A Brief History of the Northampton Free Library
(updated to Oct 2020)

The Beginning: A Little Library is a Great Thing

In 1993, a group of local volunteers, headed by Dr. Richard Andrews as president, founded The Northampton Free Library. Their goal was to make library services more accessible to residents of upper Northampton County, an under-served, high-minority, low-income, high-illiteracy area on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. A bookmobile had served this area to the best of its ability, but its time was necessarily limited and its arrival during school hours excluded use by many schoolchildren and working residents. The long commute from towns in Northampton County to the central library located north in the town of Accomac was also impossible for many residents who had limited income and often lacked a means of transportation. And the old, ailing bookmobile was frequently out of service.

So the need for better library services seemed essential. Early board members were Andrews, Jose Dovis, Vinnie and Ed Faber, Paula Mills Hopper, Frances Latimer, Julie Parker, Samantha Pitts, Lenore Hart Poyer, David Poyer, Melanie Thibadeaux, and Elizabeth Warrick. The group formed a registered nonprofit corporation, known as The Northampton Free Library, and as an operating board begin providing services, including circulating books, reference materials, and computer access. This they did for seven years with no state or county funding. How? They relied completely on donated materials and mostly volunteer manning of “The Shack”, as the small clapboard building which housed the original NFL was mostly – though not always – affectionately called.

The patrons of this shoestring operation were varied, though many cardholders were retirees living on fixed incomes. Paula Mills was the first library staffer; her paid part-time hours were supplemented by others who volunteered pro bono during the week and on Saturdays. The little library became a source of information, enrichment, and recreation; a safe place for children to study; and an information resource for business and the community.

The Library Joins the ESPL System

In September of 2000, a vote of the ESPL Board, advised by then-director Robert Keeney, officially made the NFL the Northampton County branch of the Eastern Shore Public Library regional system, a significant testimonial to the volunteers’ endurance, growth, and service. It continued to provide the only library services in the County after the elderly bookmobile gasped its last breath, aside from another small town library in Cape Charles, at the southern end of the peninsula. At this point the NFL was providing roughly two thousand customers access to a basic in-house collection, access to the larger bi-county collection, nationwide interlibrary loan service, free internet access on two Gateway computers, free summer story hour programs for children, and other services. Also more reliable staffing, as the ESPL at this point chipped in to pay for a set number of paid staff hours. At this point the NFL volunteers became a support group rather
than a day to day operating board, and renamed themselves The Friends of the Northampton Free Library.

But there remained a problem yet to be solved: a cramped, inadequate, rented facility. Although by 2001 community financial support and volunteer involvement remained high, with success word about the library got around, and the small rented one-room building became even more inadequate. The clapboard shack, less than 900 square feet in size, had sagging plywood floors, no handicapped access, no work space for the librarian, no potable water, and no separate computer or study areas. Most worrisome, the landlords had signaled their intent to develop the property it sat on.

**The Library Gets a New Home**

After several meetings to debate the best course of action to ensure uninterrupted library service to the area, the NFL Friends mobilized again, led this time by second Friends president Lenore Hart Poyer. Relinquishing daily operations to the regional library system meant they now had time to pursue bigger, long-term goals. Their new objective: to raise the funds to construct a 3000+ square-foot library building, also in Nassawadox. The new building was planned to support many more benefits than the original location could provide, including access for wheelchair-bound residents, a dedicated children's collection and story area, a multiple-station computer area, study carrels for students, a separate, dedicated work space for library staff, handicapped-accessible male and female restrooms, potable water from a deep well, an external fireproof book drop, a dedicated literacy/adult Easy Reading collection, and a small community meeting room.

In March of 2002 the Friends set their fund-raising plan into motion, spearheaded by then-vice president David Poyer as lead fundraiser. They’d expected to have to purchase a suitable plot of land, but in July of 2002 The Nature Conservancy, a major landholder on the Shore, generously donated a beautifully-landscaped double lot on Bayside Drive in residential downtown Nassawadox. The location was ideal; just off-highway in an accessible and convenient location a quarter mile from the old rented building.

The Friends board next spent almost two years in lobbying town, county, state, and national representatives in search of government funding. Then-Senator Nick Rerras put in a request for non-state funds, and a budget request was also made in the State House by Rep. Bob Bloxom. Unfortunately, those pots were empty. No state support was forthcoming. The Friends next tested public support by asking for cash and pledges from current library cardholders, combining the sum raised with funds the Friends raised over about a four year period from town car-tag sales, used book sales, and bake sales. The first result was over $20,000 in cash – not pledges. An impressive amount, considering so many donors were far from wealthy! The third step was to ask the Nassawadox town council to match that amount. This the Council and Mayor unanimously voted to do. Exmore, Belle Haven, and Eastville then followed suit, pledging lesser amounts sized roughly according to their proximity to the service location and their population size.
Then the major public campaign began. The Friends used local newspapers and radio time to spread the word, as well as face-to-face meetings with local businesses and philanthropic individuals to raise additional funds, including naming rights for various interior spaces of the planned library. An auction organized by Jenny Floyd, who was to become the next Friends president, featured many works donated by local artists, and also raised a considerable sum. Maureen Lawrence conducted a separate fundraising effort, and acted as treasurer. Over the years numerous other board members, too many to list here, but still contributing greatly, also participated in the fundraising. A set of preliminary color sketches were done pro bono by architect Robert Trower, who was later hired for the final project. Using these and other graphics and charts illustrating the need for and the benefits to be realized by a new library, the NFL Friends gave a presentation to the Boards of Supervisors of both Northampton and Accomack counties. They asked the Supervisors for their commitment to monetary support for the project. Both counties responded, completing the funds required on hand in order to start construction.

By then the Friends had raised over $420,000 as well as funding from 15 grant applications written by David Poyer. All donors who contributed $1000 or more are commemorated with engraved bricks in the lobby, in categories beginning with the major donors, to the right of the main entrance. GENEROUS MAJOR BENEFAC TORS were Northampton and Accomack counties, the Town of Nassawadox, the Morgan Foundation, the Norfolk Foundation, VESEEHC, and a gift in memory of Harriet M. Richards. MAJOR BENEFAC TORS were The Exmore Rotary Club, The Hillsdale Fund of North Carolina, George N. McMath, the Nature Conservancy, the Richards Family, Barbara Nordstrom Sturgis, Richard and Joie Tankard, and John R. "Bobby" Walker. BENEFAC TORS were the Town of Eastville, the Gannett Foundation, SunTrust Bank, David and Suzanne Tankard, and United Way of Eastville. Grants were also received from other sources, including an Enterprise Community Grant and The Tidewater Jewish Foundation. Many other people and entities contributed lesser but still significant amounts.

The architect completed a final design of the building, and construction began in late Summer of 2004. Carol Vincent, then director of the ESPL, also estimated $50,000 would be needed to furnish and equip the facility with such items as shelving, circulation desk, office equipment, computer equipment, chairs, and tables. David wrote one more funding appeal, this time for federal monies from the FDA, and successfully secured that grant. A formal ribbon-cutting for the newly-completed Northampton Free Library was held in 2006, on February 11th. Then a sizeable crowd entered the brand-new library for the first time, to attend a festive grand-opening reception.

**The Northampton Free Library Today**

At the library’s establishment in 1992 and up until 2000, the NFL Friends had either supplied volunteer labor or had underwritten 100% of the library’s very small budget – from donations, town tag sales, book sales, and other fund-raising events. The picture today is quite different: the NFL’s operating expenses, including salaries, is now paid by the Commonwealth via the parent Eastern Shore Public Library regional system. The Friends are still active, though, providing
support and funds for special programs and enhanced materials not covered by our modest regional library budget.

As of 2020, the NFL in one form or another has provided basic library services for nearly thirty years now, to the elderly, preschoolers, disadvantaged citizens; to booklovers and to students who come to the library after school. Our shelves now hold about 15,000 catalogued volumes. Our trained professional staff and active volunteers feel privileged to have been able to make a community’s dream come true. We see what that dream means every time a child comes through the door, and finds a safe and quiet place to read or study. We see it when a literacy class uses our meeting room, or children laugh out loud during a story hour program. When older residents thank us for providing the books for recreational reading that make their day brighter. And when local business professionals pick up interlibrary loans or go online to do research or look for new jobs. And today the NFL Friends, headed by local artist and business-owner Jenny Floyd, meet monthly to discuss current needs and how we can best supplement and enhance basic library services.

A few years ago a board member corresponded with a friend's daughter who was away studying in China. He asked her to look into the records of an American who had worked in Beijing in the 19th century, to help with a book he was writing. She emailed back: "I’ve asked all my friends here, and their families . . . I’m told the Chinese government keeps all the archives restricted. There aren’t even any public libraries . . . The newspaper editor says history is a secret and it belongs to the government."

America has never worked that way. Public and subscription libraries have historically supported every citizen’s access to unfiltered information. They’re one of the pillars of democracy, as our Founding Fathers recognized. Benjamin Franklin established our first public library in 1731. James Madison wrote, "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: and a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which Knowledge gives." John Adams wrote, "I must judge for myself, but how can I judge, how can any man judge, unless his mind has been opened and enlarged by reading."

But libraries, like liberty itself, must be fought for anew with each generation. The NFL Friends recognize this fact better than many. A vigorous library system not only helps us educate ourselves, it attracts new families and new businesses. It is one of the cornerstones of a vital and thriving community. So the NFL Friends know their work is not done. Our shelves still have empty spaces. The children who use the library all summer long can quickly exhaust our supply of new children's and young adult books. Technology changes rapidly, and our computers often need updating. The high demand by patrons who rely on them to stay digitally connected means we need more stations.

That was why the next project for the Friends was to establish the NFL Book Endowment Fund, to provide money to purchase new books in perpetuity. This $100,000-plus investment account came from thousand-dollar donations from generous local businesses and individuals, whose names are posted on a large plaque to the left of the library’s front door. The interest on this account, which is managed by the Eastern Shore Foundation, ensures the library will have the money to add new books to the collection every year, whatever the official funding levels.
Guaranteed money for new book purchases . . . and it is still open for new contributions!

But will the library be large enough to serve its clientele in the future? That’s the question the Friends have been asking themselves the last few years, given its current heavy usage. (Apparently no one has told our patrons that libraries are obsolete.) The architect planned the building so it could be expanded on at least two sides. A study by Dr. John Moorman in 2003 calculated that an expansion in the 2,500 to 3,500 square foot range would provide needed space for collections, public programming, and computer access.

The NFL has the space to expand on its current lot. The architectural plans already include a Phase II of two push-outs to the east and to the north. The first part of Phase II would be an expansion of the Children's Stack Area by means of an addition to the east. This addition is envisioned to mirror the adjacent east Adult Stack expansion area that was built with the original building. The plans for that area can simply be replicated by a builder; no additional design expenses would be needed. The second part of Phase II would be a 17'-4" expansion of the Adult Stack area toward the north up to the property setback line. That would entail extending the current roof line with bays identical to those which exist. A commercial building contractor could easily replicate this expansion as well.

The NFL Friends anticipated the future by looking into acquiring additional footage of property behind the library. The owner of this agricultural plot indicated willingness to donate a strip which adjoined the current property. This offer was pursued by Friends president Jenny Floyd, and on (DATE) a strip of property (SIZE) was donated by (NAME.) Cara, you can get these details from Jenny if you don’t already have them)

The Friends are ready to set in motion a future drive to raise funds for either expansion. Through setbacks and triumphs alike, they still believe in the motto they chose nearly 30 years ago. They are the words of Eastern Shore native Frederick Douglass, which we adopted when the library was merely a big dream stuffed into a too-small clapboard box: “Once you learn to read, you will forever be free.”