

Fairhope Public Library 1908

Fairhope Public Library
10 North Summit Street

A beacon of lifelong learning for Fairhope citizens and visitors.

Marie Stevens Case Howland (1836-1921) was, according to Fairhope Founder Ernest Berry Gaston, "a woman of broad culture, an author of deserved reputation, a thinker and worker along reform lines, an accomplished linguist and a musician." Mrs. Howland's legacy continued to grow in Fairhope.

Howland's husband Edward Howland died in the socialist Topolobampo, Mexico colony in 1890. Three years later the colony collapsed, and Marie returned to the United States. Howland corresponded with and was invited to join the Fairhope Single Tax Colony by its secretary Ernest Berry Gaston, and she arrived in the spring of 1899.

A room in Marie Howland's home in "The Pines," on the southeast corner of Magnolia Avenue and Summit Street, became Fairhope's first library. Edward Howland's books, collected between 1860 and 1866 and numbering approximately 1,000, formed the nucleus of the Fairhope Public Library. Approximately 250 books from the original collection, including the catalog created in Topolobampo, are stored in the Fairhope Museum of History archive. The Fairhope Public Library in Howland's home was dedicated on April 18, 1900. Home-made ice cream was served on the parlor table to a roomful of guests, soon to be patrons.

Having had her fill of people reading in her living room, Mrs. Howland pleaded for a new library building. Joseph Fels, Fairhope's benefactor, put \$1,000 toward the new building. Mrs. Howland returned the west

part of her Fairhope Single Tax Corporation (FSTC) lease to the colony for use as the site for the new library building. The one-room library, the first such building constructed for library use in Alabama, was completed in 1908, just next door to "The Pines."

Mrs. Howland died in 1921, leaving the Howland Book Collection to the FSTC. Her memorial service was held in the library. Howland was ably assisted for years by Lydia J. Newcomb Comings, who was instrumental in establishing Baldwin County's first museum in 1922 within the walls of the Fairhope Public Library. Other influential librarians included Mary Heath Lee, the first librarian with formal library training and Bertha Mershon, wife of Dr. Clarence Leoma Mershon. Later librarians include artist and children's author Anna Braune, Betty Suddeth, and Tamara Dean, the latter two serving as director for more than 20 years.

Building History

The Fairhope Public Library, like much of Fairhope, was a Fairhope Single Tax Corporation (FSTC) institution. The original one room building with the fireplace on the northern wall remains. A front porch and central room were added in 1919 and the south wings were added in 1925, in time for the Fairhope Public Library its 25th anniversary and host the Alabama Library Association's annual meeting. In 1951 an addition was built on the east side of the library. A cinder block addition with meeting space, a kitchen, and bathrooms was added in 1974.

In 1964, the library's collection was transferred from FSTC to the City of Fairhope. In 1983, the library moved from this location to the city hall complex. In February 2007, the library opened in its current location at 501 Fairhope Avenue. The University of South Alabama

occupied the building for several decades. In 2022, the building's lease was returned by the City of Fairhope to FSTC.