

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BIRTH OF THE WHITEFIELD PUBLIC LIBRARY

by
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Before the lightbulb was even invented by Thomas A. Edison in 1880, a group of entrepreneurial citizens of Whitefield decided to start a circulating library. On August 21, 1872, “a few ladies and gentlemen met and organized the Whitefield Library Association for the purpose of providing reading matter for themselves and their friends. Solicitors were sent out and the sum of \$174.95 was received from various contributions. With this sum the Circulating Library, so-called, was opened on January 11, 1873, with 208 volumes.” See, Letter to Mr. Andrew Carnegie from the Whitefield Woman’s Study Club (March, 1902).

For 14 years the books were circulated to various members of the association, fees were solicited, and additional books were added until the size of the collection (about 600 books) was too large to comfortably reside in one person’s residence. As this was taking place, the NH legislature enacted a law providing state aid to towns that would establish a free public library. The association offered their collection to the town and the town voted to accept the offer, setting aside a room in the basement of the Town Hall for their first official public library.

In March, 1887, the library was opened for two days a week. A librarian was hired at a nominal salary overseeing the circulation of the accumulated 1,026 volumes, which came from the Whitefield Library Association and through financial assistance from the state. Thereafter, the town budgeted “a small appropriation” each year (1900 - \$500; 1901 - \$525; 1902 - \$500) and the number of volumes grew to 5,082 volumes.

The library was bursting at the seams of its 25’ x 18’ quarters in the basement of the Town Hall when in 1902 the Whitefield Woman’s Study Club first reached out to Mr. Andrew Carnegie requesting funds to build a proper freestanding library building. They described the library as “having reached the limit of enlargement” with an entrance which could only be reached by crossing a double railroad track and the only light given by two windows on one side of the room.

The population of Whitefield at the time was about 2,100. Having full awareness of the financial wherewithal of the residents, the applicants admitted that the prospects of securing a building among the townspeople was remote. They suggested, however, that “[o]ur people have

shown by their patronage of the privileges of the library that they are fond of reading, and they will, without doubt, readily vote the annual appropriation necessary to maintain such a building and the library it contains.” Id.

Likely inspired by the successful application by the towns of Littleton, which received \$15,000 from Andrew Carnegie on March 14, 1902, and Berlin, which received \$17,000 on December 27, 1902, the ladies of the Woman’s Study Club began lobbying Carnegie and the Whitefield Selectmen for a similar gift from Andrew Carnegie.

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) was a self-made and self-educated man, born in Dunfermline, Scotland, emigrating with his family to Allegheny, PA in 1848. He ultimately made his fortune in the steel industry in Pittsburgh and in 1901 sold his steel enterprise to J.P. Morgan for over \$303 million dollars, turning his fortune over to philanthropic causes beginning with building public libraries all over the world. As a youth he was a prolific reader and was able to borrow books from free libraries and personal libraries, which would ultimately be his inspiration behind the library project. His philosophy on wealth, which he wrote about in article, “The Gospel of Wealth” (*North American Review*, 1889), is broken down in two parts - the first is the gathering and accumulation of wealth and the second is the subsequent distribution for benevolent causes.

The “Carnegie formula” for receiving a gift to build a free library required the local government to demonstrate the need for a public library, provide the land, and commit to providing a budget for operation and maintenance. The annual budget was to be ten percent of the cost of the library’s construction. The final condition was that all the services should be provided for free.

According to Carnegie, the public support must be from taxes rather than endowments because, as he wrote:

an endowed institution is liable to become the prey of a clique. The public ceases to take interest in it, or, rather, never acquire interest in it. The rule has been violated which requires the recipients to help themselves. Everything has been done for the community instead of its being only helped to help itself.¹

¹ Carnegie, Andrew (December 1889). "The Best Fields for Philanthropy". *North American Review*. **149**: 688–691.

A series of correspondence ensued after the first application was sent in March of 1902 from the Woman's Study Club. It was Josephine Brown Libbey, Chair of the Library Committee who carried on the correspondence with P. Boorstary, secretary for Andrew Carnegie. She informed him that the circulation of materials had increased gradually over the years and that in 1902 the approximately 5,000 books in their collection had been circulated over 16,000 times, which led all libraries in NH for the last six years. She was proud to also inform him that they catalogued everything according to the Dewey system and periodically published a Bulletin, which was the first of its kind in the history of NH libraries. She sent a sample of the Bulletin along with the list of the books in the library.

On March 10, 1903, at the annual town meeting, it was voted that the selectmen pursue the contract with Andrew Carnegie and "to raise annually by taxation, a sum not exceeding in amount, ten percent."

At that time the town did not know how much Mr. Carnegie was going to be giving, so they did not state a specific amount for the support of the library. At first the thought was that the town would receive \$10,000, which would have required the town to pay \$1,000 in support. This was going to be a challenge for the town that had traditionally paid around \$500 for the support of the library. After some back and forth correspondence with Mr. Carnegie, on April 23, 1903, he finally granted the town \$7,500 on the condition that the town spend \$750 in support of the library. The town held a special meeting on May 12, 1903 and it was voted to accept the offer.

The building was designed in the neoclassical revival style by architect J. Lawrence Berry of Boston and dedicated on September 6, 1904.