

Everett, Mary: The End Of The Century Book Club ^[1]

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Mary Everett: The End Of The Century Book Club

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/13/2001. Copyrighted.
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Mary Everett belongs to one of the state's oldest book clubs, the End of the Century Book Club in Greenville. For its 100th anniversary celebration last year, Everett studied the club's minutes, correspondence and yearbooks all the way back to 1899. She shared her research at a banquet that brought together all 25 of the city's women's book clubs.

Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of women's book clubs continue to flourish across North Carolina. Their members carry on a tradition that dates to the Progressive Era from the 1890s into the 1920s. Bringing women into public life for the first time, those early clubs talked about books but also were at the forefront of social and political issues in their day.

Mary Everett and the 23 other members of her book club are especially proud of Sallie Southall Cotten, the club's founder and a pioneer in the women's club movement in North Carolina.

In Mary Everett's words:



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Anytime any of us try to talk about the book club, especially with younger women, they are drawn to Mrs. Cotten because she seems far beyond her times. She grew up in Murfreesboro and went to Greensboro Female College during the Governor Carr had a neighboring plantation, and in 1893 he invited Mrs. Cotten to be one of the "lady managers" for the state's exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair. At this fair, she came in contact with women around the country. She saw that I don't know why it took her six years, but things move slow sometimes, and in December of 1899 she gathered around her six or eight women and they formed the End of the Century Book Club to "develop their mental and social culture." That Mrs. Cotten -- the women in the club called her "Mother Cotten" -- wanted the women to speak up. When all of us were growing up even in the 1940s and '50s in the South, women sort of kept their place. You didn't say a lot and left it to the men. These women never marched in the streets or anything like that. They were just not that way. But they were very civic minded. We take great pride in the fact that the book club founded the public library in Greenville. In 1903 they rented a room. In 1913 the book club formed a civic committee, and they sought ways to improve the appearance of the courthouse square. They attempted to have the power cables laid under the new streets that were being paved. They asked that railroad. Another member that we had, Mrs. J.B. Spilman, was just a wonderful person. She joined in 1925. I joined the book club in 1973, and Mrs. Spilman was still a member then. She was the most active, most mentally alert person I have ever been. Mrs. Spilman had been very active in politics. In the 1920s she was a precinct chairman, and in the 1930s she ran for the General Assembly but lost. Even though women had the right to vote by then, many of them did not deem it proper and she always thought of herself as very progressive. A lot of her nature came from having grown up in Chowan County and seeing the problems with the Populist movement. There was evidently a black man elected to office, maybe the General. My point being in all this is, in 1925 she was invited to join the End of the Century Club. I think that shows the foresight of the book club. They had been involved in their own, quite different brand of politics, but they supported her when a lot of As time went on, and everything changed, the value of the book club from its early beginnings changed. The majority of us work now. There are so many things in Greenville, as in every other town, that you can be involved in, and so many that I still think book clubs are important, just for a different reason. Now I think it's simply the enjoyment of being together. We still enjoy, just within the group of women, talking about our lives and our families. In this modern world, where you still

Listening to History: David Cecelski explores North Carolina's history, one person at a time.

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