Before Whitaker Library opened in 1968, the library was located in what was known as the “East Wing” of the McDowell Columns building, a four story brick building attached to the Columns that was torn down in 1968, following the completion of the new library. The Library was located on the second floor of the East Wing, just above the cafeteria and below two floors of living space for students.

The building sufficed, thanks largely to the daughter of Chowan’s first president Archibald McDowell, beloved Head Librarian, Eunice McDowell, who served the library from 1923 until 1932. She started a library club, which required members to send a new book to the library monthly, to expand the library’s collection. She convinced alumni to participate in a magazine subscription selling fundraiser to raise $15,000 to make renovations to the library that same year. McDowell was the first librarian to represent Chowan at the N.C. Library Association and the first librarian to implement the Dewey Decimal System at Chowan. McDowell’s love for the library was so strong that she remained the head librarian even after her promotion in 1926 to Dean of Women.

When Chowan reopened in 1949 following World War II, the East Wing was getting older, and the top two floors were eventually condemned. As the student body was growing, the library became nearly untenable. The noise level was one of many problems with the library. The old wooden floors creaked, chairs and tables made terrible screeches, and there were simply too many students in the room to keep them all quiet. “The ladies at the front desk would tell you that if you wanted quiet time, you would have to go downstairs to the cafeteria,” said former student and Dean of Admissions, Frank Stephenson.

It wasn’t long before the library became a liability to the college’s accreditation when it didn’t meet the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools’ (SACS) set requirements.

The need for a new library building had first been expressed by Dr. Whitaker in 1957, but there was a need for a number of new buildings and only so much money. Finally after a three-phase fundraising campaign that took less than two years to complete, the groundbreaking ceremony took place on February 23rd, 1967. The library, which was built in conjunction with a new performing arts building, Daniel Hall, was completed in the summer of 1968, after just over a year of construction.

At a cost of $850,000, the three story building itself was marvelous with enough space to shelve over
100,000 volumes and room for lounges and desks where students could study and work. The building could hold up to 400 people at one time and housed exhibit rooms for the numerous antiques the college had collected. Its reference section was said to be comparable to that of a four-year university. The interior steps of the building were even a highlight, being made of rare, handcrafted marble that was imported from Italy.

With the library completed, the Board of Trustees decided unanimously to name it after the man who was most responsible for its existence, Dr. Bruce E. Whitaker.

Soon after opening, Whitaker Library became home to three important collections, two of which remain in the library today. The first was the Government Depository. Chowan had actually been home to a Government Depository since 1963, becoming the first private junior college in the state to be selected. The documents, which at one time numbered 69,000 volumes, included topographical maps, information on the IRS, and government sailing regulations.

Both the McDowell Archival Collection and the Creech Collection of Baptist Materials were opened in 1980 and remain in Whitaker Library today. The McDowell Archival Collection, named for Archibald McDowell, houses rare items pertaining to the history of the University including the McDowell Family Bible, Chowan Catalogues, and issues of the Colonial Record and Historical Review of North Carolina from 1662 to 1790. The Creech Collection of Baptist Materials is named for Oscar Creech, author of A History of Chowan, and contains minutes of West Chowan Baptist Association meetings.

Over the past twenty years, numerous changes have taken place in Whitaker Library in order to keep the library up to date with both technological progress and the growth of the University. In 1993, when Chowan College finally returned to senior college status, the library worked to secure the books necessary for a four-year university, adding research materials for every course for the new juniors. Soon they started planning ahead with technology, having computers just as soon as the internet showed up, and in 1998, the entire catalogue was computerized.

Now with over 35 computers in use nearly every hour the library is open, access to information in both electronic and physical formats is plentiful, and students still appreciate the quiet spaces in the library to study and work on academic projects, like the recently-added private and group reading rooms.

Other recent improvements to the physical space of the library have included replacement of HVAC systems, UV protective windows and doors, energy efficient lighting throughout the building, carpeting the main floor, and adding WIFI throughout.

To be a part of Whitaker Library’s next big moment in history, join the Friends of Whitaker Library by contacting Linda Hassell at hassel@chowan.edu or 252-398-6586.