

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PONTE VEDRA BEACH BRANCH LIBRARY

AND THE FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY, PONTE VEDRA BEACH

THE EARLY DAYS

by JACK MORGAN, President, Friends of the Library-Ponte Vedra Beach 1988-95

In the early 1980's, the only public library in St. Johns County was located on the second floor of an old home in St. Augustine (now occupied by the St. Augustine Historical Society.) Long recognized as inadequate, the library finally attracted the energies of the American Association of University Women, which launched a campaign for a county library building fund. A referendum approved in 1983 established that fund.

At that point, library consultants, HBW Associates, recommended that the first two libraries to be constructed should be the Main Library in St. Augustine and a temporary branch library in Ponte Vedra Beach, with a permanent one to follow by 1990.

The Main Library was finished in 1985. In the same year, a volunteer library for northeast St. Johns County, housed in the Palm Valley Community Center, was organized by local citizens. In 1987, the temporary County Branch Library for PVB opened in a small 475 s.f. room in the County Annex building on CR210, where for the next several years Doug Cisney became the community's much-appreciated librarian. The urgent need for a library here had finally been recognized by the county. And membership in the Friends of the Library, Ponte Vedra Beach (formed in 1985) grew by leaps and bounds.

Plans for a permanent building in PVB were delayed for several reasons. First, the county required that the land be donated, so a site committee of local citizens, chaired by Jane Howatt, with John Searles and Jim Northern as members, was appointed to search out possible sites. That took several years.

The committee's final choice was facilitated by a Texas real estate developer, who wanted to build a shopping center on the southwest corner of A1A and Solana Road, which at that time was zoned residential. He was denied permission. So, he built the shopping center west of the MSD boundary and, negotiating with the county, agreed to provide 2 acres – 1 would be for the library and 1 for a fire station, which also needed donated land—in exchange for rezoning the corner property to allow for office buildings.

However, it was obvious to the Friends that the one-acre plot allotted for a 5,000-square-foot library would not be large enough for this rapidly growing community. So the FOL researched adjacent properties for additional land which would allow for future expansion. In the process, the Friends focused on the 10-acre parcel, still zoned residential, just south of Sandia (now Library) Blvd., and

enlisted the backing of County Commissioner Harry Waldron to arrange an exchange of that land for the 2-acre parcel, whose value had been increased by the rezoning. With the help of Commissioner Linda Balsavage (a founding member of the Friends), the swap was made and the county rezoned the larger parcel to allow construction of the public library and the fire station. The new larger site made it possible to design a 10,000-square-foot building, doubling the size of the original plan.

Suitable land was thus acquired, but another cause for delay was the difficulty in securing the necessary financing. Many years had passed since the county's library fund was established to build the Main Library and the branch in PVB. Populations and demand for library services had grown in all parts of the county, so the Friends had to defend the sum intended for Ponte Vedra against the demands from other sectors to divvy up the construction fund. FOL directors met many times with county officials over this impasse. County Library Advisory Board meetings heard many a debate over issues of fairness, until the Friends finally asked Commissioner Waldron to come to our rescue again. He told a meeting of the LAB to stop the haggling and get on with building the library in Ponte Vedra Beach.

Construction began, but money was needed for books. There was some hope when a referendum to fund county library capital projects, prepared by County Library Director Michael Rouse and LAB Chair George Detmold, was placed before county voters in September, 1992. The FOL organized a campaign urging approval of the measure. It failed countywide, although District 4 (Ponte Vedra Beach) voted overwhelmingly in favor.

The Friends were determined that the library would have enough books when it opened, and organized a "caravan" of many Ponte Vedrans, led by Barbara Thornton, to fill the auditorium of a meeting of the County Commissioners and urge them to approve money for books. The Commissioners, chaired by Linda Balsavage, responded to the community's appeal and approved a \$350,000 book fund for the new building.

The Friends even worked on changing the library's name to fit the area it serves. Since the Ponte Vedra Beach post office address serves all of us, whether we live in Sawgrass, Ponte Vedra, Marsh Landing or Palm Valley, the Friends convinced the county first to change the branch's designation from Northeast St. Johns County to Ponte Vedra-Palm Valley, and later to Ponte Vedra Beach, so all patrons could feel it was their community's library.

The Friends organized large celebrations for two long-awaited events – the Ground Breaking in 1992 and the Grand Opening in May, 1993. The community welcomed their new library with open arms.

But the Friends still had work to do. Sure that the building was too small the day it opened, in the ensuing years the FOL maintained constant pressure on county officials to plan for an expansion. Eventually, working with a library specialist and consulting with county FOL's, a county-wide plan for library construction was prepared. Among other conclusions, this plan recognized the PVB library as regional rather than branch, thus qualifying it for additional square footage.

...AND LATER

March, 1999, a revised plan for the expansion was submitted, calling for 10,000-square-feet, rather than 5,000-square-feet, with construction to begin by the end of 1999, rather than the previous timetable for a 2003 groundbreaking. At that point, FOL offered a \$250,000 donation to increase the expansion square footage. Construction actually began in late 2001, for a building of some 23,000-square-feet. The official re-opening is scheduled for August 11, 2002. An interesting sidelight of this last phase in the library's history is that, while the library was closed for the expansion work, a temporary library was established in the same Palm Valley Community Center building which housed the first volunteer library in the early 1980's.

The library has become a center for cultural, educational and community activities in "our town". The auditorium and conference rooms are in constant demand for the meetings of many organizations, large and small. Educational opportunities and programs abound. The Friends utilize the community room for much-appreciated lectures by authors, other regular programs on travel and world affairs, and special programs for children.

In addition to programs in the library, Friends holds an Annual Meeting at which the year's activities are reviewed, the Board of Directors is elected, and prominent members of the greater Jacksonville community are invited to speak. During the last 10 years, Friends has hosted Carl Cannon, Publisher of the Florida Times Union; Roger Nierenberg, Director of the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra; Debbie Gianoulis, Co-Anchor of Channel 4, WJXT-TV Evening News; Bowie Kuhn, former Commissioner of major league baseball; Tillie Fowler, Representative to the U.S. Congress; Mark McCumber, PGA Tour professional golfer; Ambassador Marilyn McAfee, President of the World Affairs Council of Jacksonville; Chancellor Fran Kinne of Jacksonville University, and Michael Kelly, president of the 2005 Super Bowl Host Committee.

No history of the library and its importance to the community would be complete without mentioning the great contributions of the librarians themselves. The directors, local managers from Doug Cisney to Betty Frederick, and the local staff have individual and collectively given the library a friendly and accessible personality.

Over the years, Friends has provided great support for the library, its facilities and programs. Always attuned to the library's special needs and the requirements of its patrons, Friends continues to work with the staff and the county to provide extras that make the library a special place for the community. Through the support and donations of its loyal membership, book sales and other fund-raising activities and grants, such as those from the PGA TOUR, George Grune for the DeWitt Wallace/Readers Digest Foundation, the Ponte Vedra Women's Club, Merrill Lynch and SunTrust, Friends has thus far been able to contribute almost \$1 million to make the Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library the best that it can be.

The annual book sale is an important activity for the Friends. It's an event eagerly awaited by the community and has been a source of significant funds—from the \$4,500 raised at the first sale in 1992 to the high water mark of \$24,000 in 2001, now averaging about \$18,000 per year. The Library renovation in 2002, provided the Friends with an office. In 2003, part of that space became Seymour's Book Store. Volunteers staff the store and book donations pour in to be processed and sold. The

financial success of Seymour's has been phenomenal. Proceeds from the annual book sale and Seymour's provide the library with items and services not available from the County. The book sales and Seymour's have proven to be a great resource for the book-loving public and help underline the Friend's contributions to the cultural life of the community.

Members of the Friends Board of Directors are also volunteers, who put in many hours to keep the Friends' machinery running smoothly, plan programs, decide policy, interact with county library authorities and direct outreach to the community.

In the early years, the Friends was led by Presidents Randy Brown, Linda Steinmann and Sheila O'Neill. Board Presidents who followed were Jack Morgan(1988-1995); Peggy Crawford (1995-1996); Sherrie Tatham (1996-1998); Shep Spink (1998-1999); Sarah Borns (1999-2000); Cathey Portrie (2000-2002); Carolee Bertisch(2002-2004), Gary Reichow, (2004-2005) Mary Davis (2005-2006), Jan Bialka (2006-2008), and Vic DiGenti, the current President.

As library patrons are aware, the library is supported not only financially by members of the Friends, but by the work of volunteers who log hundreds of hours moving and stacking books, working on book sales, and performing other useful functions, demonstrating the great appreciation the community has for its library. The Friends' mission is to enrich our quality of life. Friends of the Library, Ponte Vedra Beach derives a great deal of satisfaction from helping create and enhance the library's important role in our community.