

In a Foot of COVID-19 Clay Are the Feats of Library Writing Communities

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I was already an underemployed librarian. I work part-time at Coastal Alabama Community College in Fairhope at the Learning Resource Center, a fancy name for the computer lab. I'm a proud graduate of Cape Cod Community College. The job I love is in person, helping students one-on-one, and providing orientations about research and library resources.

COVID-19 hit. The campus closed. For the first time in my life, I collected unemployment. Things were okay. My family was healthy. Professionally, I had just agreed to be on the American Library Association's (ALA) Library History Round Table (LHRT) and was selected to the committee to review the Justin Winsor Library History Essay Award.

I used the unemployed time to polish and self-publish a local history book. In August 2020 I published *Clay City Tile: Frank Brown and the Company that Built Fairhope*. It was a seventy-page undergraduate research project about a locally manufactured and distinctive orange-red building block. Known nationally as structural clay tile, Clay City Tile was used to build Fairhope, Alabama, and much of Baldwin and Mobile counties from the 1920s to the late 1980s. If buildings didn't have Clay City Tile, they were certainly made with Clay City brick, which was also produced by the millions annually. While the product was typically stuccoed or bricked over; many structures have the tile exposed, making it uniquely local. The book includes the history of Clay Products Inc., its founder Frank Brown and his descendants who ran the company, a construction history, and images of numerous structures of local significance. From outbuildings, farm buildings, commercial structures, craftsmen cottages and everything in between

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Fairhope is made from Clay Products Inc. It had nothing to do with librarianship but served as a necessary distraction and accomplishment.

This was early in the pandemic, perhaps you recall, when it was “more time to write.” Only later did it turn into “more time to procrastinate.” I kept my librarian-y skills alive by adding some local history content to the Internet Archive. As the Fairhope historian, I added a collection of bound scholarly essays on my city’s founding as a single tax enclave, and two booklets of the history of Fairhope Public Library.

When unemployment ran out, I was back to work, but more like part, part-time. With so few students to help, I felt more alone at work than I did at home. It was a combination of solitude, imposter syndrome, and not having ever felt part of ALA that I reconsidered my membership. I remember wishing there was an option to be part of LHRT and not ALA. Most communication from LHRT comes from a person, an actual member, and that helped me feel connected to them. In fact, I had just been selected to the Justin Winsor Library History Essay Award committee. ALA was this thing, imposing, and, honestly, I never really felt I belonged. It was just like my undergraduate classes, where I was a returning student and typically twenty years older than the other students. Or back to elementary school wearing my Toughskins, which had the holes in the right knee, but still allowed me to pass as able-bodied while hidden behind the pants was a fake leg. I did not renew for any of those reasons. I told myself the funds were better served, saved, for a rainy day.

She was called Hurricane Sally. Perhaps you remember the one-day news cycle coverage. Probably not. It was the worst hurricane to hit Baldwin County since Camille in 1980, some locals say. While my family was spared, friends and neighbors had trees come down on homes, causing considerable damage, not just physical to homes. The emotional pain on top of the quarantine proved overwhelming, even for those whose homes were not damaged. In the middle of an isolating pandemic, when majestic live oaks are uprooted among the pecans and pines, natural disaster takes on a deeper meaning.

After five days without power and cell service, I checked my email. Out of her own pocket, Danielle Ponton had paid my annual membership and LHRT fees. I felt the tear bubble on my eyelash. Gene Wilder’s hand covered the gobstopper. Mr. Wonka said, “So shines a good deed in a weary world.”

In March of 2021, a year from the start of the pandemic, I started reading the essays submitted for the Winsor Award. The essays quenched my thirst for library history. The winning essay (chosen unanimously) was “More than a Room with Books: The Development of Author Visits for Young People in the Mid-Century U.S. Public Libraries” by Dr. Jennifer Burek Pierce.

Her energetic, informative essay not only struck the right style and tone, but it also reminded me of my twelve years with the Fairhope Public Library with the highlight being the publication of my first book in 2018. *Stump the Librarian: A Writer's Book of Legs* is part memoir and part history. It's the story of my life and the lives of other, famous, and infamous, leg amputees. Although born without my right foot, I must be careful how I say "below knee amputee."

In April, I had my first, and so far, only, pandemic book signing at Page and Palette bookstore for *Clay City Tile*. Masked up, I was talking with a woman about being a below-knee amputee and I had her completely confounded. Wearing a mask, she asked, "I can see you are an amputee, but what does that have to do with bologna?" Then I was perplexed. "Bologna?" I repeated. After a pause to pull down my mask and through giggles, I said, "Oh! not bologna! I'm a below-*the*-knee amputee." After sharing a good laugh, the woman from Tampa Bay, Florida bought a *Clay City Tile* book. As usual, I signed it, "AKA, the Clay City Tile Guy," thinking, "no foot of clay here." It is this reconnection to libraries, my local bookstore, local history and my involvement as a patron and a member of the Friends organization that has inspired me to continue writing about the unique history of Fairhope Public Library.

I am thankful to be an underemployed librarian again, serving students face to face, and eager to try new outreach ideas to engage more students. As I write this, we are in the middle of National Library Week, a chance to say thanks to those who have chosen librarianship in their career and, as author Wayne Wiegand says, to make public libraries "part of our lives."¹ Just think, if I wasn't an ALA member, I would not have read all those great library history entries for the Justin Winsor Award, seen the call for stories about our COVID experiences, and the Fairhope Library history book would have remained just an idea. In a time of unprecedented social distancing, the kindness of a stranger kept me connected to our library community and even now keeps me writing.

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NOTE

1. Wayne A. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).