

**“OUR PROGRAM FOR STUDY  
NEXT YEAR IS ON THE SUBJECT  
OF LAW, CIVICS, HEALTH AND  
CHILD-WELFARE.”**

**—MRS. W. A. BOWEN, SECT.,  
DAILY REFLECTOR, DEC. 1899**

# SECRETS OF Greenville’s Book Club Culture:

## SERVING THE EAST

by Mary Kathryn Thornton

**“SOON AFTER FIVE O’CLOCK THE  
HAPPY COMPANY DISPERSED,  
WITH MANY WORDS OF PRAISES  
FOR THE HELPFUL HOSPITABLE  
HOSTESS, WHO HAD BESTOWED  
SO MUCH PLEASURE, AT THE  
SAME TIME SOWING SEED  
THAT MUST RIPEN INTO FRUITS  
OF USEFULNESS TO BE FELT  
THROUGHOUT THE LENGTH AND  
BREADTH OF PITT COUNTY.”**

**—DAILY REFLECTOR, DEC. 1899**

Among the many treasures in J.Y. Joyner Library’s Manuscript Collection at East Carolina University are minutes and memorabilia from Greenville, North Carolina Book Clubs. In preservation boxes, fragile scrapbook pages and manila folders hold yellowing press clippings, fading photographs, old letters with two-cent postage stamps, resolutions in loving tribute to deceased members, program notes, book lists, a letter from Mamie Eisenhower, and even the charred pages of minutes that attest to being rescued from a house fire. Small yearbooks – some with hand-painted covers – provide the names of members and officers and committee members, as well as dates, hostesses, and program topics of meetings. A few even include the club’s constitution and by-laws. Reading the records of these eight literary clubs, which also functioned as social and civic groups, is like reading a history of Greenville, so entwined were they with the city’s growth and so important was their impact during more than one hundred years. Tucked away in these notes are the details of their most notable legacy – the founding of the public library. The breadth and depth of their interests and activities show these book clubs as more than literary societies – though they took their reading and presentations very seriously – but as support systems for self-improvement and for cultural and community development. Together they confronted changes to their way of life and helped empower women to take leadership positions.

Greenville’s first book club, the End of the Century – actually the first women’s club in Eastern North Carolina – was founded in 1899, for “mental and social culture,” under the guidance of Sallie Southall Cotten, wife of a prominent Pitt County planter and businessman who also served on state boards and had important connections. Erik Larson’s national bestseller *The Devil in the White City* mentions Cotten as one of the lady managers at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, and through her experience there she had come to a realization of what intelligent, educated women could achieve as a group. After raising her six children to more independent ages, she turned her efforts to organizing local women. At the turn of the century, Greenville’s population numbered fewer than three