



**THE GRAND READING ROOM**  
AT SMATHERS LIBRARY



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**T**he Grand Reading Room on the second floor of Smathers Library is one of the most recognizable rooms at the University of Florida. Yet students encountering the room for the first time often stare in open-mouthed wonderment that such a place exists on campus.

Alumni returning to their alma mater have been heard to ask, **“Was this here when I was a student?” Unless they were here before 1925, the answer is YES.**

Smathers Library was constructed in three phases in 1925, 1931 and 1949. The Grand Reading Room is located in the library’s oldest section designed by architect William Edwards. Oddly, the University of Florida’s first dedicated library space was designed primarily for studiers, not books. The books were largely confined to a stack area on the first floor. Above it was a cavernous reading room with 28 banquet hall tables and seating for 336 users, more than one fifth of the student body in 1925. Its towering arched ceiling extends upward three stories. The

1940



*Fig. 1 This image depicts the southern end of the room prior to the construction of the south tower in 1931. Behind the circulation desk is where the entrance to the second reading room, now the Judaica Suite, was constructed. Notice, too, the card catalog to the right.*

*Fig. 3*



room is braced by what appear to be eleven massive wooden beams, but are actually steel I-beams sheathed in wood (Fig 2.). At first glance, the room seems like an incredible waste of space. The empty space, however, served practical purposes in addition to being aesthetically pleasing. On sunnier days, the eighteen cathedral windows along the east and west walls allowed ample light

for readers. Before air-conditioning, the windows provided good ventilation as did banks of windows on the north and south walls. The high ceilings allowed the Florida heat to escape up into the rafters.



*Fig. 2 Image of one of the steel beams supporting the Grand Reading Room provided by BBI Construction Management, Inc. during the 2020-21 restoration of the south facing exterior of Smathers Library.*

A second reading room was added when the south tower was constructed in 1931. Before World War II, it served as the reading room for juniors and seniors while the lower classes were restricted to the Grand Reading Room. This was not a library regulation, but one of many “rules” imposed and enforced by the student body. Since the war, the south tower room has served a number of purposes and is now the headquarters for the Price Library of Judaica (Fig 3.). The 1931 south tower also included suites of offices on the second and third floors. The second floor suite juts out into the Grand Reading Room and above it are three pairs of ornate windows which give the appearance of a balcony. Above the windows, are the seals of Oxford, Sorbonne and Salamanca, Europe’s oldest universities.





The last major transformation of the Grand Reading Room took place when the north wing of the Library, including the new lobby and main entry, was finished in 1949. This addition eliminated the bank of windows in the north gable, but provided a much needed doorway. Prior to 1949, the only entry and exit was on the south end, a problem duly noted by the county fire marshal in his annual inspections. To provide nocturnal studiers better lighting, the original overhead lights were replaced by very unattractive, but functional, dropdown fluorescent lights.

The blank wall where these windows once were allowed for the other defining feature of the Grand Reading Room: the mural (Fig. 3) on the north gable entitled, "History of Learning in Florida." It was painted over the course of several

months in 1953 and 1954 by art professor Hollis Holbrook in conjunction with the University's centennial celebrations. With its emphasis on orange and blue hues, it provides the room with a much-needed Gator Nation ambience. The mural and its recent restoration will be featured in a future piece in this series.

The Grand Reading Room remained a general study area until it was assigned to the Libraries' Special Collections in 1997. At that time, the dropdown fluorescent lights were replaced by replicas of the original lights and supplemented with table lights for researchers. The room was divided into a patron research area and a staff work area by a low partition wall. Nine of the long banquet tables were moved into the work area in 1997, but were

**GRAND READING ROOM NAME CHANGE THROUGH THE YEARS -**

The earliest known official name was General Reading Room from a 1947 library user guide. In later guides from the 1950s into the 1970s, it was known as the Humanities Reading Room. There was also a Social Science Reading Room (2nd floor north wing), a Science Reading Room (3rd floor north wing), and the University College Reading Room (1st floor north wing). There is no written explanation as to why these names were applied to each room. When I (Carl) started in the 1980s, people called it the Grand Reading Room, yet it was not official until Dean Russell made it so a few years ago.

*Fig. 4 South wall in Humanities Reading Room in 1977.*



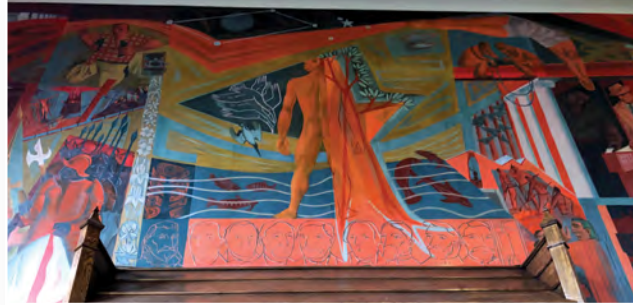


Fig. 3

transferred to the research area after the wall came down. To make them suitable for special collections, the tables were resurfaced and ninety years' worth of chewing gum was removed from underneath.

Today, the Grand Reading Room serves multiple purposes. First and foremost, it is the public service area for researchers using the special collections: rare print, archives, and manuscripts. The partition wall has been removed. The room, though, is far too large for just the handful of researchers who are there on any given day. Studiers are also allowed to use the room, but they are assigned seating away from the researchers and must adhere to the

same rules: no pens, no bags, cellphones on mute, etc. The iconic room is also used for special occasions. Recently, a series of programs co-hosted by the Smathers Libraries, the Bob Graham Center for Public Service, and the Bill Nelson Initiative on Ethics and Leadership (Fig. 5) have been held that included conversations with former Senator Bob Graham and current Senator Marco Rubio and a talk given by historian Jon Meacham. It was also the venue for President Fuchs' inauguration luncheon.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6 This photograph was shot from the south wall balcony during a summer session in the 1930s. Whereas the spring and fall semesters were restricted to men, summer sessions were coeducational. Most of the summer students were teachers seeking advanced degrees or certification in specific fields. Consequently, there were far more women than men in the summer.