

# All Ages Enjoy Mathews Memorial Library

by Catherine C. Brooks

**I**n July 2005, I received copies of my first book, *Walk with Me*. Two years later, the first in the series of “Catherine’s Tales,” *Didn’t Know We Were Poor*, became available for Market Days sales and signings. I’ve also been published in *Good Old Days* magazine and *Chesapeake Style*. Through it all, Mathews Memorial Library assisted me with obtaining information, and also welcomed me to do book sales and signings in the library lobby during Mathews Market Days each year.

Having used facilities at Mathews

Memorial Library to research my book publications, I have learned even more about what the library offers. In 2006, First Lady Laura Bush selected our library as one of six in the United States to receive a 2005 award for “the nation’s highest honor for libraries and museums.” I’d like others to know about the library’s achievements and what good leaders have accomplished in our small county. As an author and library patron, I’d also like to share how this library has helped get books to readers.

## History

After World War I, many public discussions took place concerning a proper memorial for those Mathews men who had lost their

**Catherine C. Brooks** ([maecallis@msn.com](mailto:maecallis@msn.com)) published her second book, *Didn’t Know We Were Poor*, the first in her series of “Catherine’s Tales,” in August 2007. Her first book, *Walk with Me*, about post offices nationally and why there were forty-four in Mathews County, Virginia, was published in 2005 and continues to sell.



Original library built in the 1930s and dedicated in 1935.

lives in the war. Once the decision was made to build a public library, fundraisers began. First one community and then another sponsored ice cream socials, art exhibits, oyster roasts, and other activities to aid the fund. By 1933, the building had been completed, and people began donating the first books. Then the August Storm brought devastation with hurricane winds and high tides that covered much of the county. The first librarian, Irene Brooks, along with her staff of one and volunteers, salvaged most of the water-soaked books, rebinding those that needed it. On August 1, 1935, the library officially opened.

By 1979, the library had outgrown its capacity to hold displays, available books, and equipment needed to satisfy public demand. Meanwhile, Farmers Bank of Mathews needed additional space. The bank purchased property and constructed a new building beyond Main Street. Once the bank relocated, the stately building left behind on Main Street offered an ideal place for Mathews Memorial Library. The county made the purchase. Time-consuming renovations converted the bank to a public library. Once the interior was completed, Mathews Memorial Library moved from Church Street to Main Street.

Technology and readers' needs continued to increase until by the late 1970s the library couldn't satisfy these demands without expansion. The twenty-first century would require not only more technology, but also more interaction among county citizens. The children's department also needed to expand. Plans were made, and both the Board of Trustees and the Friends of the Mathews Memorial Library took on added responsibility for a massive enlargement with an outside reading garden.

### **Friends of Mathews Memorial Library**

In the spring of 1982, fourteen women met for the purpose of organizing a support group for Mathews Memorial Library. The original group of volunteers, which had assisted with the library's upkeep and growth since the 1930s, had passed on or were unable to play an active role. However, the need had become greater than in previous years, demanding a proper organization. They

---

**The first librarian,  
Irene Brooks, along  
with her staff of one  
and volunteers,  
salvaged most of the  
water-soaked books....**

---

selected "Friends of the Mathews Memorial Library" as the name for the group. Once established, the organization grew. The statistics in February 2007 showed that the membership stood at 319, including 243 life members.

During the addition to the library, the Orrell Building supplied basic books from the main library for the public to use. Captain Robert W. Orrell had willed a sizable amount to the library upon his death in 1988. They used the money that was available from the estate immediately after his death to erect the multipurpose building behind the library from which the Friends operate. It houses a used bookstore and serves as an office and meeting place for the Friends officers and executive committee, all volunteers.

The income generated comes from individual donations, grants,

book sales, commemorative brick purchases, and dues. Over the past six years, the Friends have contributed over \$130,000 to the Memorial Library. In 2006, the Friends funded library programs and purchased books, audio books, computers, furnishings, and equipment totaling \$31,114. Members of the Friends contribute approximately 2,000 volunteer hours per year in carrying out the responsibilities and projects of the organization. It is a Friends volunteer who greets patrons at the checkout desk and helps those still learning to access their email.

The Friends established the "Buy-a-Brick Program" in 2001, entailing the construction of a Brick Commemorative Patio and Walk located between the Orrell Building and the library. Bricks that honor or memorialize clubs, individuals, and families are an integral part of the patio, and new names are constantly being added. The "Buy-a-Brick-Program" has generated funds both for the library and donations of books to others.

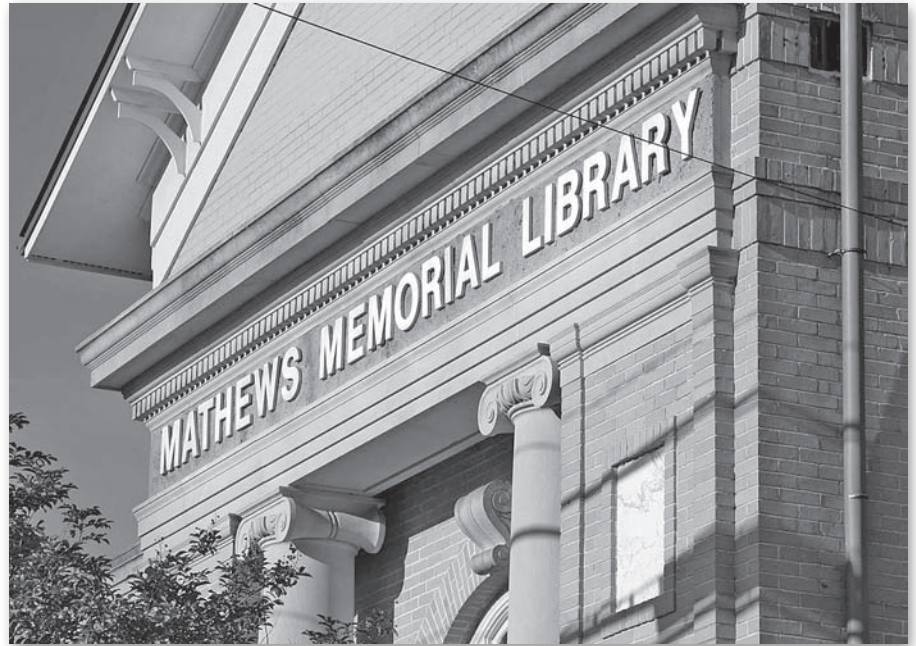
### **Enlarged and Renovated Building**

In August 2002, staff members opened the doors to the enlarged and renovated Mathews Memorial Library. Patrons entered a lobby unlike anything seen before in Mathews County. A spiral stairway curved to the second floor, enhancing the beauty of the tall ceiling. Matching carpet covered the lobby and steps, while upholstered chairs invited one to sit and read the daily paper lying on the side table. The copy machine sat in a secluded corner—convenient, but out of sight. One couldn't see the staff and volunteers' workspace until one walked left to enter the main library. Beyond the lobby, bookshelves sat in plain view. Overall, the appearance spoke of elegance.

Mathews Market Days takes place yearly on the first Friday and Saturday after Labor Day. With the enlarged and renovated building open, staff members give tours to readers and researchers. Beyond the well-organized shelves of fiction, nonfiction, reference books, magazines, videos, CDs, and DVDs, with computer stations and reading tables interspersed between them, one passes through opened doors to enter an area with glass showcases displaying artifacts or other collections, featured monthly—a small historical museum. To the left is the huge entrance to the John Warren Cooke Conference Center. With all the doors pushed into their pockets to open up the room, quilters set up displays for Market Days. Double glass doors lead to the handicapped entrance to the reading garden or the parking lot by way of the sidewalk. Straight ahead, a glass wall of windows contains a center door labeled “Youth Conference Room, in memory of Mae A. Hudgins.” This Youth Library, complete with books, computers, and appropriate seats, is also used for readings and other youth activities. Rosey Clark heads Youth Services, with volunteers assisting her.

On a regular day, the John Warren Cooke Conference Center remains closed with a solid standard door that one may enter for civic meetings of various organizations. Computer classes, classical music classes, and tea dances are a few of the many activities that take place in the conference center. It depends on the occasion as to whether the room has a set of worktables and chairs; rows of chairs with a podium for the speaker; or an opened space with, or without, tables or chairs on sides of the wall.

One can take either the spiral stairway or elevator to reach the Chesapeake Room, which holds Mathews County records dating back to the 1600s, when Mathews



*Sign above the entrance to the library today.*

was Kingston Parish of Gloucester County. On the 2002 renovation tour, the staff had only begun to place the data on microfilm; today, this continuous job is more up to date.

Marked by a plaque, the Herman Hollerith Archives takes up an area with a locked gate in the main library. Here are the Mathews County Historical Society records, relocated from the second floor of Tompkins Cottage to a more secure area. In earlier years, this room housed the bank's vault.

#### **Adult Educational Programs**

The library offers free computer classes by trained instructors in three tiers: Basic Computer Skills (three sessions); Intermediate Internet (four sessions); and Specialty Classes (two sessions). The Digital Camera Workshop (two sessions) teaches the new camera owner details on operation, how to shoot pictures, and how to transfer and edit the pictures.

The Adult Literacy Program, headed by Leigh Wilder, is a com-

munity gift of concern and sharing that can transform the lives of those it serves. The program is more than student's books and teacher's manuals. Since it is sensitive to students, volunteers, and the community alike, the program can win support and move the cause of literacy forward. Quoting from Mathews Memorial Library's brochure, "For every literacy student who earns a high school degree or a college diploma—for every student who holds a new job, or who can read a children's story or study the Bible—that program has opened a whole new world."

The program used by the library, under the sponsorship of the Mathews Community Foundation, has launched an adult literacy program aimed at providing assistance to adults in the community. It teaches basic reading skills to ensure that adults can read at a functional level. A skills assessment test is given to place the student at an appropriate learning level. Trained tutors work with students on an individual basis. Scheduling can be designed to meet individual



*Left, rock-and-roll teen program in the John Warren Cooke Conference Room.*

*Below, children's program about Native Americans.*

needs. Meanwhile, all information about program participants remains confidential.

### **Bringing the Library to You**

Any Mathews County resident who is homebound is eligible for "Bringing the Library to You." Patrons just call the library phone number, ask for Leigh Wilder, and tell her what they'd like. One may choose from books, books on tape or CD, and selections from the Music Library. All materials are available for the same loan periods that apply to in-person patrons.

Volunteers deliver and pick up material on a regular delivery cycle matching the loan period of the library. If one prefers, a person designated by the patron can pick up the materials from the library. A patron makes requests in advance so staff can check out the materials and have them packaged for fast pickup.

There is no charge for this program. Patrons are responsible for both borrowed materials and replacement costs for any items not returned to the library when requested.



### **"Lessons in Pleasure" and "Musical Emotions"**

Thomas Steel, a native of North England who's had a great interest in classical music since he was a young man, teaches two music appreciation classes. Steel moved to Mathews County in 1987 with his wife Jean in order to serve as pas-

tor for Peniel Evangelical Friends Church.

In "Lessons in Pleasure," Steel provides his students with knowledge of musical forms, techniques, and terms. He identifies the instruments of the orchestra through words and sound and discusses the powerful force of social and national influences on music cre-



*An adult program in the John Warren Cooke Conference Center.*

ation. Using recorded music, Steel takes students inside magnificent compositions by Beethoven, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, and more. The five sessions of "Lessons in Pleasure" are titled "What Is Classical Music?" "Music, Periods and Styles"; "Music, Tempo and Lightning Conductors"; "Musique Nationale"; and "Classical Music Goes to the Movies."

"Musical Emotions" investigates the emotions that music engenders in four sessions: "War and Peace," "Sadness and Happiness," "Fear and Joy," and "Tchaikovsky: The Man in His Music."

Both classes are limited to thirty persons.

### Tea Dances

Mathews County business establishments sponsor four tea dances each year in the John Warren Cooke Conference Center. Flyers invite the community to "Come and dance or sit and listen to your

old-time favorites!" The dances, with their live music, bring memories to the old and show the young the social life of another era.

### Children's Activities and Trips

Rosey Clark organizes children's trips to museums in Norfolk, Newport News, Hampton, and other places of interest. On other days, children listen to interesting readings, watch videos or DVDs, learn games played in other countries on local public playgrounds, and participate in hands-on learning experiences.

There are also bus trips for adults to the Library of Virginia in Richmond to see special exhibits, hear speakers, and tour homes. In December 2008, patrons will travel to see the exhibit "Working Out Her Destiny: Women's History in Virginia." In the afternoon, the group will tour an older home used by the Woman's Club since 1900.

### The Mathews Memorial Library and Mathews County Historical Society Merge Archives

When I began researching my first book, *Walk with Me*, for which I needed data only found in Mathews County Historical Society's files, I'd meet Reed Lawson at Tompkins Cottage, the historical building the society had restored, at a prearranged date and time. Lawson brought folders from the locked room on the second floor, and I'd hand-copy the information I needed. We worked approximately two hours a month. Though I had found historical facts about post offices nationally and had the names and dates of each of the forty-four post offices in Mathews County, I needed more. I wondered how long it'd take to glean it.

When the workers began enlarging the library, Lawson told me the Historical Society's records would be moved to the library's archives. I could have access to them any

day I wanted and make copies. I rejoiced at the good news. The records added valuable information, but I also needed to do many interviews when the articles didn't tell the full story. While I waited for the completion of the library, I spent time interviewing people who were retired at home or in nursing homes, as well as active older folk still living at home.

After the doors opened to the enlarged library, I spent several mornings and afternoons with Reed Lawson and Becky Barnhardt, until I had the facts that the book required. Other than to make my selections, I didn't handle the papers since Lawson or Barnhardt copied what I needed before it was returned to the secured area. A tiring task had become a pleasure.

In my interview with Becky Barnhardt, I asked if others had used the archives for book research. Barnhardt said that one had gathered some information, but no one else had spent the hours that I did in research at the library for the books they wrote. However, letters, telephone calls, and emails with requests for genealogy information, records of land transfers, and other statistics keep her busy. The Chesapeake Room contains books that pertain to other counties in Virginia, as well as Mathews County. On Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday, Barnhardt can usually be found inside the otherwise locked area searching records or in the Chesapeake Room. Requests require her to find information that doesn't always pertain to Mathews County, such as requests that concern the Commonwealth of Virginia or the Chesapeake Bay. The requests come from as far away as California, Washington State, Texas, and all the places in between.

One query asked about the fish, oyster, and crab industries. Another

correspondent, who knew Grandfather owned a sawmill, wanted to know the type of lumber he sawed from native trees. Questioners ask for information in order to write small booklets so that posterity will better understand what their ancestors did to live. The reasons for the research are as varied as the questions.

When I realized that *Walk with Me* didn't contain information as to how New Point Comfort received its name, I contacted Barnhardt. In a few days, she phoned to tell me she'd left what I needed at the checkout counter. One of the men in John Smith's expedition who had named Old Point Comfort in Norfolk, Virginia, had also named the site New Point Comfort. At that time, the site contained over a hundred acres and made a safe harbor.

I am presently writing a book about World War II for which I began research in spring 2008. Without the information from the Historical Society Archives and the Chesapeake Room scrapbooks, I'd not have the book that I'm planning to publish.

### **Library Helps Authors Reach Readers**

Our local newspaper, the Gloucester-Mathews *Gazette-Journal*, prints press releases with invitations to book signings in Mathews Memorial Library. These authors have either written about a phase of local history, used Mathews as the setting for a novel, or resided in Mathews County.

After *Walk with Me* was released in July 2005, I presented Mathews Memorial Library with a copy. Later, I asked permission to sell and sign books on the Saturday of Market Days. The director welcomed me and supplied a spot in the lobby with a table and chair. I

have been in the lobby of Mathews Memorial Library every Market Day Saturday since that time.

When an author from Williamsburg with whom I sell and sign books went to the Mathews County Archives in the Library of Virginia, the first thing she picked up was *Walk with Me*. I don't know who presented it, or who made the choice to include it in the archives. It pleases me. I spent most of three years researching and writing the book.

### **Mathews Memorial Library Rewarded**

In 2006, First Lady Laura Bush selected Mathews Memorial Library as one of six in the United States to receive the 2005 award for "the nation's highest honor for libraries and museums." When Mathews Memorial Library Director Bette Dillehay traveled to Washington DC to accept the award, Chong Deggs accompanied her. Deggs spoke about how the adult literacy programs had helped her get her GED and allowed her to move closer to her goal of obtaining a higher education. Laura Bush's secretary, Mary L. Chute, presented the awards and said the six winners of the awards were "centers of excellence that connect people to information and ideas—and to each other."

An interesting point in the survey of the libraries concerned the public funds required. Mathews Memorial Library operates on a budget of \$187,496, compared to the next-lowest award-winner's budget of \$510,000. The low operating cost is possible due to the work done by the Friends of the Mathews Memorial Library and volunteers, both of whom help make it successful. The director and board of trustees also receive grants to achieve their goals. **VI**