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Libraries Meeting Boomer Needs for over 70 Years

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- 👤 **Unusual Careers**
- 👤 **Food & Facts**
- 👤 **Ageism**

Then and now

Libraries strive to meet the needs of Boomers



The Dunbar Library



Janet Jordan



Mark Campbell

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**

When Janet R. Jordan, 73, was growing up in Athens, and living on the top end of Magnolia Street, she and her friends would walk a little over a mile to the Dunbar Branch of the Athens Regional Library System at the historic Reese Street School, which then housed Athens High and Industrial School. There, at the only library for African Americans in town, patrons would be allowed to check out up to 10 books, join reading clubs and take part in library celebrations.

Before then, Jordan, a lifelong Athenian, says she either bought or borrowed books. The public library at Dunbar opened a whole new world to her and other Black residents of Athens—albeit not as equal as the world that was available for white residents at other libraries in the region. “My family has always read,” says Jordan, who retired from BellSouth in 2003. “Although it was limited, it was great to have access to more books and a different variety of books.” In 1970, the Dunbar branch was consolidated with the main library, then on Dougherty Street.

For Jordan and many other baby boomers, the public library became an important place during their childhood and adolescence where they developed their lifelong love of reading.

The library has always been a touchstone for retiree Mark Campbell, who moved to Athens about two years ago. Growing up, his family moved around frequently because his father was in the military, but one constant was always the public library and the goal of getting a library card.

“In any town we moved to we couldn’t wait to get to the library and get a library card—it was a goal of ours,” Campbell says. “It was a source of information and pleasure. We knew that we’d find books there that were exciting, fun, and informative. If your teacher asked you to write a story or do some research, you headed to the library.”

Throughout his life, “whether it was Fairfield, Cedar Falls or Des Moines,” Campbell says he always stopped at the library within the first month of arriving. He even shelved books for a time at the Des Moines Public Library after he retired. He speaks reverently of a rare collection of violins from the Holocaust that were on display at the Nashville Public Library and enjoyed tremendously a recent book talk by Michael Thurmond at the Athens Library.

Kimberly Davis is a fourth-generation Athenian who has been a writer and editor for 25 years.

But Campbell, like other older adults, doesn't just enjoy what the library has to offer, he also has served the community through volunteering for the library. Once a week, while living in Nashville, he read books to the blind on a live broadcast. He now serves on the Athens-Clarke County Friends of the Library board.

Lifelong engagement with the library

As of 2022, there were about 68.6 million people belonging to the baby boom generation in the United States. Those born between 1946 and 1964 currently make up roughly 21 percent of the population. Often characterized as more highly educated, tech-savvy and financially secure than any previous generation, boomers, with gains in longevity, have had profound implications for public institutions — including libraries. With the first wave of baby boomers reaching 65 in 2011, as early as 2006 researchers began to consider the impact that older adults would have on public libraries. With their high expectations for quality products, programs, and services, it became clear that baby boomers will influence the public library system for years to come.

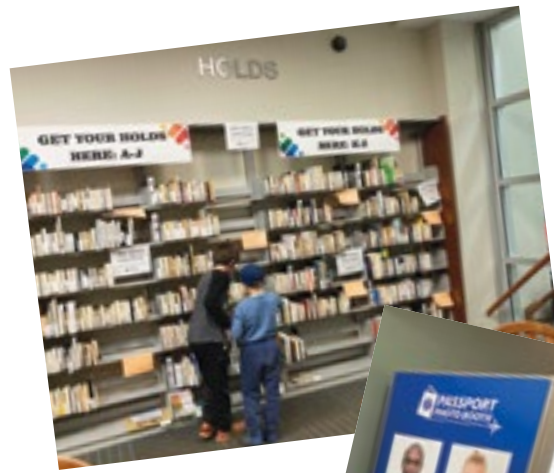
According to Georgia's State Librarian Julie Walker, who is also vice chancellor for libraries and archives in the University System of Georgia, shaping the system involves library staff learning and understanding this demographic and implementing the services and programs that would engage them the most. From a creative space with a recording studio and a 3-D printer at the just-opened Oconee County Library at Wire Park in Watkinsville, to the Heritage Room for genealogical research at Athens-Clarke County Library, Walker says, "Libraries are really branching out."

She says one of the most important services Georgia public libraries offer is computer classes and internet access so that people can participate in the digital world. It's about a commitment to lifelong learning and building community, which are highly valued by older adults who are looking for meaningful experiences and activities in retirement.

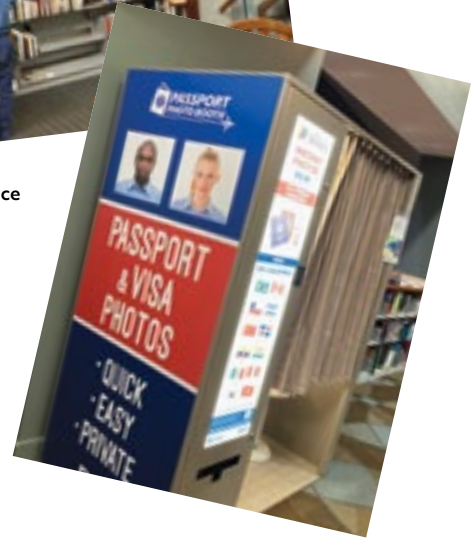
"Obviously the baby boomers are a large group at this point in time and libraries are really paying attention to that," Walker says. "There are just endless opportunities for people of that generation."

One person who takes advantage of those opportunities is Patricia McAlexander, a novelist who in 2009 retired from the University of Georgia, and now in her second year on the board of the Friends. Born in Johnstown, New York, where she recalls Saturday mornings spent trekking through the snow to story time at the town's historic public library, McAlexander says she joined the board because she uses the library and thinks it's wonderful.

"It a welcoming place and offers so much," McAlexander says. "It has a good supply of books, and they're so helpful with other things" such as passports and interlibrary loans.



21st century library service in Athens



Pat McAlexander and her childhood library



Fond memories of the library growing up? Share them in the comments section online.

From bake pans to 3-D printers, Oconee Library tries to meet a variety of needs.



The services, beyond just books, that public libraries offer are a huge draw, and the fact that many of these services began in response to the baby-boomer segment of the population means other folks can enjoy them, too. Older and younger generations are reaping the benefits of the growth of access and services that began in the early fifties.

As Susan Winstead grew as a member of Generation X, so too did her use of public libraries. Winstead takes classes at the library and loves listening to audiobooks through the Libby app. “It takes me back to when people would read stories to you,” she says. Raised in Cobb County, Winstead retired as a schoolteacher in Oconee County and moved to Athens in 2019. She sees libraries as an extension of school—a place to learn and grow.

When her son and daughter were young, she took them to every library program. From puppet shows, to programs where they could hold snakes and reptiles, her children got to experience so much through the library as part of their education. “I always looked at the two institutions, school and the library, as what keeps society educated, moving and growing,” says Winstead. “That was where you went to learn and grow.”

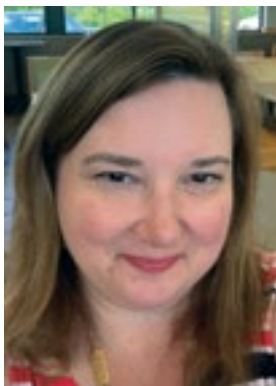
Another member of Gen X, Julie Peters of Bogart experienced that type of growth, too. She says her love of public libraries began when she was a child living in the small town of Ringgold. The library was a place where she gained access to ideas, people, and cultures that she never would have had access to otherwise. “When I grew up, we didn’t have a ton of money—we definitely didn’t have a ton of money to spend on books,” she says. “I was a young, voracious reader, so libraries were where I went to find stories that I enjoyed.”

Peters, who works with foster children, has also taught foster care and CPR classes at the public library, and attended civic events. “The community can come together in a library,” Peters says. “It’s so important.”

The Athens Regional Library became a community hub for Jordan, too, particularly after her first retirement. While she once was barred from the main branch, she sees the public library now as a space for community engagement. Internet access, community meetings, special exhibits and lectures are all offerings that she didn’t have at Dunbar.

“When I was younger, the only thing you did do was check out books,” says Jordan, whose local chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority recently had an exhibit in the Heritage Room. “It’s a place now where you can have meetings, do civic work like voter registration, attend book signings—there are opportunities to do a lot more than just get books.” ■

More Online: Athens director addresses ALA and book ban controversies.



Julie Peters



Susan Winstead