



“THE BUILDING WAS OPEN FOR ALL TIME”
THE NEW BRUNSWICK FREE
PUBLIC LIBRARY TO 1903:
A CENTENNIAL TRIBUTE



At 9 o'clock on Monday morning, November 16, 1903, the New Brunswick Free Public Library officially opened at its new location on 60 Livingston Avenue. Those present included librarian Cornelia A. See, her entire staff of four library assistants, Isaac Griggs (the janitor), and New Brunswick architect George K. Parsell, who designed the neoclassical library. As the *New Brunswick Daily Times* reported, “When the hour for opening the building had arrived, Miss See opened the doors and the building was open for all time.” Frances Cropsey, of Livingston Avenue, was the very first person to check out a book from the new library.

New Brunswick had a public library as far back as 1796, when a group of leading citizens met at an establishment known as the New Coffee House (most likely at the corner of Albany and Peace streets) to form the Union Library Company, "an institution," as local historian John P. Wall writes, "for the use of the public, and the promotion of literature and morality in the City of New Brunswick."

A share in the new library cost \$5, not an inconsiderable sum in those days.

John Hill was elected to oversee the Union Library Company's original

collection of sixteen books. Among those were Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*: the New Brunswick Free Public Library has these volumes preserved in its archives. By the time Hill died in 1816, the collection had burgeoned to 366 titles. For the convenience of Hill's successor, Hannah Scott, the library was transferred to her family home at the northwest corner of Albany and Neilson streets.

About 1820 a second city library was instituted, which merged in 1821 with the Union Library Company to form the New Brunswick Library Company. This operated until at least 1847, but dissolved sometime before 1855; its books were transferred to Rutgers College. When the public library closed, the local newspaper received letters like the following: "Because we have no public library . . .



The first free public library in New Jersey opened in 1883, in the Schneeweiss house at George and Church streets.

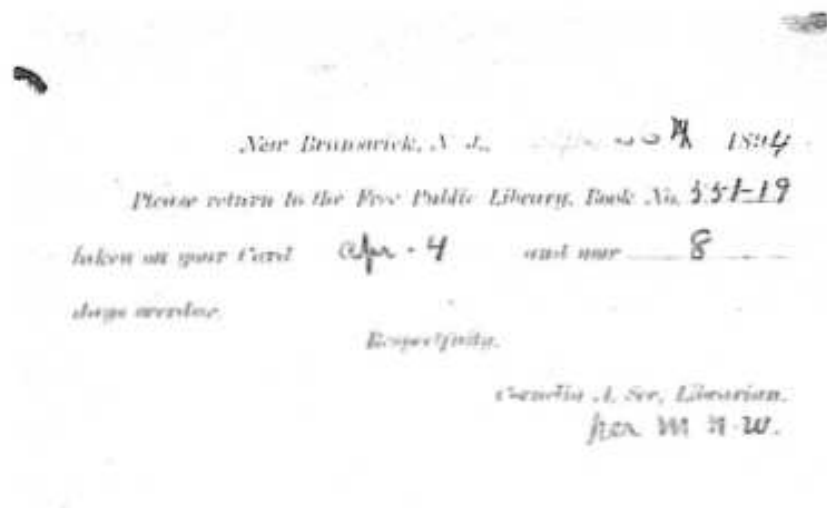
parents do not take books into their families, or spend their evenings at home reading aloud for their own and their family's benefit. When fathers and mothers once taste this pleasure they will then know what true happiness is. Rum, the gaming table, and the bar-room have no attractions compared with this."

In 1868, the YMCA retrieved the old New Brunswick Library collection from Rutgers and supplemented it with additional books to begin a new library, totaling 1,400 volumes. Borrowing privileges (together with use of the YMCA) cost \$2 a year, or \$20 for life. The YMCA's library committee recommended that "efforts be made at once to secure lady subscribers," and posted registration lists at local bookstores. The YMCA eventually presented its library (which had grown to 2,900 books) to the Free Circulating Library.

New Brunswick is the first city in New Jersey to have established a free public library. Other cities had free reading rooms, but there was always a charge to borrow books and take them home. On March 23, 1883, the New Brunswick Free Circulating Library opened at a small frame house on the corner of George and Church streets, later moving to the old State Bank Building at Peace and Albany.

In the Library's annual report of 1890, Secretary and Treasurer Mary Neilson writes, "It will interest many to know that this, the first free Public Library in New Jersey, has been of use to others that have since grown up in the State; it has been often visited by those active in forming and re-forming libraries, and in many

instances its methods, which are based upon the experience of the best libraries in the country, were adopted; especially in small libraries which aim to accomplish the greatest good at the least possible cost." A plaque that still hangs in the Library's entranceway commemorates



A memento from the Library archives: Librarian Cornelia A. See mailed this overdue book notice in 1894

Mrs. Neilson's indefatigable work on behalf of the Library and other New Brunswick institutions.

In 1884, the New Jersey state legislature passed a law providing for the establishment of public libraries, and, following a municipal election in which voters cast an almost unanimous ballot, the Free Public Library of the City of New Brunswick was incorporated in 1891. The Free Circulating Library merged with the Public Library, which was located at George and Paterson streets from 1892 until the new Carnegie building opened.

In 1902, as part of his campaign to fund public libraries across the country, steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie offered the city \$50,000 to erect a new library building. (Notably, the renovation of the Library's Children's Room in 2003, funded by Johnson & Johnson, also cost \$50,000.) The portrait of Andrew Carnegie in the Library's entranceway was hung in 1935, on the centenary of Carnegie's birth.

Carnegie's gift gave rise to an intense political battle among Mayor George A. Viehmann and his fellow Library trustees. The most contentious issue was the new building's location. Mayor Viehmann and his supporters favored the Livingston Avenue site, which at the time, as John P. Wall writes, "was a hollow filled with willow trees and had a running brook, a swimming hole under the culvert for the boys of that time." Opponents of the Livingston Avenue site proposed locations closer to the downtown business district. After the resignation of one trustee who wielded a crucial vote against Livingston Avenue, the way was cleared for the Library's construction.

The Library's cornerstone was laid just in time to prevent its inscription, "1902," from being inaccurate: it was put in place on December 31 of that year. Present at the ceremony were the Mayor and other Library trustees, George K. Parsell, city clergy, and other officials. Inside the cornerstone is a copper box containing mementos of the time: coins, newspapers, business cards, a roster of State officials, library reports

and journals, and photographs of thirty principal libraries in New Jersey.

And so the foundation was laid for the first 100 years of community service at the Free Public Library. In her 1904 Annual Report, Cornelia A. See called the new Library building "eminently well designed, . . . flooded with light" and particularly noted the great success of the Children's Room, which was "well filled almost every afternoon and evening."

The same could be said today about the newly renovated Children's Room, which serves families attending story hours and other educational programs, school classes touring the Library, and young students after school. It is heartening to note that the Library has maintained its popularity since its origin.

This success may be attributed to the Library's ability and willingness to evolve with the changing times. Not only has the building itself grown (in 1990 an addition was built to house Reference and Meeting rooms), but the collection is perpetually expanding and adjusting to better suit the needs of the community. Long gone are the times when a library only loaned books: we now lend multi-media items that were probably never even imagined by Cornelia See when she first opened the Library's doors. Public computers are a major resource for adults and children alike, answering the current demand for Internet access and other information technology, and greatly assisting students in the Library's afterschool Homework Center.

As we settle into the new millennium, the Library faces the future with optimism while proudly remembering its distinguished past of 100 years of public service.



Andrew Carnegie
1835-1919



Mayor Viehmann, at left, breaks ground for the new Library in 1902. On the far right is architect George K. Parsell

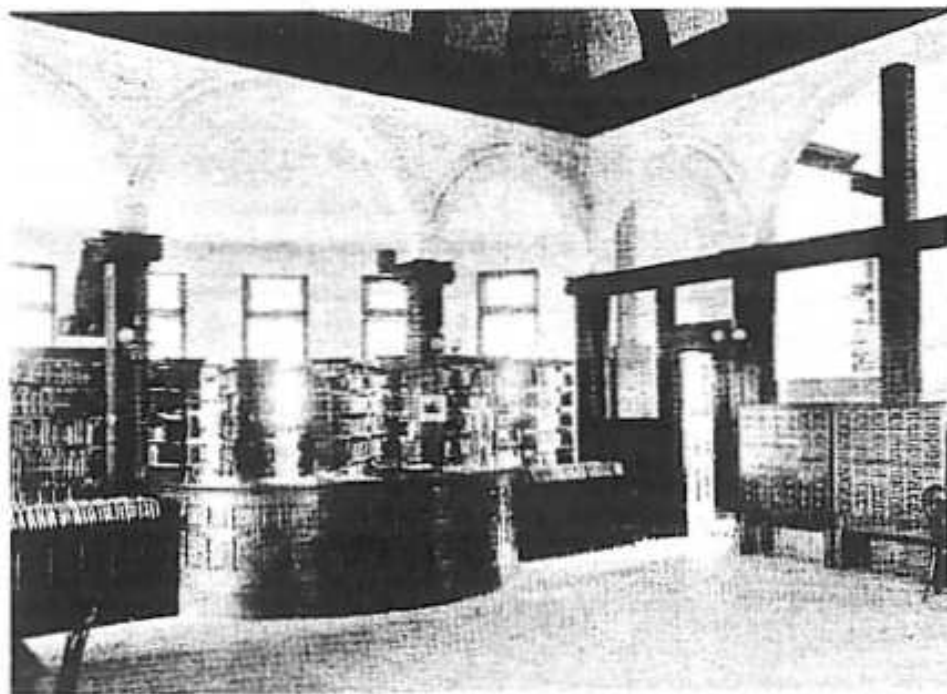


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The Library interior, 1909
