

# History Comes Alive!



by Michael E. Holland  
City Archivist



## ON THE RADIO

Some *History Comes Alive!* columns can be heard on 89.3-KPCC's Off-Ramp, online at [www.kpcc.org/offramp/](http://www.kpcc.org/offramp/)

~ Tales From the City Archives ~

Photos courtesy the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, except as indicated

If you work for the Library, you know that the City Librarian is John F. Szabo. But City Librarians across the country aren't generally well known. In 1906, it seemed that everyone in the City knew who Mary Jones was and what was happening to her.

In brief, Mary Letitia Jones was fired as City Librarian by the Board of Library Commissioners in March 1905 for undisclosed cause. Four of the library commissioners were themselves dismissed shortly thereafter by Mayor Owen McAleer, also without cause. The former commissioners demanded an investigation into their own removal. Mary Jones took her case to the numerous ladies groups in the City who likewise demanded action from the mayor. After being covered in the press for months, a committee of City Councilmen was convened to conduct a series of public inquiries in January and February 1906. The Los Angeles City Archives has the transcripts containing the testimony of the people involved. They will tell our story.

The first session, held Jan. 24, 1906, began with the committee trying to figure out who was in charge. The hearings were held in the evenings after normal business hours in a meeting room and were open to the public. The City Attorney was not represented. The Council president declined the chairmanship of the committee. The meeting room was deemed too small to seat everyone due to public interest. The first formal hearing was delayed a week until the Council chambers were available to accommodate the crowd.

The series of seven meetings document the sort of drama familiar to fans of legal proceedings. The board had called for the investigation of the mayor's actions. Was Jones fired at the mayor's request? The mayor flatly refused to state a probable cause and denied any role in the matter. He had never even set foot in the Library before, which at the time was in City Hall. He was "misled" by the board about Jones' threat to resign and thereby replaced the Board as having been dishonest with him. The board claimed they approached the mayor about replacing Jones and the mayor allowed them to proceed, claiming he knew of good cause. Ms. Jones was guilty of "doing politics," he told them.

But there was a surprise coming to the audience attending the hearing. Mayor McAleer abruptly ended his deposition with this statement: "This is only a farce. The mayor refuses from this time to take any part in it...I am only sorry that I brought an honorable attorney here to represent me who has been insulted and offended... Good Night." The mayor and his attorney left the proceedings, never to return. The committee needed to find a purpose to carry on. The focus now shifted to what happened to Mary Jones.

When she was deposed, Mary Jones explained that "doing politics" meant approaching the mayor to recommend a friend for an upcoming vacancy on the library board. She claimed not to have threatened to quit if an increase in salary wasn't forthcoming or that she had even asked for a raise. Several board members staked out their positions around various alleged shortcomings in the way the library was managed. They alleged that contracts for supplies were not put out to bid properly. Jones was cross-examined several times and refuted every claim, citing the approval of the board itself as confidence in her ability.

But what everybody agreed on in the testimony was that Mary Jones was relieved of her duties. She had been the first City librarian trained at the New York State Library School. She was replaced by noted local writer and historian Charles Lummis – who was neither a trained librarian nor a civil servant. Several of the board members said on the record that they preferred having a man head up the expanding system of library branches. Lummis was hired for more money after the board claimed to have turned down Jones' modest request for an increase, citing a plan to fund a separate library building to replace the inadequate City Hall facilities. Jones' claim about not asking for a raise, however, was disputed by several witnesses,

## Mary Jones and the Library Controversy

### Why was influential Mary Letitia Jones dismissed as City Librarian in 1905?

including the board secretary who had been present at an angry scene in the librarian's office. Among some lesser motivations for action suggested conspiracy. There was a discussion in the transcript about a new civil service rule, about to become law, which would have made it more difficult to remove Jones if they did not act immediately. Several lunch meetings of the board were conducted at Al Levy's restaurant in secret – including one with the mayor in attendance.

I was surprised to discover that one significant detail was not found in the transcripts. I had heard that one of the charges made against Jones was her choice of book titles. There were supposedly some unsuitable materials being



The original Arroyo Seco Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library, at 6545 Figueroa St., among the branches that Mary Jones opened during her brief five-year tenure as City Librarian. An auto service center now sits on this location; the current Arroyo Seco Branch is a few blocks away.

*fair and impartial." That is my attitude.*

*McAleer: Well, if you do, you ought to go to heaven.*

*Houghton: I wouldn't leave Los Angeles for any place so remote.*

*McAleer: I have a hope you don't have to.*

A less friendly tone is evident in this exchange between Oscar Lawler – the attorney for the library board – and Jones' attorney, W.A. Harris:

*Lawler: Let us not get away from the record. Pardon my interruption.*

*Harris: Certainly. I will permit you to interrupt me whenever you see fit.*

*Lawler: And I shall do when whenever you do not state the facts.*

So on it went until the final hearing on Feb. 21, 1906. The City Council made its final report on March 5, 1906. They concluded that, due to the mayor's refusal to cooperate, they could find no instance of the board breaking the rules. The council overturned the mayor's removal of the board members and restored them to their positions.

Charles Lummis stayed on as City Librarian until 1910. Mary Jones left Los Angeles for a while to work in the library at UC Berkeley and Bryn Mar Women's College before coming back to be a part of the new Los Angeles County Library system in 1913.

Those interested might Google the subject; academic reports and theses have been written about the plight of Mary Letitia Jones, and her possible firing due to gender inequality.



The first library branch Mary Jones built was this branch in Boyle Heights, which became known as the Benjamin Franklin Branch, at 2200 E. First St. The current Benjamin Franklin Branch sits on this site.



The adult reading room at Benjamin Franklin Branch Library (formerly Boyle Heights Branch), which was the first library branch built in the City. City Librarian Mary Jones created the branch system.



At the time of Mary Jones' leadership, the City Library was housed in City Hall, seen here. The Central Library downtown wasn't built until 1926.

These reports also mention some of her accomplishments during her brief five-year stint as City Librarian: She began the branch system by opening the first Los Angeles Public Library branch, in Boyle Heights. Within four years, eight branches were opened. She opened a formally recognized library school. She integrated the City Library into the United States Library of Congress card catalog system. She assigned an African-American librarian to the new Arroyo Seco branch. And she brought impeccable academic credentials to her position.

I think there are still several teachable moments in this story. Are there still inequalities in pay between the genders? Are there still questions to the power of civil service protection? Is there a debate over the books on library shelves going somewhere in the United States as we speak?

The transcripts and the Council minutes are only several pieces of the story. The archive doesn't have the Library Commissioners' minute books but some of the annual reports and the periodic reports to Council. But perhaps the story of Mary Jones will continue to resonate and inspire someone to do an authoritative work. We'll be ready to assist.

found on the shelves – think of the cry "Chaucer, Rabelais, Balzac" from *The Music Man*. The closest the transcript comes to discussing any content of books had to do with the fact that there were so many early Southwest history books written in Spanish that only someone like Charles Lummis could read them.

The written transcripts are fun to read. They contain a certain wit as in this exchange between councilman Arthur Houghton and mayor McAleer:

*Houghton: I am merely asking questions, Mr. Mayor, and if my questions should appear in any way to have any tendency to bias in that direction, I want you to tell me. You will notice when I started taking notes this evening, I wrote on top here [indicating tablet of paper]: "I will be*