in that year no new books were purchased. The librarian at Palmetto Point, a community some 6 miles south of Governor’s Harbour, was Lillian Knowles who was paid £20 and the librarian at Savannah Sound, located about 10 miles farther south, was Alice Culmer, who was paid £12. Possibly the salary differences are accounted by differences in the number of hours that the library was open to the public.

Information about the library in Governor’s Harbour, as well as those in other settlements throughout the Bahamas in the 70s and 80s is scant. By all accounts, the Haynes Library had been closed for some years and the premises used for storage.

In the early 1990s, a community organization “Friends of the Haynes Library” was established with the goal of restoring the Haynes Library building and re-establishing a public library in Governor’s Harbour. The Friends group led by a local resident, Michelle Johnson, raised funds to renovate the original building for its 100th anniversary in November 1998. The newly restored Haynes Library now features a wooden interior staircase, new windows and a new roof. Reading and reference materials were collected using donations of books and funds. The Friends committee holds a very successful silent auction annually to supplement the grant they receive from the Ministry of Education. The library is staffed full-time, acquires new materials annually and has established itself as an essential community resource center.

**Public Libraries in New Providence**

Migration from the Out Islands continued steadily through the 1940s and 1950s as many more employment opportunities developed in the more populated centers of New Providence and Grand Bahama Island. This rise in demand for schools and other social services in turn increased the demand for libraries in Nassau. (Craton and Saunders, p. 191). By Independence in 1973, there were four libraries in New Providence: Nassau, Southern, Eastern (1958) and Fox Hill Public Libraries. Between 1973 and 1992 three more libraries were built, Coconut Grove (1974), G.K. Symonette (1987) and Wulff Road (1988 but used for non-library purposes until 1994). The expansion of Nassau’s suburbs in the post-1992 era saw the establishment of four more libraries: Kemp Road (1998), Elizabeth Estates, East Street South and Flamingo Gardens (all 1999).
Grant’s Town Library and Southern Public Library

Southern Public Library, a stately Bahamian-Georgian structure nestled on the side of a hill overlooking Grant’s Town was opened in 1951. Its predecessor, the Grant’s Town Library had been destroyed by rioters and set on fire during the 1942 Burma Road Riots.

Grant’s Town Library was opened by Governor Charles W.J. Orr on May 30, 1930. It was located above the Grant’s Town Post Office. Member of the House of Assembly for the Southern District Mr. A.K. Solomon was instrumental in petitioning for a library for his constituency. Mr. J.D. Weir was credited with having designed the library building and having ensured that “every detail was seen to.” The collection on opening day consisted of a large collection of books donated by Mr. Frank Holmes as well as a variety of British and American magazines. The Chairman of the Library Committee was Mr. A.F. Adderley and the librarian was Miss Lillian Weir, the aunt and namesake of the long-serving Southern Public Library librarian, Mrs. Lillian Weir Coakley. The Tribune newspaper report of the day noted that “A notable feature of the equipment of the library is the steel cabinets for the books, which line the walls, and which are an excellent safeguard, in this country, of book-loving insects.” (Grant’s Town, p. 1).

The Grant’s Town Library must have been a wonderful place for recreational reading and quiet study. It was located on the second floor, above the street and out of the way. Although it was a subscription library, the Grant’s Town Library was open to all. “...the advantages of a library should be open to all, whether subscribers or not.” (Grant’s Town, p. 1).

In early June 1942, a mass demonstration of labourers demanding higher wages erupted into a riot. The crowd attacked the police station, broke into the Grant’s Town Post Office and public library, setting them on fire. The loss of the Grant’s Town Library to the residents of the Southern District was significant as it had been one of the first institutions that the Black Bahamian population had for themselves, in their own neighbourhood.

Strenuous lobbying in 1949 on the part of educator Dr. Claudius Walker and musician Bert Cambridge, both members of the House of Assembly, resulted in the passing of legislation to build a new library in the Southern District. The two-story building, overlooking the Southern Recreation Grounds on Baillou (or “Blue”) Hill Road opened to the public in 1951 with Mrs. Ruth Russell as the chief librarian. Located near a secondary school and a community health clinic, Southern Public Library has been the nucleus of the “over the hill” community, playing a significant role in the lives of many generations of children and students.

Following Mrs. Russell’s retirement in 1955, Mrs. Lillian Weir Coakley became the chief librarian. Although Mrs. Coakley had no formal education in librarianship, she worked tirelessly for more than 37 years to provide library services to the children and adults in Southern District. Mrs. Coakley had received her degree in Social Work from Hampton University in Virginia in 1953 and worked for a short time as a social worker before starting at Southern Public Library.

Given the needs of the community, Mrs. Coakley focussed on providing the best library service possible to children. She extended hours to accommodate after-school activities such as story telling and implemented a programme for students attending nearby schools to visit the library regularly throughout the school year. In addition, for over 25 years Mrs. Coakley organized highly successful summer programmes for children that combined education and entertainment. Activities included reinforcing spelling and reading skills as well as arts and crafts. These month-long summer programmes were so popular that the library would hold classes at the nearby St. Agnes Church schoolroom. At the end of the month, all the participants would put on a show for their parents. Years later, parents who had attended
these summer programmes as children, would bring their children to enjoy them. Though the summer programmes continue at Southern Public Library, they do not cater to quite as many children as they did in the past.

In recognition of Mrs. Coakley’s commitment and dedication to quality librarianship, she has been the recipient of many awards and accolades, including the British Empire Medal in 1996 and the Bahamas Order of Merit Award in 1999. Her most recent recognition was on January 14th, 2000 when her former employer, Southern Public Library, paid tribute to Mrs. Coakley’s contributions to the library and to Bahamian society by renaming the Special Collections Room the Lillian Coakley Information Center.

By the mid-1970s, Southern Public Library was suffering from under-funding and lack of space. The 1976 Annual Report states “we are being choked out.” There was no space for new books nor room to accommodate more library users. Although many library users were school children, during the 1970s more adults were returning to school for further education and looked to the public library for support. Coping with irregular and uncertain Government grants paid a toll on the range of library services that Southern Public Library could offer. As a result of the financial crisis of 1977, Southern Public Library drew on its financial reserves, depleting them completely. Although the meager grants received from the Government did not permit the library to purchase new books and journals, the 1978 Annual Report states that the library had received donations of new materials from the Overseas Book Centre in Ottawa, Canada.

Following Mrs. Coakley’s retirement in 1992, Mr. Jerome Agboyi became the Chief Librarian. Under Mr. Agboyi’s leadership, Southern Public Library has grown further, automating its functions, promoting literacy and providing library services to the residents of the Grant’s Town area. Today Southern Public Library houses a collection of over 55,000 volumes. It is the first public library in the Bahamas to offer Internet access and free e-mail services to its patrons. Although Southern Public Library continues to be desperate for more space to house its collection and accommodate its patrons, in January 2000 the Chairman of Southern Public Library Board of Trustees, Rev. Geoffrey Wood, announced plans to double the size of the library.

Synonymous with Southern Public Library is Dr. Cleveland Eneas. Dr. Eneas served as Chairman of the Board of Trustees from 1950 until his death in 1995. Dr. Eneas lived across the Southern Recreation Grounds from Southern Public Library and was able to “keep his eye” on things on a daily basis. Dr. Eneas also served as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Nassau Public Library, the Bahamas Historical Society and the Friends of the Archives. His quest for education led him to the Tuskegee Institute and

Southern Public Library, Nassau
later to the Meharry Medical College where he studied dentistry. To honour his contribution to the development of public libraries, Southern Public Library commissioned a bust of Dr. Eneas that was unveiled on January 14th 2000.

The Ranfurly Out Island Library Service

Libraries in the Bahamian Out Islands were provided with a very small budget allocation throughout the century. The budget was normally not much more than a stipend to pay someone to open the library for a limited number of hours each week as well as enough to cover the cost of a few newspapers and magazines and the occasional order of new books. Reports from the Out Island commissioners frequently remark that no new books had been ordered for the year in review due to a lack of funds.

To counteract the shortage of reading materials for school children in the islands, Countess Hermione Ranfurly, the wife of the Governor of the Bahama Islands, Earl Thomas Ranfurly, founded the Ranfurly Out Island Library Service in 1954 from a back room of Government House in Nassau. Donations of new and second-hand books would be gathered in Britain, Australia, Canada and other English-speaking Commonwealth countries and sent to Nassau. Boxes of selected reading material were then dispatched free of charge to schools and communities throughout the Bahamian archipelago. Upon Lady Ranfurly’s return to the United Kingdom in 1956, the concept of the original service pioneered in the Bahamas was further developed and finally registered as a charity in 1966 as the Ranfurly Library Service. The symbolic fifth million book handled by the London-based Ranfurly Library Service was sent to the Bahamas in June 1973 and was deposited at the Department of Archives. (Fifth million book, p. 3; Bahamas gets, p. 3.)

Sir Dudley and Lady Elizabeth Russell managed the Ranfurly Out Island Library Service in Nassau from 1956 after the Ranfurlys returned to England. The service was operated out of a small building on Bank Lane until the early 1970s when it was moved to the old RAF building on Gregory Street in Oakes Field. By April 1968, over 28,500 books for adults and 93,846 books for children had been sent to schools and public libraries in the islands. (Turner, p. 222) This figure rose to over 200,000 in 1975. (Books for Family Islands, p.1)

Extracts from letters from grateful schoolteachers, found in the Ranfurly Out Island Library Service file at the Department of Archives sang the praises of the service and the opportunities that it offered the population in the islands. “You will be interested to know that my pupils are becoming more and more interested in reading. Thanks to the Out Island library.” (Ranfurly Out-Island Library, p. 3)

Sir Dudley Russell died in 1978 and Lady Elizabeth Russell died in 1980. The Ranfurly Out Island Library Service was taken over by Mrs. Frances Sawyer, Lady Russell’s sister. Her small committee continued to operate the service with a modest financial contribution from the Ministry of Education (which was used to defray shipping costs). As the committee members aged and declined in health, it become more difficult for them to maintain the service. The building from which they operated was plagued with problems of security, fire and insects. The building was demolished by Hurricane Andrew in 1992. By the 1990s, the value of the service to the outlying communities of the archipelago declined as these communities had greater access to television, better school and community libraries and more communication with Nassau and the outside world.

The legacy of the Ranfurly Out Island Library Service is a generation of Bahamians whose education benefitted from the shipments of books. In 1994 the Ranfurly Library Service in England was renamed Book Aid International. Today Book Aid International organizes the massive annual distribution of over 1.5 million books to developing countries throughout the world, with the objective of promoting literacy and education. And it all started in the Bahamas!
Libraries in Grand Bahama

The island of Grand Bahama and its large city of Freeport were only fully settled and developed in the 1960s. With the signing of the Hawksbill Creek Agreement in 1955, the Grand Bahama Port Authority was granted concessions to operate free of tax, thereby stimulating development of industry and infrastructure on Grand Bahama. The 1960s brought rapid growth – roads, electricity, water supply, homes in well planned subdivisions, an airport, schools, hospitals, police stations, churches, and of course, libraries.

Established in 1962, Freeport Public Library outgrew its premises in the Savoy Building by 1966 and was re-accommodated in the John Harvard Building. The famous inventor, James Rand (who invented the dial telephone) had founded the John Harvard Library of the Colonial Research Institute in 1958. In 1982 the Grand Bahama Port Authority assumed responsibility for the John Harvard Library, and changed its name to the Sir Charles Hayward Library.

The Sir Charles Hayward Library, named for one of the first major investors in Grand Bahama, is today the island’s largest public library. (Bahamas Handbook, 2000). Like all libraries in the Bahamas, it continues to operate as a subscription library, with fees of $15.00 per family per year. (Barton, p. 4). It is open daily and it is staffed by a corps of volunteers under the direction of a professional librarian, Mrs. Elaine Talma. The collection is organized according to the Dewey Decimal classification and presently stands at over 28,000 volumes. In 1994, the Grand Bahama Port Authority established the Sir Charles Hayward Children’s Library. The children’s library is housed in an extension to the public library and the librarian is Miss Josephine Zonicle.

The Grand Bahama Youth Library, which is presently located in the Syntex Teen Centre, was opened in 1986. It was founded as the result of a community effort spearheaded by Mrs. Julie Glover. The library is managed by volunteers who work under the direction of a professional librarian. It was one of the first libraries in the Bahamas to have an automated catalogue.

Although Freeport-Lucaya is the main population center on the island of Grand Bahama, the island is 80 miles long with many smaller settlements located along the southern coast from West End to East End. Through the years small community and school libraries have been established in these settlements. Worthy of mention is the Benjamin W. Laing Library in the settlement of Pelican Point. This small library was established in 1986 on the site of the oldest grant-in-aid school in Grand Bahama. (Grand Bahama library, p. 8).

Another community library was established in Freetown, Grand Bahama in 1999. Mrs. Carol McCutcheon, a schoolteacher, had been using her home as an informal lending library. When the demand for a library became overwhelming, she suggested renovating the East End Missile Base building as a library. The East End Missile Base had been used in the early 1960s for training chimpanzees for space missions but had laid unused since the base was closed in 1989. The building was renovated using volunteer help, and a library was organized and turned over to the Ministry of Education to operate. (Maycock, 2000, p. 5.)

Library development in Grand Bahama has benefited from the support and creative input of Mrs. Barbara Barton. Mrs. Barton, an American citizen, is a full-time teacher-librarian at Eight-Mile Rock Secondary School and part-time Assistant Librarian at the College of the Bahamas’s Northern Campus in Freeport. When she first arrived in Grand Bahama in 1980 there were few libraries, however Mrs. Barton made it a personal campaign to convince teachers, students, parents and the community at large of the importance and value of libraries. She was one of organizers of the Grand Bahama Youth Library and an ardent supporter of the community library movement in Grand Bahama. Today there are libraries in most schools in Grand Bahama and every community is now demanding that they have a public library.
Contemporary Developments in Public Library Service

Library Legislation

Libraries in the Bahamas in the year 2000 continue to be governed by two antiquated acts: the Nassau Public Library Act of 1847 and the Out Island Public Libraries Act of 1909. Operational and procedural details about library management are included in the Nassau Public Library Rules of 1961. Over the years as governments changed, the legislation has been subject to re-interpretation, such as interpreting “Minister” to mean “Minister of Education” in the Out Islands Libraries Act.

According to the existent legislative framework, all libraries operate independently under their respective Boards of Trustees. In New Providence, library boards have 7 members, four of whom are nominated by the Governor General and three elected by the subscribers of the library. Family Island libraries have five trustees, three nominated by the Governor General and two elected by subscribers. Generally, the island commissioner acts as Chairman of the Board of Trustees. The role of the library board is to allocate the grant money received from the government for salaries, maintenance and new book stock. Both Acts require that annual reports be submitted to both houses of the legislature. These reports were submitted more or less consistently until Independence in 1973, as the local island commissioner was responsible for the library or libraries in his jurisdiction. In the post 1973 era, libraries were transferred to the portfolio of the Minister of Education.

In the Family Islands, Commissioners retained the local library as part of their administrative responsibilities with the Ministry of Education being responsible for allocating funds, or “subventions.” As the role of the commissioner expanded to cover all aspects of government administration, less attention was paid to the libraries. The local trusteeship became less prestigious and many small libraries simply disappeared.

The Nassau Library Rules and the Out Island Public Libraries Act stipulate that all libraries were to operate as subscription libraries, as opposed to free, public libraries, which became the norm in the United States and Britain during the same period. Subscribers to the libraries enjoy borrowing privileges, but the libraries were open to all for reading and reference. The Rules, which were set out in 1961, remain in effect today and are the basis of operation for all libraries in New Providence. Public libraries still collect membership fees of $5.00 per annum to borrow one book at a time or $10.00 for two books. Fines are set at 5 cents per book per day.

Several public libraries in Nassau continue to operate with a Board of Trustees. However in the past 10 years or so, the Boards have come increasingly under the financial control and guidance of the Ministry of Education. Without the benefit of legislative authority, in 1996 the Ministry of Education assumed full administrative responsibility for public libraries in New Providence. This was necessary because many Boards of Trustees had not been meeting, most the libraries were being managed by para-professionals and there was need to establish a...
public library system. A further reorganization of the administration of libraries occurred in 1998 when separate public library and school library services were established as branches of the newly formed National Library and Information System.

Lacking a well-stated government policy or current modern legislation, libraries in the Bahamas have not been provided the leadership or guidance they need to expand, resulting in a ‘haphazard pattern of development with no clear guidelines or goals.” (Boulthee, 1978, p. 192)

The need for new library legislation has been a recurrent theme in the reports of all library consultants, (Reid, Baa, and Bennett), and since the 1970s there have been several abortive attempts at doing so. In the past five years, under the government of Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham and the direction of Senator Dame Ivy Dumont, the Minister of Education, interest in rewriting legislation for libraries has emerged again. (Miller, S., p. 5).

A National Library for The Bahamas?

A review the past 40 years of Bahamian library history reveals several attempts at, or at least interest expressed in, establishing a “national library” or a nation-wide library service.

In the Majority Rule years (1963-1973), Ministry of Education officials recognized that library service in the Bahama Islands suffered on four fronts: lack of central direction (or policy), lack of a central repository (a national library building), lack of a training programme (and lack of a professional librarian) and lack of adequate funding. They also realized that “…a properly organized library system would be an inestimable boom to the Bahamas and is urgently needed to reinforce the educational social progress of the Colony.” (Library System, p. 2).

Despite these high-minded words, in 1966, a total of $44,000 was granted for the operation of Nassau, Eastern and Southern Public libraries as well as the 30-odd Out-Island libraries and the Ranfurly Out Island Library Service.

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education at the time, Sir Brian Marwick, did however request assistance from UNESCO in 1969 to survey the public library situation and make recommendations for its long term development. D.G. Reid visited the Bahamas in February 1970 and worked extensively with the Ministry of Education librarian, Mr. Emmett Johnson. Reid’s report recommended revamping library legislation, establishing separate school and public library services, providing education for teacher-librarians and librarians, establishing a central headquarters in Nassau to coordinate library development, and, finally, appointing a professional director.

Reid was prescient when he wrote that the Bahamian people were entering “a new age of increased prosperity, improved educational opportunities, rapid social change and political independence” (Reid, p. 35), words which in the year 2000 still ring true.

The first major attempt to redraft library legislation occurred in 1972 with the proposed Bahamas Library Service Act. It was thought, at the time, that a new national library would have been an appropriate national project to celebrate the impending Independence of the Bahamas on July 10, 1973. A committee headed by Allan Butler was established under a Declaration of Trust to select a site, build, furnish, purchase books etc. and turn over the final product to the Ministry of Education (Baa, p.2). A 10-acre site in the Oakes Field area of Nassau was identified as an ideal location and a detailed report was prepared by Baa and Heneghan outlining minimum standards for collection size, funding, personnel needs and other criteria.

These were ambitious plans indeed for a newly elected government and a newly independent state in difficult economic times. The government did not neglect developing other institutions of national significance. It was at this time that the College of the Bahamas was established. Some consideration was given to designating the College’s Library as a “national library”. This idea was ultimately rejected because the new institution did not have the staff or space to accommodate the extra demands that
would be made by the public. Thus, competing priorities and financial difficulties relegated the hopes and dreams for libraries and a national institution to a back burner.

Some steps to realizing the dream were taken in 1976 when the Ministry of Education established the Learning Resources Unit. Now known as the Learning Resources Section, its mandate is to assist teachers, students and school libraries, going beyond the model provided by the Ranfurly Out Island Library Service. The centralized unit gathers audio-visual resources, provides materials for loan to schools throughout the Bahamas and produces indigenous learning support materials. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, public libraries were so under-funded that they had to close temporarily until the government stepped in to restore their customary grants, allowing the libraries to pay their day-to-day expenses. (Darville, p. 1; Library shut, p. 1)

In the late 1970s, the Bahamas School Libraries Association (BSLA) was established and the newly formed College of the Bahamas began to offer a library technician programme in an attempt to provide some training for school librarians. At the BSLA annual meeting of 1978 the then Minister of Education, Livingstone Coakley promised that a national library service was “on the cards” (National library, p. 1). More empty promises, when in reality, public libraries continued to lack funds, trained personnel and policy (Boultbee. 1978, p. 154).

A second attempt to establish a national library was made in 1984. Speaking to a Rotary Club luncheon, Fred Mitchell, an activist and journalist, later to become a lawyer and senator, announced that national library legislation was expected “soon” and that a national library would be built to honour Sir Milo Butler, the first Black Bahamian governor-general. (Devaney, 1984, p. 1) Unfortunately, the Bahamas of the 1980s was fraught with controversy as the government of the day was caught up in a Commission of Inquiry into its involvement in the international drug trade. Moreover, as a young emerging nation, the Bahamian government was more concerned with establishing strong bases for economic development – the tourism and offshore banking industries – than spending money on social infrastructure. Due to the lack of political resolve, no proper legislative basis was ever established and funding for libraries was never sufficient to allow any headway.

Public Libraries in the 1990s

The 1990s heralded many changes in the Bahamas. Bahamian society benefited from greater educational opportunities and an educated middle class emerged. The population in general became more sophisticated and cosmopolitan, profiting from the spin-offs of a stable economy, trade, travel and more links with the outside world via cable television and the Internet. The nation voted in a new government in 1992, after 25 years of the previous administration. The public of the 1990s demanded better governmental services – better schools, better medical services and increasingly, better library services as well.

A Senate Select Committee of 1993 headed by Senator Lawrence Glinton asked Dr. Gail Saunders, the Director of the Archives Department, point blank: Why are there no libraries in the Bahamas? Her response was that “… the mercantile elite were more interested in business and more interested in making money than creating libraries.” (Symonette, M. 1993, p. 1) Further, she placed the blame “… on us a society … it is a bad reflection on our society not to have a very good library.”

The Free National Movement government elected in August 1992 and again in March 1997 made significant efforts to improve library services. One anecdote was that the Prime Minister and his friend the Senator Dr. Ronald Knowles went on a cruise together through the Caribbean. Apparently, the Prime Minster was impressed by the public libraries existing in many of the smaller Caribbean islands they visited; island-states that were not nearly as wealthy as the Bahamas. And so he wondered, why do we not have as well developed libraries in my country?
In mid-1998 the Minister of Education, the Senator Dame Ivy Dumont, announced that the first steps by her government to improving library services would include not only building three new public libraries but also separating the administration of public and school libraries within the library section of her Ministry.

At this juncture, the government had realized that a national library would be an extremely expensive venture, hence a decision was taken to concentrate on enhancing public library services. As a result, the long-range plan includes rewriting library legislation and establishing a national public library system. Such a national system would encompass all public libraries in the country, encourage resource sharing, centralize procedures and processes and implement a career path for all personnel working in libraries. The “Library Career Path” received approval in March 2000 and will be put in place later this year. (Miller, S., p. 5).

A significant step to improve access to public libraries was taken in August 1998 with the opening of the Kemp Road Community Library. Located in the Uriah McPhee Primary School compound, in one of the more impoverished areas of Nassau, the Kemp Road Community Library has been a focal point to re-kindle community spirit. It was at the opening of this library that the Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham announced that “…We have placed this library in this location to empower members of this community to give them the information that can transform their lives.” He also announced the government’s intention that “…special attention would be paid to the country’s library system this academic year” (Hall, August 1998, p. 1A, 3A) and that there was a “nation-wide plan to electronically link all public libraries and information centres.” In addition, three other “neighbourhood” libraries were built in 1998/1999, all located in communities undergoing rapid urbanization. The new public libraries have joined new local post offices, police stations, and community health clinics in the Elizabeth Estates, East Street South and Flamingo Gardens communities of New Providence Island. The new community centres have shifted some of the stress on centralized services to local resources. An important impact of these community-based libraries will be to strengthen identification with their patron’s neighbourhood and foster community spirit.

Outside of New Providence, several communities in the “Out” or Family Islands have re-established or founded new libraries, often depending on private donations and community fund-raising efforts for financing and relying on volunteers or non-professional assistance for staffing. On the island of Eleuthera, new libraries have been built in Gregory Town and Tarpum Bay. Older libraries have been renovated or have been re-born in new premises,
as we have seen in Governor’s Harbour, Eleuthera and Matthew Town, Inagua. The Long Islander’s Association of New Providence raised funds to build a library and museum in the Central Long Island settlement of Buckley’s, and in May 2000, turned the facility over the Ministry of Education to operate.  (Tex presents, p. 16).  On Cat Island in 1996, the Organization of American States (OAS) provided funding for the Ministry of Education to build a library and resource center in the settlement of Knowles. And, for many years, volunteers from the Women’s Garden Club of Exuma have operated the public library in George Town, Exuma.

School and Academic Libraries in The Bahamas

In post-Independence Bahamas, the new government placed education at the top of its agenda. Expanding and improving the public school system throughout the islands as well as providing opportunities for higher education both at home and abroad were top priorities. At the time it was thought that to fund separate public and school libraries would be expensive and would involve a duplication of effort, resources and personnel. In Nassau, the larger secondary schools had libraries, however the quality was quite uneven between schools. By 1977, only one school had a budget for its library (Boultbee, 1978, p. 154), while most schools relied on book fairs and donations to stock their shelves.

The education system in the 1980s and 1990s suffered from overcrowding, lack of money for essentials and low salaries for teachers. (Craton and Saunders, p. 413) The Government did not see fit to provide much funding for less fancy resources like books, but appeared to concentrate efforts on funding high profile projects such as the College of the Bahamas, computer technology and a few new buildings. In general, school libraries suffered (and continue to suffer) from a shortage of trained teacher-librarians, a lack of space, and lack of funds to maintain and develop collections. On a more positive note, since the 1980s, all newly constructed schools have made provision for a library facility.

School and public libraries have been under the administration of Miss Nellie Brennen since 1973 when she became Librarian at the Ministry of Education. She was well qualified for this role having commenced her career as a classroom teacher. She made the career change from teacher to librarian after she became responsible for a school library, an experience she enjoyed so much that she pursued a post-graduate diploma in teacher-librarianship at the University College of the University of London in England. Over time her responsibilities have evolved; she is now responsible for the National Library and Information Service and liaison with public libraries throughout the islands of the Bahamas. The school library service is under the supervision of professional librarian, Dr. Curlean Fernander.

From its beginnings in 1974, the College of the Bahamas (COB) has taken the provision of library services seriously, in part because the institution cannot achieve accreditation without an acceptable library. Collections of materials to support the academic program offerings, a special collection of Bahamian materials and resources on West Indian and African history form the COB’s library holdings. In the absence of a national institution charged with collecting the Bahamian published heritage, the library of the College of the Bahamas and the Department of Archives have worked together to fill this vital national role.

One of the first professional librarians hired by the College was Mr. Paul Boultbee, a Canadian. During his tenure at the College between 1974 and 1981, Mr. Boultbee made a significant contribution to the development of libraries in the Bahamas. He served as Acting Head and Head Librarian of the College, established the Bahamian Special Collection and implemented the library technician programme. In addition, he researched and wrote about Bahamian library history, and as president of the Bahamas School Library Association, organized their first conference. His bibliographies on the Bahamas, which are an important contribution to Bahamian librarianship, were published by the College of the Bahamas in 1981 and Clio Press in 1989.
As the College added new programmes and courses, the library has kept pace, both in physical size and collection size. In 1984, the World Bank granted funds to allow the library to more than double in physical size. In addition, in 1985, with considerable financial assistance from Syntex Chemicals and the Rotary Club, the library added an extensive collection of journals on microfilm and a collection of Caribbean-related dissertations to its holdings. The collection now stands at over 60,000 volumes in all formats – print, microforms, videos, and CD-ROMs. Witnesses to many of these changes were Mrs. Vanrea Thomas-Rolle, who was Chief Librarian until 1990, and Miss Willamae Johnson, who has been with the College since 1982 and Director of Libraries and Instructional Media Services since 1990. Miss Johnson has served as President of the Bahamas Library Association and ACURIL. She has worked tirelessly to promote the profession in the Bahamas, by teaching in the College’s Associate Degree in Librarianship programme, writing for publication and speaking at conferences and workshops.

Today the College of the Bahamas boasts 4 libraries: the main branch at Oakes Field Campus, the Hilda Bowen Library at the Grosvenor Close Campus in downtown Nassau (serving the Nursing and Health Sciences Division), the Northern Campus Library in Freeport, Grand Bahama and the Exuma Resource Center in Georgetown, Exuma.

Education for Librarianship

The need for continuing programmes to train library workers was mentioned in all the reports by library consultants in the 1970s. The earliest examples of library training were those workshops and seminars offered by Mr. Emmett Johnson, the first librarian hired by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education continues to offer workshops and seminars for teacher-librarians and public library workers to this day.

In the early 1970s, a certificate programme for library workers was offered at the C.R. Walker Technical College by the librarian Mrs. Kornelia Teelucksingh. In 1974, UNESCO consultant Mrs. Stella Merriman, a Guyanese, offered a one-week seminar for library workers. This seminar was the first formal exposure to library training that many Bahamian public library workers received. In fact, the manuals that Mrs. Merriman developed for the seminar are still in use today.

In an attempt to provide more training opportunities for library workers, in 1976 the College of the Bahamas implemented a library technician programme, similar to those offered in Ontario community colleges, leading to a certificate in Library Science. As the need for more formal and advanced library education was recognized, Mrs. Vanrea Thomas-Rolle established the Associate of Arts degree programme in Library and Information Science in 1982. The programme provided an avenue for certification primarily for library workers employed at the Ministry of Education as well as other interested people. The Associate degree and certificate programmes have proven to be relatively successful as over 30 people have completed the programmes and the majority still works in libraries.

In addition, there have been workshops and seminars offered to teacher-librarians throughout the years. In 1979, the United States Embassy sponsored a three-day seminar on library skills at the Learning Resources Unit that was attended by over 40 interested people. Bahamian librarians were selected to tour the United States under the USIA International Visitor Programme in 1974, 1983, 1985 and 1993.

One great supporter of school libraries and teacher-librarian education in the Bahamas has been Ms. Dianna Thompson. A trained elementary school teacher, Ms. Thompson was teacher-librarian at four primary schools in Nassau. During the 1980s she conducted in-service workshops on library service, lectured for the Ministry of Education’s Summer Workshop programme and was co-tutor for the Canadian-based Organization for Cooperation in Overseas Development (OCOD) workshops on
school librarianship that were held in the Bahamas.

Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Education in offering in-service training workshops, government scholarships for library education and the existence of an associate degree programme in library science at the College of the Bahamas since 1982; librarianship is not a popular career choice among young people. As N. Brennen (1984) points out, “... public libraries are most visible to the general public, the negative image projected by sub-par facilities must adversely affect recruitment.”

B. Walker suggests that in the Bahamas the profession suffers from lack of opportunities for advancement, high levels of frustration due to poorly funded facilities and an ill-defined job role. A further problem is that the profession is considered to be one of low status, it is poorly paid, there are few avenues for promotion and no incentives for professional development, resulting in a “career that is going nowhere.” (Walker, p. 8.) Yet another deterrent is the fact that public library personnel are hired by a library board, not the government, therefore there would be no pension scheme or gratuity payable to employees upon retirement.

**Conclusion**

There have been libraries in the Bahamas for more than 150 years, beginning with the Nassau Public Library’s founding in 1837. In the mid 1800s, four communities outside of Nassau petitioned the House of Assembly for libraries and reading rooms. With the expansion of the Colonial administration early in the 20th century, small community libraries were established in more than 36 settlements throughout the Bahama Islands. Owing to many factors ranging from population shifts, neglect, lack of funds or lack of staff, by the 1960s many of these libraries were no longer in operation.

One wonders why a country like the Bahamas does not have a stronger, better developed library system. The most obvious problems cited have been outdated legislation, insufficient funding for libraries and lack of trained personnel. But are these insurmountable problems? There have been several attempts at drafting new library legislation although due to shifting political priorities modern legislation has never been passed by Parliament. Public libraries, particularly in the islands, have survived because meager government grants have always been supplemented by fundraising or community efforts.

Perhaps it boils down to the fact that the public has never felt the need for a library for self-improvement? Recent economic times have been such that lack of competition in commerce made the population apathetic about education.

On the other hand, is it a lack of leadership within the profession? The College of the Bahamas has offered courses in library science for the past 20 years and the Ministry of Education offers scholarships to Bahamian students interested in pursuing higher education in librarianship, the numbers of professional librarians remains small. Without a strong advocate for libraries, politicians were content to let things be. No-one made much noise when budgets were cut. Belts were tightened and things limped along.

Fortunately, for Bahamians, there appears to have been some movement to solving some of the problems. In New Providence over the past five years, four new libraries have been built in communities where they are needed, and of late, many Family Island communities have followed suit. The Ministry of Education has announced its plans to link all libraries in a electronic network to facilitate resource sharing and the exchange of information. In this “information age”, more young Bahamian men and women are considering librarianship as a career option. Moreover, in the Speech from the Throne on March 29, 2000, the Government has stated its intention to update the 153-year-old legislation. Perhaps, at last, all elements will be in place: modern legislation, adequate funding, professionally trained library staff and a well-compensated career structure. The 21st century looks bright for Bahamian public libraries.
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The Commonwealth of the Bahamas

Courtesy of the Department of Lands and Surveys.
The publication of "Bahamian Public Libraries: An Overview", will be the first in a proposed series of Bahamas Library Publications.

This monograph provides an overview of the developments in public library service in the Bahamian archipelago, from the establishment of the Nassau Public Library in 1837 to the Long Island Public Library and Museum in May 2000.

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