

# Carnegie name graces libraries across Canada, around the world



Andrew Armitage  
OUR HISTORY

I've had a constant companion down through the years — and his name is Andrew Carnegie.

The first public library that I ventured into at the age of six was a Carnegie building in Charleston, W. Va. It smelled of lemon oil and dust. At library school, we learned that the "best gift" a town or city could have was a Carnegie Public Library.

For a while, I worked as a field consultant in Pennsylvania, visiting and attempting to improve the Keystone State's public library system. And one of the libraries that occupied my time was in the town of Carnegie. Not only was it a public library (built sometime before the First World War), it had a swimming pool and an exercise track.

And then, for nearly 30 years, I worked in Owen Sound's public library with a portrait of the great man on the wall. For all those years and many more, he looked down on what he had begun to create when he funded his first library in Braddock, Pa., in 1889.

Andrew Carnegie was born in Dunfermline, Scotland, in 1835. His father, a craft weaver who was also an original member of a Tradesmen's Library, brought the family to the United States in 1848 where Andrew's formal education ended. As a teenage telegraph messenger, he borrowed books from a private library.

When it was converted to a mechanic and apprentices' library with a two-dollar annual subscription rate, Carnegie wrote a letter to the editor of the Pittsburgh Dispatch arguing that the fee should be eliminated and signed it "A working boy." Free public library service would be his mantra for the 2,509 public libraries he funded between 1883 and 1929.

Andrew Carnegie became an industrialist genius in an era with no federal income tax. In 1901, he retired at the age of 66, selling Carnegie Steel to J.P. Morgan for half a billion dollars. For the next two decades, he

would use that money for philanthropy, not just for public libraries but for many other projects including the Tuskegee Institute, the Carnegie Hero Fund and the Carnegie Endowment for Peace and even the provision of church organs. Andrew Carnegie died in 1919.

A Captain of Industry and the "Hero of Steel," Carnegie was, at one time, the wealthiest man in the world. He also had a dark side, ruthlessly putting down strikes by his workers including the bloody Homestead Strike of 1892 while also being held culpable for the Johnstown Flood when a dam burst on a holiday lake where the Carnegies summured.

He first began to fund public libraries in Scotland, endowing buildings in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Inverness before enriching the United States with 1,681 of them. In total, the Carnegie Corporation donated a total of \$56,162,622.97 to free public library buildings worldwide. Of that amount, \$2,556,660 was granted for public libraries in Canada.

The Carnegie Formula for public libraries was simplicity itself. An applying community had to demonstrate the need for a public library, then provide a free building site. But most importantly, the municipality must agree to provide 10% of the cost of the library's construction to support its operation. And finally, there must be free public library service for all. Fees were outlawed.

In Canada, the Georgian Bay town of Collingwood made the first request for Carnegie funds in 1899. In short order, other communities such as Stratford, Windsor, Sarnia, Berlin, Smith's Falls, Lindsay, Brantford, Paris and Brockville followed suit.

As one of the earliest applicants, Collingwood followed a pattern already set in the United States to make their Carnegie library more than just a library. Requesting a total of \$25,000, the design included, "Besides the library proper and the book-stacks and Reading Room, there should be a gymnasium for young men and one for women, a swimming bath, a camera room, a lecture room, a children's room, a recreation room, etc."



Supplied photo

The original Carnegie Public Library in Owen Sound.

Not every town council was amenable to the lure of free Carnegie dollars. In Orillia, opposition mounted as it did in other more fiscally conservative communities where book reading was looked upon as somewhat of a frill.

One Orillia correspondent asked, "Should Orillia ask Mr. Andrew Carnegie for \$10,000 to build a free public library? Most emphatically I think not. So far Orillia is a free and independent town, owing nothing to any special favour from any person or corporation outside of her own limits. Why should we now sink our independence by begging an unfriendly foreigner to give us of his ill-gotten gains?"

In October, 1855, 102 citizens signed a charter "to establish a Mechanics' Institute and Library Association in the Town of Sydenham under the name 'The Owen Sound Mechanics' Institute.' A forerunner of the free public library, Mechanics Institutes charged an annual subscription rate to use its services. Not only was this library service not free, it did not include women as members until the late 1870s.

With the passage of Ontario's Free Public Library Act of 1882, local library boards came into

existence to provide library leadership. And in Owen Sound in 1904, the library board applied to the town for permission to seek funds from the Carnegie Corporation.

The subsequent course of events did not go easily. Year after year, town council debated the wisdom of local support for a public library. It would take, of course, taxpayers' dollars to support such a service — and what about the people who didn't use it? A decade would pass before a bylaw introducing free library service and creating the Owen Sound Public Library was finally approved in 1911.

Matters had hardly changed when I arrived in Owen Sound 60 years later. At that time, the library board had been making application to city council for years for a new library building. Opposition on council was staunch with one councillor announcing that he had parked in front of the public library counting the people who entered. His conclusion? There was simply not a demand for new and improved library facilities.

Grey and Bruce County community to enjoy the pleasures of a Carnegie public library. When the Markdale library opened in June, 1915 with speeches, bands, and a parade, it was said to "add honour and dignity to the book-loving intelligence of the province."

Owen Sound's Carnegie Public Library opened on February 3, 1914. On that date, the headline in the Owen Sound Sun announced "New Library Open Today." The story read, "Opening of Carnegie Public Library this afternoon marks a period in the history of Owen Sound. Today, the town comes formally into possession of its \$26,000 library without a dollar of expenditure, but from today the town is bound, under the agreement with the Carnegie Trust to maintain it."

Owen Sound's new public library was a magnificent building for its day. Designed by Forster and Clark Architects of Owen Sound, it is still a prime example of the classical design favoured by the Carnegie Corporation. A 7,500 square foot building, its main hall has an arched ceiling and was originally illuminated with opalescent bowls. A reporter of the time stated they "cast a soft glow over the reading tables, lighting the entire room evenly and making reading a pleasure."

Owen Sound was not the only



Andrew Carnegie

Carnegie public libraries graced the streets of Port Elgin, Durham, Hanover, Kincardine, Walkerton, Mount Forest, Lucknow, and even Teeswater, at a population of 900, the smallest of Canadian Carnegies. Over the years, some Ontario Carnegie buildings have been torn down while others have been successfully renovated.

Wherever you travel in North America, you are bound to run into a Carnegie Public Library. And in the good old days, you had to be healthy to use them since many if not most were placed on a rise, at the crest of a hill or slope, with many steps leading into their hallowed halls. Unlike the United States where public library service is in serious decline, Canada's public library system has never been healthier since the days of Andrew himself.

Andrew Armitage appears Fridays.



Supplied photo

Teeswater's Carnegie library.



Supplied photo

Markdale's Carnegie library.

20 now doing in Grade 3? For the record, the answers are: 1. 366,952,283; 2.

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