

NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
Office of Archives and History
Department of Cultural Resources

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

W. R. Surles Memorial Library

Proctorville, Robeson County, RB0531, Listed 9/16/2009
Nomination by Rose Oliver, Sarah Britt and Ann Swallow
Photographs by Jessica Oliver Roberts, July 2009



Facade view



Side view

W. R. Surles Memorial Library
Name of Property

Robeson County, North Carolina
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

private
 public-local
 public-State
 public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

building(s)
 district
 site
 structure
 object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register
N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Education Sub: Library

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Education Sub: Library

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Colonial Revival

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete
roof Asphalt
walls Brick
other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

B removed from its original location.

C a birthplace or a grave.

D a cemetery.

E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

F a commemorative property.

G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

(Enter categories from instructions)

Education

Period of Significance

1951-1959

Significant Dates

N/A

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

T. A. Nye and Sons, Builder

Areas of Significance

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

previously listed in the National Register

previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____

recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State agency

Federal agency

Local government

University

Other

Name of repository: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh, NC

W. R. Surl's Memorial Library
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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property approx. 7

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing
1 17 680210 3816520
2

Zone Easting Northing
3
4
 See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Rose Oliver, Sarah Britt/ Ann Swallow, National Register Coordinator

organization R. C. Lawrence Book Club /NC Historic Preservation Office date May 12, 2009

street & number P. O. Box 215 telephone 910-628-8981 (Oliver) 910-739-1610 (Britt), 919-807-6587 (Swallow)

city or town Proctorville state NC zip code 28375

12. Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name W. R. Surl's Memorial Library/R. C. Lawrence Book Club

street & number 105 West Main Street, P. O. Box 215 telephone 910-628-8981

city or town Proctorville state N.C. zip code 28375

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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W. R. Surles Memorial Library
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The W. R. Surles Memorial Library is located at 105 West Main Street, Proctorville, Robeson County, North Carolina. The small, farming community was established along the 1899 rail line of the Carolina and Northern Railroad which ran from Raleigh to Charleston, South Carolina. The community is fifteen miles due south of Lumberton, the county seat, and twelve miles north of the Robeson County line bordering South Carolina. The one-story, front-gabled, one-bay wide, brick building faces north on the southeast corner of Main and Cedar streets. The small building measures twenty feet wide and thirty feet long, and its construction was completed in January 1951. The library sits on lot seven, approximately one twentieth of an acre in size, measuring thirty-five feet wide by seventy feet long. This acreage was deeded to the R. C. Lawrence Book Club on May 7, 1951 by Mrs. W. R. Surles and heirs.

It is a level, open piece of property, and the building is surrounded by a grassy lawn, shade trees, and foundation plantings. Accessed by a centered, concrete walkway from West Main Street, the building is setback a few feet from both rights of way. A free standing wooden sign in front of the library marks the name of the library and information concerning the hours of operation. The surrounding town lots in all directions have moderately dense residential and commercial development. Additional property (.3 acres) to the east and south of the building was deeded to the library in 1997 by Mr. Robert V. Richards, great son-in-law of Mr. Surles. This open land is not included in the nominated property.

The diminutive library building is finished in the Colonial Revival style, with common bond brickwork, modern double sash windows with soldier course brick window lintels, brick sills and molded surrounds, boxed eaves, and a small, louvered, frame, bellcast-roofed cupola at the ridgeline. The single bay façade is sheltered by a full pedimented portico, with paired replacement synthetic columns, and synthetic siding within the pediment. Originally the portico was carried by wooden columns, similar in scale to the replacement columns. The poured concrete porch floor is slightly above grade, and cast iron railings flank the step up to the porch floor from the concrete walkway.

The north façade consists of a central entrance with a six panel door, and a four over four double-hung sash window on either side. Synthetic half-round pilasters terminate the edge of the portico roofline, which is slightly narrower than the front wall. Continuing clockwise around the building, the west elevation has one six-over-six window opening and a small gable at the eaveline where the pediment meets the front wall. The

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cornerstone is located on this wall, near the front of the building. The rear (south) elevation also has a single, centered window, and a gable roof with the pediment infilled with synthetic siding. The fenestration of the east elevation replicates the west side wall.

The interior consists of the main library room with shelves from ceiling to floor on the side and rear walls. At the back of this room, accessed by a door in the center of the wall, is a separate room for book storage and a single bathroom facility. The interior is finished in pine, tongue and groove vertical boards on the walls, and pine boards running the length of the ceiling. A portrait of R. C. Lawrence was presented to the Club by his grandsons in 1989, and it hangs beside a picture of W. R. Surles in the main library room.

The building and property are well maintained by the R. C. Lawrence Book Club.

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Summary

The W. R. Surles Memorial Library in Proctorville, Robeson County, North Carolina, is locally significant for its historical contribution to educational services in the community and surrounding area. The privately-operated library was the only such facility open to the public in southeastern Robeson County. It meets Criterion A for education and the period of significance is 1951 through 1959, the years of its operation during the historic time period. Administered by the R. C. Lawrence Book Club, the 1951 library building is the successor to Proctorville's first library which was established during the mid-1930s. Both buildings were the gift of local businessman Willis R. Surles, and later, his estate. The library continues to serve the community today; however, the period within the past fifty years is not of exceptional significance.

Library Development in North Carolina

During the colonial period North Carolina's libraries were almost exclusively collections established by well-to-do individuals or clergymen for their private use. The first public library in the state is traditionally documented as a short-lived collection created by the Anglican Church for Daniel Brett, the first missionary to North Carolina in 1701-02. Following the American Revolution, a number of libraries were created by private, parochial or associational institutions, and by 1848, thirty-two library societies had been incorporated by the North Carolina General Assembly. (Mitchell, 2) These libraries were for subscribing society member use, and if they were successful, member reading rooms were sometimes opened. In a Smithsonian Institution 1851 report on public libraries in the United States, North Carolina claimed six institutional libraries: University of North Carolina, Fayette Academy in Salem, Mission School Library in Valle Crucis, Wake Forest College, and the State Library in Raleigh. (Mitchell, 2) For the remainder of the nineteenth century nearly all libraries were for scholarly research within state government, or private and public schools, colleges or universities, or they were operated by the smaller private library societies. "Louis R. Wilson [who later became Chairman of the North Carolina Library Commission] observed that in 1897 there was no clearly defined, well-organized library movement in the South. Free public library service was virtually unknown." (Mitchell, 4)

For the most part, tax-supported libraries for the general public in North Carolina were a phenomenon of the industrialization and urban growth of the state in the early twentieth

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century. Although Raleigh, Asheville, Charlotte, Wilmington and Durham had established various types of library associations during the second half of the nineteenth century, the Carnegie Corporation funding for public libraries was the most important impetus in the expansion of the free municipal library system in North Carolina. Hickory, Greensboro and Winston-Salem were among the cities to take advantage of the Carnegie grant program during the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1909-1910 the newly-established North Carolina Library Commission published its first biennial report accounting for all of the libraries in the state. They reported eighty-two libraries, with specifics on only sixty-five of them. They were: thirteen free public libraries, ten subscription or association institutions, twenty college libraries, ten school libraries, and six state government-sponsored libraries. As early as 1899 the Federation of Woman's Clubs in North Carolina created traveling libraries, and by 1909 eight cases were circulating in fifteen counties. (Mitchell, 19) In the early 1910s the North Carolina Library Commission took over the distribution of the traveling libraries, and more than 1,200 collections were sent to 865 communities in the mid-1920s. (Mitchell, 24) Larger communities continued to seek Carnegie funding for libraries through the early 1940s.

Following the example of the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie, other private donors made the creation of both private and public libraries possible throughout the state. An interesting example is that of the Seaboard Airline Railway which, in 1904-05, distributed traveling libraries to fifty-five schools and twelve rural communities along its right of way. The company actively sought the guidance of the North Carolina Library Commission in selecting communities in need of a traveling library. (Mitchell, 19) Permanent library buildings made possible through private donations ranged from the grand, castle-like Pack Memorial Library established in Asheville in 1879, to the diminutive Colonial Revival styled W. R. Surles Memorial Library in the rural, railroad town of Proctorville. Unlike more populated urban areas where tax revenues were appropriated to the operation of the donated library, the Surles Library was, from the very beginning, a private lending institution – first by the Surles family, and after 1939 by an active local book club.

Public and private lending libraries in North Carolina offered educational opportunities outside of the school system. Many rural schools were open for only a few months a year, and the year-round open library was an important supplement to the local school education curriculum. Very often the library is the place where adults had access to books and other reading material. In the 1936-1938 report of the North Carolina Library

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Commission the “equalizing opportunities” of a library were highlighted in the preface. “Books on all subjects must be accessible, books for young and old, books for those people who have given their best to the State; books for pre-school children who have so many things to learn in this great world; books to answer the question of the boy who wants to be an aviator and visit the ends of the world; books for the girl who wants to earn money for college by raising chickens; books for every one.”

Proctorville and the W. R. Surles Memorial Library

Very little is written about the beginnings of Proctorville. The most complete source is a September 5, 1938 article in the local newspaper, *The Robesonian*, which was reprinted in a one hundredth anniversary issue in 1970. The text of the article was the 1938 address given by W. R. Surles at the unveiling of a memorial to E. K. Proctor Jr., for whom the town was named. Excerpts follow:

The land comprising the town of Proctorville was originally owned by Calvin Graham. He purchased a young Negro named Dennis for \$1,000.00 from Henry and Sarah Graham of Richmond County on February 1, 1859. Later, Mr. Graham gave this Dennis Graham, who had been a faithful slave, the 50 acre tract of land on which Proctorville grew from. On July 20, 1899, Augustus Mellier purchased from Dennis Graham, and his wife Rose, a parcel of land 100 feet wide, thru this original 50 acre tract, for a right of way for the Carolina and Northern railroad, predecessor of the Raleigh and Charleston railroad. On August 30, 1899, Augustus Mellier purchased from Dennis Graham and his wife, Rose, ten acres of this original tract on both sides of the Carolina and Northern railroad right of way, which he immediately laid out into four blocks, subdivided into lots, with properly laid out streets. He named the new born town Proctorville, in honor of Edward Knox Proctor, Jr., Lumberton Lawyer and promoter of the Carolina and Northern Railroad, and other enterprises which were helpful in developing lower Robeson. On May 1, 1900 Mr. E. K. Proctor, Jr. in appreciation of the honor thus bestowed in giving his name to the town, purchased from Augustus Mellier and his wife, Mary Etta, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the original ten acre site with the intention of carrying out the plans of Mr. Mellier in making Proctorville an ideal town. But two years later Mr. Proctor was taken by typhoid fever and died.... In December

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1907 the sale of lots in Proctorville was advertised in The Robesonian, and it was predicted that this railroad center was to become the most important town in South Robeson.... The town charter was written by E. J. Britt of Lumberton and duly incorporated by the 1913 General Assembly of North Carolina, in which George B. McLeod, brother-in-law of Edward K. Proctor, Jr. served.

Mr. Surles's speech showed obvious pride in his community, but it did not include an acknowledgement of his own contribution to its establishment and settlement. In 1946, Mr. R. C. Lawrence, in a newspaper article entitled "Will Surles Was a Friend Of Education In Robeson", recounted what took place after Mr. Proctor's death in 1902: "In 1903, assisted by J. P. Price, he [Surles] purchased the land and laid off the site of Proctorville, named for his beau ideal, Edward Knox Proctor."

In a 1948 article in the Robesonian entitled "Proctorville Community Is Not Hurt By School Consolidation," the agricultural base of the rural community was described. The "old faithfuls" of tobacco, cotton and corn were the mainstay crops, and Proctorville served as the trading center for farmers, with the cotton gin operating there since 1928. The article acknowledged that although the town had thrived, it had failed to grow substantially. Around 1930 the railroad tracks had been taken up, and "trucking took its place." Various businesses were listed including grocery stores, a general merchandise store, service stations, repair shops, and the gin.

Much of the library history that follows was provided by Rose Oliver, a member of the R. C. Lawrence Book Club, and Sarah Britt with the Robeson County Historical Society.

Willis Robert Surles's (1870-1946) interest in Proctorville extended beyond business and farming. Early in his adult life he had been a teacher, and later the principal of a four-teacher school. He served as Robeson County superintendent of public instruction for many years beginning in 1906. And it has been said that he made his home a public library of sorts, as friends were free to borrow books. In the 1930s, Mr. Surles owned and operated a grocery and drygoods store. Admiring his grandfather's business, his fifteen-year-old grandson Harry asked for a store of his own, and in 1935 Mr. Surles hired Mr. Remus Davis of Proctorville to build Harry a small frame, store building. Harry sold crackers, candy and nick-nacks to local children. He soon became tired of the confinement of running the store and not having time to play with his friends, so the little

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store closed. Mr. Surles moved the supplies to his drygoods store and gave the store to the town of Proctorville for a library. Books were donated by Mr. Surles and the women of the community. Mrs. Evelyn Clyburn became the first librarian, and the one-room library was open two afternoons each week.

In 1939, the R. C. Lawrence Book Club in Proctorville was organized with twelve charter members. The first president was Mrs. Blanche Lewis, the daughter of Willis Surles. The club was named in honor of Robert C. Lawrence, prominent Lumberton attorney and historian and an author of local histories, "The State of Robeson" and "Here in Carolina" published in 1939. The Book Club's primary mission was to promote cultural awareness and to encourage residents both young and old to read. As outlined in the club's by-laws, they also maintained and provided financial support to the small library building. The motto of the women's club was "Knowledge is Power, let us be large in thought, in words, and deed."

On May 20, 1944 at a meeting held at Willis and Florence Surles's home, he presented the club with a deed for a lot on which to build a larger and more modern library building. He stated that he would also donate \$2,000 for the building when conditions permitted. He died in 1946, and the \$2,000 provision was stipulated in his will. In December 1950, construction began, and by mid-May the building was completed. The local firm of T. A. Nye and Sons of Fairmont, North Carolina, were awarded the construction contract.

The W. R. Surles Memorial Library was officially opened and dedicated on a Sunday afternoon, September 30, 1951. Proctorville citizens, dignitaries, and many visitors gathered at the Proctorville Baptist Church to dedicate the memorial library made possible by Mr. Surles's bequest. E. J. Britt, Lumberton attorney, historian, long time friend and legal advisor of Mr. Surles, made the dedication speech. Accepting the library on behalf of the R. C. Lawrence Book Club was its president, Miss Maggie Graham. The dedicatory prayer was made by Dr. I. P. Hedgpeth, who spoke on "What a Library can mean to the Adults of a Community." Miss Mabel McDonald, another local historian, spoke on "What a Library can mean to the Youth of a Community." Dignitaries from all over the county and state, including the Governor of North Carolina, W. Kerr Scott, State House member David Britt, and State Senator Hector McLean attended. An open house in the small brick library followed the event.

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During the 1950s, the W. R. Surles Memorial Library was the only library open to the general public serving the agrarian families in southeastern Robeson County. The service area encompassed both Proctorville and the nearby town of Orrum, three miles to the southeast. The central location of the library in the small town center made it easier for families to walk from their homes or drive a very short distance. In 1950 the population of Proctorville was 232, Orrum 162, and a total of 2,334 in the entire township.

The only other libraries within the service area during the 1950s were at Proctorville School, an African American school (grades 1-8), and Orrum School for white students (grades 1-12). The public records show three years earlier that Proctorville School's 397-book library served 201 students. However, school libraries were not for use by the general public. Three public libraries served other communities in Robeson County in the 1950s: Lumberton, Maxton and Rowland. Also by the 1950s, bookmobile library service had reached Proctorville. A county-wide library service was not publicly funded until after the 1950s, likely due to the difficulty in financing such a program in a sparsely settled rural county.

The handwritten minutes of the monthly meetings of the R. C. Lawrence Book Club are the only record of the library's activities. In 1953, they noted that the club planted shrubbery around the building. Miss Grace Hedgpeth, librarian, reported in May 1955, a good circulation during the previous winter with a total of one thousand books loaned out. Children's books were purchased in 1957, and in February 1958 the book club donated old magazines and books to the Proctorville School. Also, in 1958 Miss Hedgpeth noted that seventy-one donated books were added to the library. In 1959, the minutes noted that "during the year 385 books were read and 21 new books were added to our Library." The minutes also record that during the 1950s the librarian's salary of one dollar per week was generously paid by Mr. Hoyt McRae, owner of the general store in Proctorville.

At various times, the book club was formally affiliated with the national federation of women's clubs, as their interests in the community extended beyond the library. Mrs. McRae, club president in 1954, wrote to the North Carolina state president of the federation, Mrs. Edwin Brown of Murfreesboro:

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When our club was organized in 1939, we were supposed to be federated as a literary club with our chief project, fostering our public library. I suppose it was the influence of war times and the urgent needs, but somehow we found ourselves doing part of every phase of a "Womans Club". Gradually we found that we were pushing our main project to the background, so we withdrew from the Federation. Since that time, we have devoted more time to the functioning of our library, but we have missed the fellow-ship and wider perspective (sic) which comes with association with groups of women, and the inspiration that comes from meeting with them at the district meetings, etc. We would like to belong again, if we can just to the work of a Book Club....We have a lovely brick Memorial Library, and we feel that we must foster that.

For the next four years the club belonged to the national federation. In 1957, the club established an award for the student with the highest scholastic record at Orrum High School. Donations were given toward the purchase of a movie projector at the Proctorville Baptist Church and in support of a local swimming pool fund. However, by 1958 the meeting minutes record that club members "voted to retire from the Federation. They felt it was too expensive and too hard to try and keep up with the 'Woman's Club' when we are only a literary club." Although the club's interests were broader than the library, the library institution was clearly their first priority.

The minutes also recorded repairs to the building and grounds, the donation of cash and books by club members and friends, the election of officers, fundraising events, the payment of staff salaries, and members' attention to the general improvement of the community. In 1957, they sent a letter to the mayor and aldermen expressing their appreciation for the town's efforts to pave its streets.

The administration of the library has remained the same since its opening. The Trustees of the Library have consisted of three members of the R. C. Lawrence Book Club. They are appointed by the club for lifetime duties unless they feel a need to resign. They monitor the building and grounds and make recommendations to the club members of any pertinent needs. A librarian is appointed by the Book Club, and the club pays her salary. All of the maintenance, utilities, insurance, and upkeep of the Library is provided and supplied by the Book Club. Upon the death of a book club member, a memorial book is donated to the library. Club members actively raise funds for the library

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operation through activities such as merchandise sales and catering meals for various organizations. Each member pays dues annually in the amount of \$5.00. Also, each club member donates a book to the library each year. Today, the Town of Proctorville contributes \$300.00 annually to the club to be used for the needs of the library. The W. R. Surles Memorial Library remains independent of the public library system in North Carolina.

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Bibliography

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Biennial Reports of the North Carolina State Library (Reorganized July 1, 1956) 1956/58 through 1961/62

Lawrence, R. C., "Talk About Public Spirit!," *The State Magazine*, December 23, 1939

Lawrence, R. C., "Will Surles Was A Friend of Education in Robeson," *The Robesonian*, December 20, 1970 100th anniversary issue, reprint of article in May 31, 1943 issue

McRae, Mrs. P. A., Letter to Mrs. Edwin P. Brown, Murfreesboro, N. C., August 24, 1954, R. C. Lawrence Book Club collection.

Mitchell, Thornton W. *The State Library and Library Development in North Carolina*, 1983, Raleigh, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1983.

North Carolina Library Commission. *Biennial Reports*, 1909/10 – 1954-56

"Proctorville Arose From Purchase of Land Owned by a Former Slave," *The Robesonian*, December 20, 1970 100th anniversary issue, reprint of article in September 5, 1938 issue.

R. C. Lawrence Book Club minutes 1950-1960, and summary book 1939-1969, R. C. Lawrence Book Club collection.

The Robesonian, August 2, 1951 photos of the new W. R. Surles Memorial Library and the original Proctorville library building; July 2, 1978 photos of R. C. Lawrence Book Club members.

Helen Seawell, "Proctorville Community Is Not Hurt By School Consolidation," *The Robesonian*, November 11, 1948.

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Verbal Boundary Description: The boundaries are shown on the accompanying tax map at one inch equals eighty feet scale. The parcel ID number for the lot is 12050305101.

Boundary Justification: The boundary encompasses the land historically associated with the W. R. Surles Memorial Library.

Section 12: Photographs

W. R. Surles Memorial Library
105 West Main Street
Proctorville, Robeson County, North Carolina

Date: July, 2009

Photographer: Jessica Oliver Roberts

Digital originals: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Survey and Planning Branch, Architectural Survey File and Photo collection.

1. Overall view, looking southeast
2. Rear view, looking north
3. Side view, looking west
4. Interior, looking north toward entrance
5. Interior, looking south