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Georgia Library Spotlight - Mary Willis Library

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GLA SPOTLIGHT

Mary Willis Library

“This beautiful building is a work of art—a symphony in stone!” These words were spoken at the 1889 opening of the Mary Willis Library in Washington, Wilkes County. A wonderful example of High Victorian, Queen Anne architecture, the library was funded by Dr. Francis T. Willis in memory of his daughter, Mary Willis Jones, who passed away at the age of forty-four. The Mary Willis Library was established as the first free public library in the state of Georgia. An endowment created by Dr. Willis in 1894 continues to provide funding for the library today.

The Mary Willis Library was designed by architect Edmund G. Lind of Atlanta who also designed the Peabody Institute in Baltimore in 1875. The brick structure features a round corner turret, terra-cotta inserts with expressive faces on the chimneys, and decorative half-timbering in the gables. Inside, the library contains patterned brick fireplaces with terra-cotta inserts, antique furnishings, and, in the library’s reading room, tall stained glass windows crafted by Tiffany Studios memorializing Mary Willis. The library was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.

The initial collection of 300 books was selected by Dr. Willis and his half-brother Samuel Barnett. Samuel Barnett served as the first



president of the library’s board of trustees. Both brothers donated their personal books to the library’s collection. Today, the library’s special collection features these original resources as well as an extensive collection of history books, census and tax records, and genealogical histories from the local region, state of Georgia, and the Southeast. The library also possesses a collection of prints by naturalist William Bartram and books from the

personal collection of Richard Harwell, a librarian and prolific biographer of the life of Margaret Mitchell.

An annex designed for compatibility with the library’s architectural style was created by Kuhlke and Wade of Augusta and

built in 1977. Another addition/renovation designed by Edmund Maddox of Savannah was completed in 1991. In addition to expanded stack space, offices, a computer area, and a meeting room, the library now features a well-loved children’s library. A colorful mural depicting buildings of literary significance in the city of Washington adorns the walls. A theater, accessible from the children’s library, provides puppet shows for its young patrons.

Today, the library serves as headquarters for the Bartram Trail Regional System, which includes Wilkes, Taliaferro, and McDuffie counties. The bookmobile service supplements library access to this three-county area and has a circulation of over 5,000 books and other

materials. Other programming includes a summer reading program for young adults, traveling puppet shows, movie days, story time for over 1,000 children per week, and monthly

craft projects for senior citizens. Ms. Lillie Crowe currently serves as the sixth head librarian of the Mary Willis Library over its 125-year history.