

THE BETHESDA CIRCULATING LIBRARY SOCIETY by Louise Pettus

Bethesda Presbyterian Church, located about 8 miles southwest of Rock Hill on S. C. 322, has the oldest church building in York County, dating back to 1822.

A dozen years before the construction of the Bethesda meetinghouse, the Bethesda Circulating Library Society was organized along the lines of the pre-Revolutionary circulating library established by Ben Franklin in Philadelphia. Penn. Philadelphia was America's most cosmopolitan city (chiefly because Franklin made it so). Bethesda was completely rural, not even a crossroads village. The only town in York County in 1810 was Yorkville and it had probably no more than 20 houses. This alone makes a circulating library most unusual for the time and place.

The constitution of the Bethesda Circulating Library stated that their object was "...to promote and facilitate the acquisition of great advantages resulting both to individuals and to the community at large, from a general diffusion of divine and natural knowledge."

The membership was made up of 50 men (no women and children were listed) from all over York District. Subscriber's surnames represented were Black, Simpson, Walker, Sadler, Givans, Love, Starr, Hanna, Moore, Hope, Davidson, Rainey, Martin, Grier, Cooper, Daugherty, Aiken, Wallace, Clendennan, Ross, Anderson, Douglass, Robertson, Mitchel, Miller, Crockett, Beattie, Watson, Roberson, Williamson Sandifer, Davis, Powell and Ardrey.

The money needed to establish the library was acquired by charging an initiation fee and an annual installment payment. The books were purchased in Philadelphia, Pa. and in Charleston, S.C. Quarterly, the men met to exchange the books which were bundled in lots of from one to four.

Since there were 50 members and 50 lots, over time, each man had access to all the library's holdings (or would have if the society, which disbanded by mutual consent in 1816, had lasted longer). A list of the books shows that they were mostly histories, religious and philosophical books. There was a scattering of books of essays and travel books. The Works of Benjamin Franklin and David Ramsay's History of South Carolina were probably among the most popular.

A *Yorkville Enquirer* correspondent who signed himself "Juvenis," wrote in 1860 about the men of the Bethesda Circulating Library Society of a half century before that they had read uplifting literature of

substance. He applauded the concept of the circulating library and thought it worthy of imitation by villages, churches and communities.

Juvenis bemoaned the fact (in his view) that the "modern passion" was for "the sickly, trashy nauseating stuff of which so many novels are made." He was especially appalled to observe people racing after the "wishy-washy, namby-pamby, demoralizing matter that floats through so many of the periodicals of the present age."

Juvenis' viewpoint was probably too harsh. At the time of his writing Yorkville had two academies and the Yorkville Lyceum. The Lyceum, underwritten by Yorkville's merchant and professional class, sponsored visiting lecturers and concert artists. It also subscribed to New York, Philadelphia, Washington and London newspapers and magazines.

In one week in 1860, Yorkville, the "Athens of the Upcountry," could boast of having two lectures on astronomy by Maj..P. R. Stevens of Charleston (" a lucid and highly satisfactory lecture on the Ptolemaic and Copernican theories"), Bailey's Varieties (comic and sentimental songs, music and dancing by the "genteel and clever" 11-member Bailey family), a parade of the Jasper Light Infantry with the cadets from the Kings Mountain Military Academy and a "Streamers of Light" show displaying the aurora borealis.

Lectures and concerts were generally held in the auditorium of the Yorkville Female Collegiate Institute at the site now occupied by the McCelvey Center in York. The college, the military academy and the Lyceum all suspended activities when the Civil War broke out. Concerts, lectures and public libraries had to wait until the tumult of the Reconstruction Era subsided.