

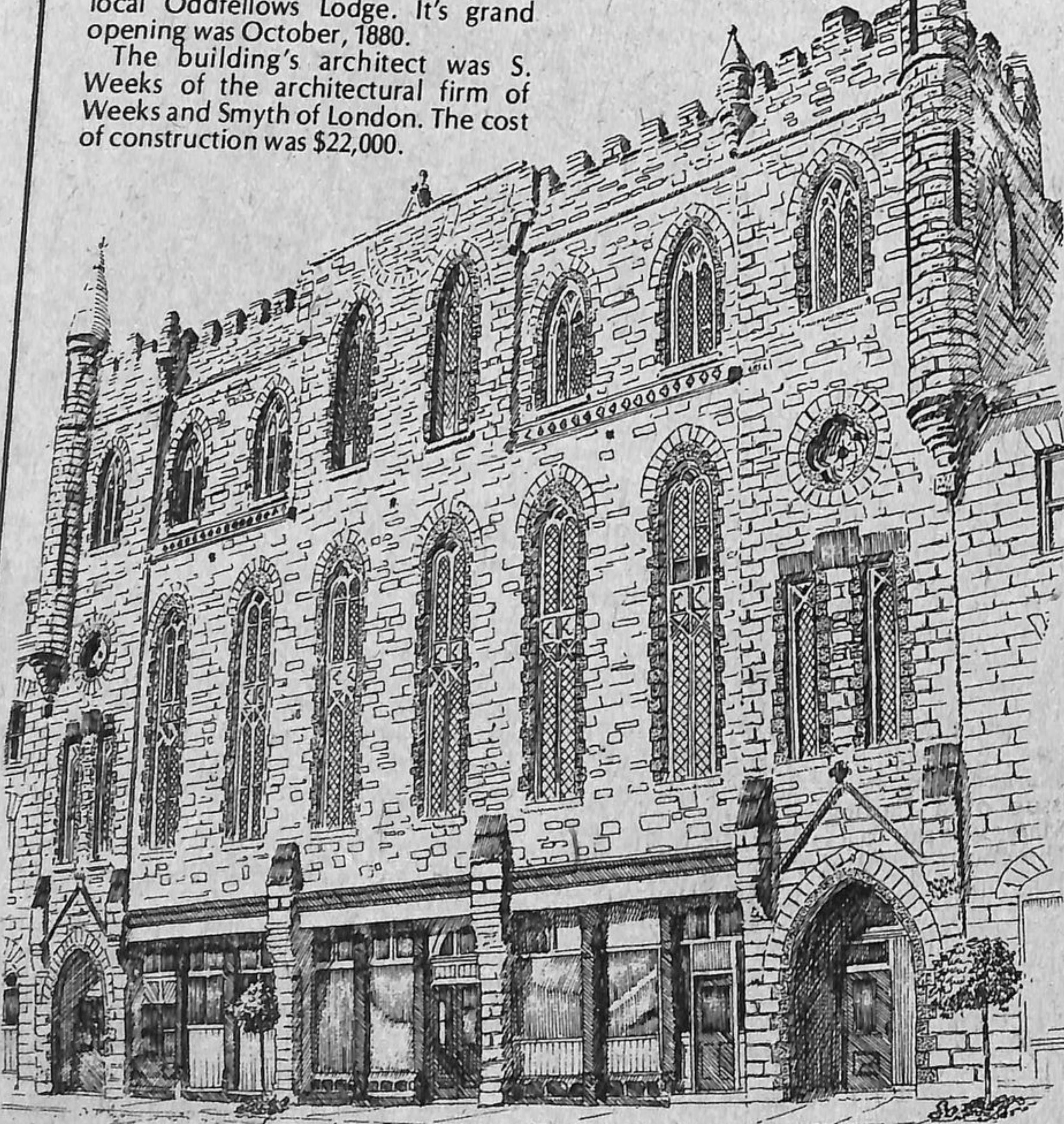
Opera House

Along with the town hall, the Opera House is without doubt one of St. Marys' most impressive buildings.

Located on the west side of Water Street, just south of the main street, the Opera House was built by the local Oddfellows Lodge. Its grand opening was October, 1880.

The building's architect was S. Weeks of the architectural firm of Weeks and Smyth of London. The cost of construction was \$22,000.

L.W. (Curly) Wilson, St. Marys own historian and resident here for more than 80 years, can well recall when the



opera house was the cultural centre of the community. He relates how the ground floor of the building was used for shops while the theatre, which could seat 800 patrons, was on the second floor. The Oddfellows meeting hall was on the third floor.

But because the ground floor stores never attracted the business anticipated by the Oddfellows, they were forced to sell the building for a mere \$10,000 to a harness-making company in 1904. Three years later the building again changed hands when the G. Carter and Son Company took over ownership.

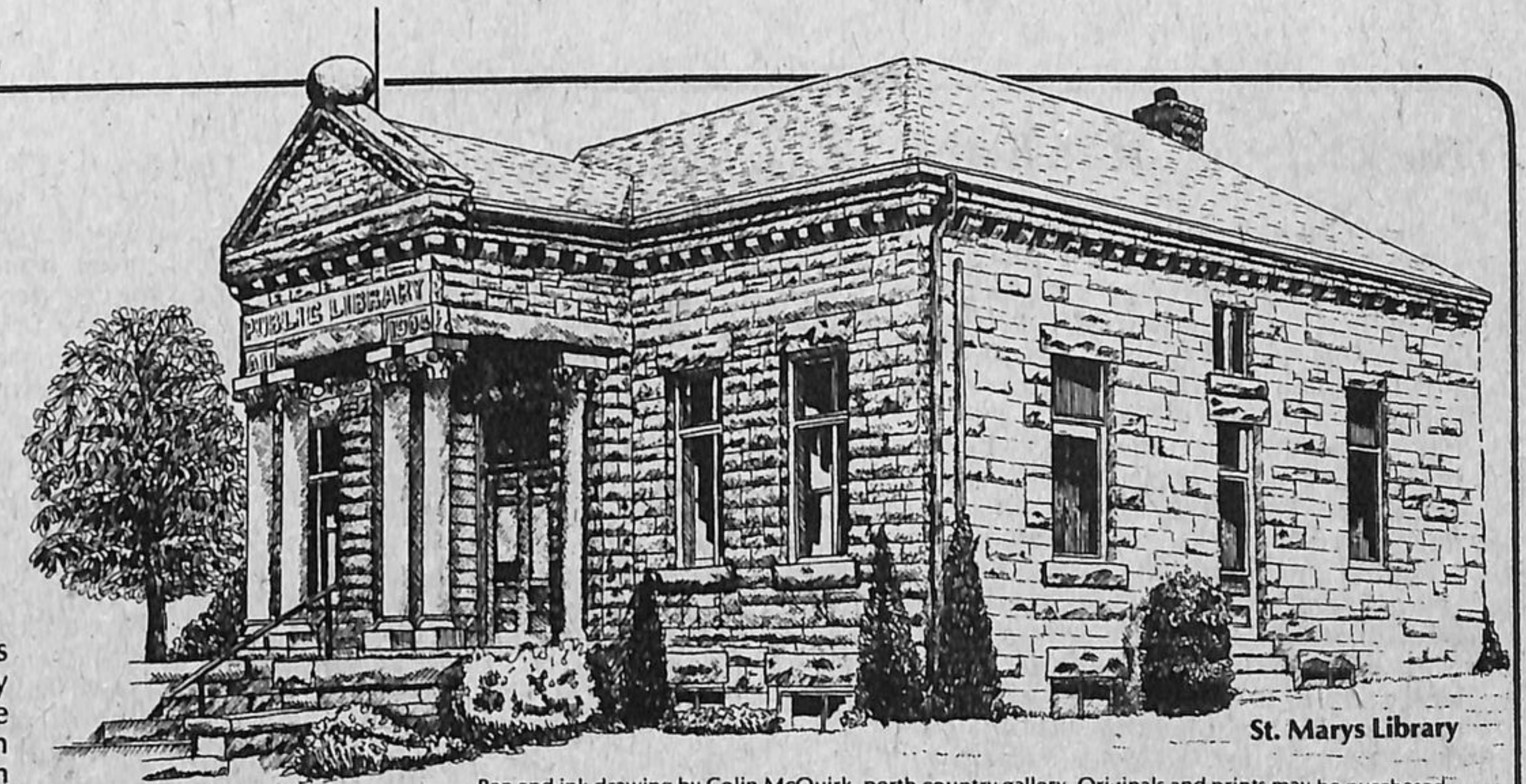
The grain merchants went into bankruptcy in 1919, however, and the Royal Bank became owner of the property.

One distinguished speaker at the Opera House was Sir John A. Macdonald. He spoke to a local gathering in the auditorium during his last political campaign. The Marx Brothers were among the performers appearing on stage and Uncle Tom's Cabin was a popular attraction which was performed on several occasions.

In 1920 the St. Marys Milling Company bought the Opera House and, to facilitate its milling operation, carried out extensive alterations to the building.

The building has since been owned by the Wolverton Flour Mills Company and Great Star Flour Mills Ltd. In 1973 a local development company, Trifid Realty Developments, purchased the building. The company has been considering a number of uses for the property. Included in its plans are the establishment of a number of boutiques, a first class restaurant, outdoor cafe, a small convention centre and some kind of restored auditorium area.

St. Marys Public Library



St. Marys Library

Pen and ink drawing by Colin McQuirk, perth country gallery. Originals and prints may be purchased.

Visitors to St. Marys remark on the beauty of the grey stone building of Grecian architecture which houses St. Marys public library. Complementing the stone town hall next door it helps form a focal point of interest which emphasizes the solidarity of this strongly built community.

The predecessor of the present library was established in 1857 and known as the Mechanics Institute. It occupied no building but used rented rooms in downtown stores to serve the needs of those early citizens. The primary object was education, through books on practical subjects, lectures by leading people of the district, and night schools. The membership fee was one dollar a year, and management was by a committee elected from the membership.

Late in the last century Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish immigrant who rose to head the vast United States Steel Corporation, seized the idea of using his personal fortune to endow free public libraries. Before his death he gave 2,811 library buildings (but not books) to communities in the United States, Britain and Canada. Of this achievement a biographer writes:

"Virtually nonexistent in the U.S. before 1880, the free library, as a result of Carnegie philanthropy, became almost as much a part of America as the schoolhouse or church"

Ordinarily, no objection would have been raised by the proposed beneficiaries of Carnegie's great wealth. However, some people felt strongly that Carnegie had exploited sweat-shop labour in his steel mills, and opinion was divided in St. Marys too on the morality of accepting "tainted" money. In January, 1904 the issue of a Carnegie library for St. Marys was put to a vote of the people. The count showed a majority of only 35 votes in favour of accepting the Carnegie offer. At a subsequent town council meeting the clerk read this communication from Mr. Carnegie's secretary: "... if the Town agrees by resolution of Council to maintain a Public Library at a cost of not less than One Thousand Dollars a year, and provide a suitable site for the Library, Mr. Carnegie will be pleased to fur-

nish Ten Thousand Dollars to erect a Public Library Building for St. Marys."

The municipal council agreed to these conditions, accepted the architectural design used in other Carnegie libraries and the building was completed in 1905.

As one walks up the stately entrance to the library, a stained-glass window above the front door portrays the Lamp of Learning. Inside the building many of the original oak shelves are still in use, as in a rare Pequegnot clock. A portrait of Andrew Carnegie hangs over the fireplace, and nearby are framed copies of the 1904 negotiations with Mr. Carnegie. A fire destroyed part of the building in 1929, but this merely gave impetus to further improvements.

Over the years the town of St. Marys has generously supported the library, and the unpaid board members have devoted much time and energy toward maintaining it in good condition.

Visitors are always welcome to come in and browse.

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