

## History of the Liberty County Libraries

According to available records, the first public library in Liberty County was opened in 1973 in a portion of a small building that also included a beauty parlor on the southwest corner of Main and North Center Streets in Bristol. At that time the population of Bristol was around 600 and the library was part of the recently formed Northwest Regional Library System, which was created under a federal Library Service Construction Act grant and headquartered in Bay County. Mattie Lou Florence served as the librarian at the Bristol library until 1985. Darlene Severence (see photo below) took over from Ms. Florence that year, serving as Liberty County Librarian until 1992. During this time period there was bookmobile service to Liberty County as well as book drops at the Hosford Heath Department, the Telogia Post Office, and the Sumatra Polling House.



**First Location of the Bristol Library**



**Darlene Severence, Liberty County Librarian from 1985 to 1992.**

In 1985 the library was moved to a former riding stable located on Michaux Road near Myers Ann Street in Bristol. A popular and more versatile location, the riding stable featured a large covered outdoor area that was used to stage library events such as book sales and summer reading activities. However, the property was prone to flooding so books and other materials were shelved well above the floor. Additionally, the building could only accommodate a small collection. The 1980s and 1990s saw more and more advances in electronic resources and, along with it, greater demand for them in libraries. Liberty County was no exception, so the facility was further marginalized due to its limited capacity to facilitate modern electronics and telecommunications equipment.



**Construction on the Harrell Memorial Public Library which opened to the public in 1992.**

While it was clear that a new library was needed in Bristol, it was equally clear that Liberty County, the most sparsely populated county in Florida, had few resources with which to do so. Enter Francis Maxwell Harrell. Max Harrell was born on November 27, 1920 and raised in Bristol. After a successful career in business, he and his wife Evelyn returned to Liberty County and began engaging in a number of philanthropic projects, including the construction of a new library facility at 12818 Northwest County Road 12. Along with the Northwest Regional Library System, Mr. Harrell successfully applied for a matching funds grant for a new library facility. The design chosen was based on the blueprints of the Madison County (Florida) Library. Construction began in 1991 and, on June 20, 1992, the library was dedicated in a ceremony at which the Harrells were present. Mr. Harrell spoke about his memories of growing up in Liberty County, never forgetting where his roots were and wanting to give something back to the place that meant so much to him and his wife.



Darlene Severence retired in 2003 and Fonda Tanner took over as Liberty County Librarian. Evelyn Harrell passed away in 2005, and Maxwell followed in 2010. Included with their many contributions benefiting the people of Liberty County are the words they had inscribed in stone over the entrance to the library that bears their name, "Wisdom Begins with Learning."

The people in Hosford (12 miles east of Bristol) desired their own library branch and began their dream in 1998. Known as the Hosford Resource Center, it was located on leased land next to the Hosford Elementary School. Working with limited funds, the county purchased a used, singlewide mobile home and packed it with as many books, equipment, and other resources it could hold. Library assistant Patricia Miller was in charge of the center.

In 2005 Liberty County received a donation in the form of a building. A former convenience store on State Road 20 was offered to the county by Jimmy Weaver, a one time resident of Liberty County who wanted his parents, James W. "Mutt" and Virginia Weaver to have a memorial within the community. He stipulated that his unoccupied 2400 square foot building and the land it was on could remain in county hands as long it was a library. On June 8, 2007, the building was dedicated to the parents of Jimmy Weaver as the Jimmy Weaver Memorial Library. Day to day operation was entrusted to assistant library manager Pam McDaniel, assisted by library assistant and retired Liberty County educator Edith King. The library soon became a well-used and valued part of the Hosford community.

In 2015, the Jimmy Weaver Memorial Library received a grant to upgrade the energy efficiency of the building. Improvements included a new HVAC system and vent work, an on-demand hot water system, thermal glass, and the first LED lighting to be fitted to a public building in Liberty County.

Submitted by: Gerard Giordano, previous Liberty County Librarian