

Brantford Public Library: The Early Years



In 1836 Dr. Charles Duncombe organized a Mechanics' Institute which was modeled after the ones in England where working people could pay a small fee to read books and newspapers. However, the following year the Institute closed when Dr. Duncombe was forced to flee to the United States as one of the leaders on the losing side in the 1837 Rebellion. It was several years later before the Mechanics' Institute in Brantford reopened. The Institute was supported by the fees of members and the proceeds of an annual excursion. It was first located in some rooms on the north side of Colborne Street somewhere between King Street and the Lorne Bridge. While the name of the first librarian isn't known, other librarians included Duncan McKay and John Sutherland. The longest serving librarian was James Woodyatt, Brantford's first city clerk, who greatly increased the size of the collection. The Institute moved to rooms on the second floor of the Roy building on the corner of Colborne Street and South Market Street which was later occupied by the Bank of Toronto.

Another location was on the second floor of the YMCA building on Colborne Street.

The listing in the **County of Brant Gazetteer and Directory for 1869-70** for the Brantford Mechanics' Institute and Literary Association was: "Colborne Street, established 1836. Contains 1,600 volumes. Thomas Cowherd, President; John Sutherland, Jackson Forde, Vice-Presidents; William Watt, Treasurer; James Woodyatt, Secretary and Librarian; Thomas James, Cabinet keeper; Managing Committee, John Edgar, Samuel Tapscott, Robert Alger, Geo. R. Van Norman, Rev. William Cochrane, B. F. Fitch, Chas. Greenaway. Number of members about 70."

On January 23, 1870 a fire destroyed the building at the corner of Market and Colborne Streets where the library was located and most of the books, records, and fixtures, worth almost \$1,600, were lost (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, January 28, 1870, p. 3). At a meeting of the Committee of the Brantford Mechanics' Institute and Literary Association a few days after the fire a committee was established to find new premises. The remaining books were taken to the Kerby House block on George Street with George Lindley and J. W. Lethbridge appointed as librarians. The library moved to the Heyd Block on the George Street side when it was completed.

In March 1882, the Ontario government passed legislation permitting municipalities to establish libraries that were open to everybody. Brantford City Council passed a bylaw on January 7, 1884 to establish a free library. The first library board included: Rev. Dr. Cochrane, who was the chairman of the board until his death in October 1898, James Woodyatt, Wm. Watt Sr., Rev. Dr. Mackenzie, and Rev. Father Lennon. James Horning became the first permanent librarian, a position he held from 1884 until 1901 when he was forced to retire due to failing health. E. D. Henwood took over as librarian. Mr. Horning died in July 1902 (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, July 10, 1902, p. 1, 16).

On February 28, 1902, County Court Judge Alexander David Hardy wrote a letter to Andrew Carnegie asking for a grant to build a new library in Brantford. Carnegie, who had made a lot of money in the steel industry, was donating money to cities in Canada and the United States to build libraries, provided that certain conditions were met. On March 14, 1902, Judge Hardy received a letter asking for further information which he provided a few days later. It was on April 8, 1902 that the Judge received a letter from James Bertram, Andrew Carnegie's secretary, confirming that Brantford would be receiving \$30,000 for a new library. The letter stated: "If the city of Brantford, Ontario pledges itself by resolution of council to support a free public library at a cost of not less than \$3,000 a year and provides a suitable site, Mr. Carnegie will be glad to furnish \$30,000 for the erection of a free public library building." (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, April 17, 1902, p. 13). The building cost more than originally anticipated so Andrew Carnegie was asked for an additional \$5,000 which he provided.

With the funding of the library secured the debate began as to where it should be built. It took several months before City Council and the Library Board reached an agreement on the site. One possible location was land on Dalhousie

Street that the city already owned. This site had been vacant for the past six years ever since Waterous Engine Works had moved to South Market Street. The other potential site was on George Street but the city would have to use taxpayers' money to buy the land. On June 19th the headline in the newspaper read: "Council locks horns over library site: City Council reached a deadlock over library site last night-no discussion-third reading of the by-law was lost-how the vote stood" (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, June 19, 1902, p. 1). Seven of the alderman and the mayor had voted for the park site while the other eight aldermen had voted for the Waterous site and council adjourned without a decision being made. After six months of fighting, Council finally agreed to buy the "park site" on George Street (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, July 10, 1902, p. 1).



The architect's general plans for the new library were accepted the following month (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, August 21, 1902, p. 8, 12). One of the few changes made to the original plans was to add a dome to the building to make it look taller and have a circular rotunda. The newspaper provided a brief description of the proposed building with a sketch showing the front elevation and a layout of the interior of the proposed library. In September 1902, at a joint meeting of the Public Library Board and the special committee of City Council, the detailed plans for the library were accepted with very few changes (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, September 25, 1902, p. 8).

After the city received James Bertram's letter stating that the city had met the necessary

conditions, the corner stone of the building was laid on December 16, 1902 by Reverend Dr. Mackenzie, the Chairman of the Library Board (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, December 18, 1902, p. 6). Included in the articles enclosed in the receptacle was a "copy of the first catalog issued by the library in 1884, and a copy of the present catalog up to September 22, 1902". The architects were Stewart, Stewart & Taylor while Schultz Brothers were the contractors. It was expected that the building would be completed by July 1, 1903 but a shortage of terra cotta caused problems for the builders and resulted in a long delay in construction.

The new library opened on July 4, 1904. The newspaper provided a detailed description of the interior and exterior of the new facility (**Brantford Weekly Expositor**, July 7, 1904, p. 11). It was a rectangular building with a full basement beneath the main floor and tall windows which provided plenty of interior light. Features of the building included: twenty stone steps from the sidewalk to the front door, a large portico supported by cement Ionic pillars, recessed display cases under the portico on either side of the front door, a marbled vestibule, and a large rotunda with a mosaic tiled floor. The embossed verse in Latin above the door was translated as: "I have erected a monument more lasting than bronze". The names of prominent English authors such as Burns, Tennyson, Shakespeare, and Dickens, were carved above the windows.



In 1910 a juvenile department was established and the Library Board decided at a board meeting to set aside a room solely for children (**Brantford Expositor**, November 2, 1910, p. 6). By 1913 the library was running out of space so Judge Hardy requested funds from Andrew Carnegie for an addition to the library. The library received \$13,000 from Mr. Carnegie as well as some money from the City and the basement and the stack room were enlarged.

Mrs. S. W. Secord, the first female member of the Library Board, was appointed in January 1918. By 1921 there were 34,902 books in the library, 3,400 bound magazines, and a circulation of 142,580. In comparison, there had been 17,629 books in the collection with a circulation of 70,700 in 1902.

E. D. Henwood, who had succeeded James Horning as the librarian, was the son of Dr. Reginald Henwood and the grandson of Dr. Alfred Digby (both former mayors of Brantford). He was responsible for introducing the card system of indexing, instrumental in establishing a children's section, and increasing the number of volumes in the library to 40,000 during his years of service. He died in April 1924 (**Brantford Expositor**, April 17, 1924, p. 2). Judge Hardy, Chairman of the Library Board, said: "Under his guidance the library made marked advances and became a leader among smaller cities of the province. He loved the atmosphere of books and had in a marked degree the faculty of making the library a popular resort for all seekers after knowledge." (**Brantford Expositor**, April 17, 1924, p. 2). In 1925 a memorial tablet which commemorated his life and work was unveiled by D. J. Waterous, the chairman of the Library Board (**Brantford Expositor**, May 7, 1925, p. 15).

After the death of E. D. Henwood, Miss Winnifred Matheson was the chief librarian for seven years. A graduate of the Riverside Library School in California, she had joined the library staff in 1918. She died in July 1932 (**Brantford Expositor**, July 20, 1932, p. 7). As part of a tribute to Miss Matheson, Judge Hardy stated: "Her pride was to increase the usefulness of the library not only for cultural but practical purposes. Notwithstanding the limited amounts at the disposal of the board she succeeded in increasing the circulation since taking charge in 1925 by many thousands each year and in 1931 it reached 250,441." (**Brantford Expositor**, July 21, 1932, p. 8).



Miss Vera Prime was Miss Winnifred Matheson's replacement as chief librarian. She had worked at the library since 1924 and was the chief librarian for fourteen years until 1946 when she had to retire because of illness. Under her direction, the children's department was extended and remodeled, the adult section greatly expanded, and the music record library started. In cooperation with Mrs. W. Ross Macdonald, Miss Prime organized a group known as the Friends of the Library which was formed to cooperate in library projects and in bringing art exhibitions to its gallery. Vera Prime died in May 1962 (**Brantford Expositor**, May 25, 1962, p. 16). Miss Joyce King replaced Miss Prime as chief librarian and was still in charge in 1967.

Reference Room, Main Floor

Judge Alexander David Hardy's contribution to the local public library was recognized in October 1956 when new exterior steps at the library were dedicated to his memory. The inscription reads: "These steps were dedicated in 1956 to the memory of Judge Alexander David Hardy, 1859-1951, who was instrumental in obtaining the Andrew Carnegie grant for the erection of this library, which was opened to the public in 1904" (**Brantford Expositor**, October 19, 1956, p. 17).

For more information:

- [CornerStoneofCarnegieLibrary.pdf](#)
- [Reville's History Volume 1 \(p. 145-146 of PDF\)](#)
- [Expositor Semi-Centennial 1877-1927 \(p. 19 of PDF\)](#)
- [Expositor October 1909 \(p. 42, 63 of PDF\) \(photos\)](#)