The Architecture of Literacy
Carnegie Libraries in the U.S.

Mary B. Dierickx

National Trust for Historic Preservation
November 3, 2006
• Carnegie libraries are a unique collection of buildings, united in time, space, and intent.

Goshen Indiana (1903) library
Indiana’s 1st Carnegie library
• Andrew Carnegie gave over $40 million for libraries in the US and nearly $50 million worldwide
• He funded libraries from about 1883 to 1919, the bulk of donations from 1901-1917
• Over 1600 Carnegie libraries were built in the US in 46 states
• The most Carnegie libraries were built in Indiana, at 164
• California is 2nd, with 142
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- New York State received the most money, at $6.5 million
- Pennsylvania was next at $4.6 million
• Over 2500 Carnegie libraries were built worldwide, in Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and other countries

Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada (1914)

Fraserburgh, Scotland (1905)
Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) believed that the rich should live simply, provide moderately for their families and then give away the rest of their money while still living, acting as trustees for their wealth.
• Carnegie believed in helping those who helped themselves by providing the means to improve themselves – libraries were high on his list

Harper’s Weekly, 3/30/1901 (NPS)
Carnegie’s 7 areas of philanthropy in 1889:

- Universities
- free libraries
- hospitals
- parks
- meeting and concert halls
- public baths
- churches.
• Andrew Carnegie gave away 90% of his fortune, about $350 million, in early 20th century dollars

• He established the Carnegie Corporation in 1911, one of the earliest philanthropic corporations

1st meeting of the Carnegie Corporation in 1911
• Carnegie divided his library giving into the retail (1883-1896) and wholesale periods (1896-1917)

• After 1917 the corporation gave to library education rather than buildings, although library funds were dispersed into the 1920s
• Carnegie’s early giving focused on his home areas in Pennsylvania and Dunfermline, Scotland. The library at Dunfermline (1883), at right, was his first library donation

• The Carnegie Free Library and Music Hall of Allegheny City, now in Pittsburgh (1886), at left, was his first library in the US
• The Fairfield, Iowa library (1892), right, Carnegie’s first library donation outside his home area. It is now a school.

• Carnegie gave about $2 million for 14 buildings during this retail period.

Homestead, PA (1896) library today
• Most libraries in the 19th century were subscription, private, attached to schools, or special collections.
• Library shelves in the earlier 19th century were usually closed and patrons had no direct access to books
• Library reforms, encouraged by Carnegie, called for better layouts, more public access, and professional staff

Pacific Branch, New York City (1903) library, professional librarians and plan with early use of radial stacks
Public libraries in the later 19th century were often housed in storefronts and on floors of buildings. Carnegie’s gift encouraged separate buildings for libraries.

Williamsburgh, Brooklyn: Storefront branch in 1899 and Carnegie library replacement in 1910
Public libraries began to be built in the later 19th century, Carnegie’s gift accelerated this pace.

Sparta, Wisconsin (1902) library today

DeKalb Branch, New York City (1905) library today
• Towns across the nation applied to Andrew Carnegie for a library

Cleburne, Texas (1904) museum & theater today

Girard, Kansas (1906) library today
• James Bertram (1872-1934), Andrew Carnegie’s Secretary, and after 1911 Secretary of the Carnegie Corporation, managed the applications and influenced library designs
Bertram scrutinized the answers to the library questionnaire. He wrote to Independence, Kansas:

“Your statement of the extraordinary development of Independence is not borne out by the fact that only one thousand dollars a year can be guaranteed to support the library”

Independence, Kansas (1907) library today $22,500 grant
• Carnegie would deal only with municipalities, not library boards or private groups

• Greenfield, Indiana originally asked for $30,000; James Bertram wrote:
  “A request for $30,000 to erect a library building for 5000 people is so preposterous that Mr. Carnegie cannot give it any consideration.”

Greenfield, Indiana (1909) commercial today $10,000 grant
• Andrew Carnegie invented cost accounting and greatly leveraged the amount he gave
• He required that municipalities provide a site, books, staffing, and maintenance in perpetuity of the libraries
• It was not always popular with municipalities when the real cost was computed
• The average grant was $15-30,000 but there was great variation. The earlier libraries were more expensive on average than the later ones.

Bellefontaine, OH (1905) library today $14,000 grant

Alameda, CA (1903) library today $35,000 grant

Medford, Wisconsin (1913) library today $6,000 grant
Carnegie also gave large grants to cities, starting with $5.2 million to New York City for a branch library system in 1901, 67 libraries were built.

Stone Avenue Branch (1914), New York City library today
• Philadelphia received $1.5 million in 1903 for a main library and branches
• Other cities received grants to establish branches, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Baltimore, St. Louis, Detroit, Louisville, New Orleans, Denver, Portland, Oregon, Seattle

Lehigh Branch, Philadelphia (1906) library today

Richmond Branch, San Francisco (1914) library today

East End Branch, Cincinnati (1907) community center today

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• Along with Philadelphia, St. Louis, Detroit, Washington, DC, and San Francisco, 34 cities in all received funds for main libraries
• Main libraries were grander in style and plan than the small local and branch libraries

Detroit Main Library, (1913-21) library

San Francisco Main Library (1917) museum

Washington, DC (1902) museum
• By 1919 there were about 3,500 public libraries in the US, half of them Carnegies.
Over 1400 communities in the US received Carnegie grants

Waterville, Maine (1905) library today

Cedar Rapids, Iowa (1904) museum gift shop today

Niles, Michigan (1902) chamber of commerce today
• Carnegie did not insist on racial integration, saying he did not interfere in local matters
• Carnegie funded libraries for African-Americans, mainly in the south in Louisville, Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans and other cities, and also outside the south in such towns as Evansville, Indiana

Mound Bayou, Mississippi (under construction, 1910, burned)

Booker T Washington requested library funds for Mound Bayou, a small African American community. The community could not support a library. The building was used as a Masonic Hall, then burned down in the 1930s
• Communities frequently went over budget and built libraries Carnegie and Bertram considered too elaborate

• IN 1904 Bertram began reviewing library plans as part of the application process

• In 1911 he published “Notes on the Erection of Library Bildings” with sample floor plans and notes about modesty in design, reflecting Andrew Carnegie’s preferences

Sample library plans from “Notes”
• Carnegie libraries have a variety of plan types
• Characteristic features:
  – large, open spaces rather than small nooks
  – accessible, perimeter book shelves
  – reference desk located so that librarian can see several spaces

Webster Branch, New York City (1906) library today
• Communities wanted a combination of uses: library, theaters, cultural centers, club spaces, gymnasiums, museums

• Carnegie held the line at libraries, although lecture rooms or community spaces were accommodated, mainly in the basement

Sample Plan D in “Notes” showing lecture room in basement
The Carnegies vary widely but many share type and materials:

- Masonry construction
- Plaster walls and ceilings, wood furnishings
- 1-2 stories high
- High base
- Steps leading to entrance
- Windows at 1\textsuperscript{st} floor set high on facade
• Carnegies came in a wide variety of styles
• The emblematic Carnegie is Classical in style with steps leading to a center entrance

Napoleon, Ohio (1913) book storage today

Sonoma, California (1913) visitors' center today
• The majority of the libraries were classical in style: Beaux Arts, Classical Revival, Renaissance Revival

  Kokomo, Indiana (1905) demolished

  Salem, Indiana (1904) library today

  Xenia, Ohio (1906) library today
Paris, Illinois (1904) library today
Jacksonville, Florida (1902) offices today
Paxton, Illinois (1904) library today
Houston, Texas (1904) demolished

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Port Huron, Michigan (1904) museum today

Lexington, Kentucky (1906) library programs today

Cedarville, Ohio (1908) college classrooms and offices today
The other eclectic styles of the early 20th century were represented, including Romanesque Revival, Tudor Revival, Prairie, Mediterranean and other variations.
Parsons, Kansas (1911) arts center today

Richfield, Utah (1911 grant) government offices today

Hoquiam Timberland (1911) Hoquiam, Washington library today
• Architecture firms developed specialization in Carnegie libraries
• Edward L. Tilton of New York City helped James Bertram develop his “Notes” on libraries and designed libraries across the country
• Other Carnegie library architects:
  – Patton & Miller, Chicago
  – Wilson B Parker, Indianapolis
  – Clifford Shopbell, Evansville
  – W H Weeks, California

Washington Irving Branch, New York City (1923, Edward L Tilton) library today
• Today over 1100 Carnegie libraries have survived
• Over 700 are still libraries
• Other are used as museums, community centers, offices, and arts centers
• Hundreds are listed in the National Register

Decatur, Alabama (1904) arts center today
• The Carnegie libraries of the US are a significant and irreplaceable collection as essential to producing a literate and educated populace today as they were over 100 years ago
Many people have written about, photographed, and publicized Carnegie libraries in the US. Images and information in this lecture primarily come from:

Mary Ellen Armentrout, *Carnegie Libraries of Ohio*
George Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*
Mary B Dierickx, *The Architecture of Literacy*
Theodore Jones, *Carnegie Libraries Across America*
Alan McPherson, *Temples of Knowledge*
Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to All*
Joseph Wall, *Andrew Carnegie*

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