

Carnegie Arrives in Orange County

By Kenneth Perry McCune

We are glad to hear that our sister town, Orleans, is in a fair way to soon realize her hopes of a free Carnegie library... Such a building and institution will be a credit to the community and will speak well for the enterprise of the citizens. (Orleans Progress-Examiner, 1915)

In the early part of the twentieth century, glowing words like these resounded from newspapers throughout the state of Indiana. After all, what could be more splendid and exciting than the opening of a new free public library in “our town?”

This era was one of unprecedented free public library expansion in communities large and small across the United States. It can be attributed to the convergence of numerous forces and trends occurring within a greater sphere of social, economic and cultural changes taking place. Economies became more industrial and less agricultural, creating a new middle class that now had leisure time to read. The restrictive public libraries of the elite and mechanics institute libraries gave way to free public libraries that could better meet the educational and recreational reading needs of the middle class and the growing number of new immigrant workers. The movement to establish institutions was advanced by the spirit of boosterism in cities and towns of all sizes and the tireless efforts of women’s literary clubs, state library commissions and boards of education. Legislation was passed allowing communities to tax themselves for library services. Indiana had one other huge advantage over other states: a superior network of rail transportation enabling Indiana Public Library Commission Organizers Merica Hoagland, Chalmers Hadley, Carl Milam and Henry Sanborn to travel to virtually any Hoosier city or town to help establish new libraries. As a result, communities in Indiana received a total of \$2.5 million in Carnegie grants for the construction of 164 buildings.

All of these factors coincided with the benevolence of a Scottish-American industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, whose program of library philanthropy enabled the construction of 1,681 free public library buildings in the United States. The greatest American beneficiary of the Carnegie library program was the state of Indiana, with 164 free library buildings built in 157 communities constructed from 1901 to 1918. Two Orange County, Indiana communities less than eight miles apart were recipients of Carnegie grants: Orleans and Paoli.

As was true in most Indiana cities and towns at that time, a group of determined women championed the movement to establish a free public library in Orleans. Stella Glover and Claire Steward Young solicited \$1.00 donations from local residents to purchase books for a lending library. The first circulating library was established in a room at the Kress Furniture Store in the fall of 1910. The town appointed a Library Board and passed a one-mil tax levy collecting approximately \$900 per annum to pay operating expenses. The library grew rapidly and soon it became apparent that a larger space was needed. In 1913 the library moved to a larger room at the Orleans Academy. However, soon it outgrew this space, and in October, 1914, Orville Apple of the library board wrote to the Carnegie Corporation of New York requesting a grant to construct a new permanent building for the library. He concluded the letter by saying “There is splendid interest in the library which has been open to the public now about one year.” Having the support of the people, the means to pay the operating expenses and a location already secured, there was just one last piece needed - financial support to construct a building. The Carnegie Corporation put this piece in place on January 6, 1915, awarding a grant of \$10,000 to construct a new Orleans and Orleans Township Public Library. On January 15, 1915 the town of Orleans adopted a resolution to accept the grant, committing the sum of \$1,000 per year to operate the library.

The editor of the *Orleans Progress-Examiner* summed up the mood of the community: “This is one proposition that the people of Orleans should not permit to escape. In the language of a once prominent and successful business man of Orleans, “Take everything you can get give to you, and a \$10,000 building is a gift worth looking after.”

Work began quickly to construct the library in Orleans. The Library Board of Trustees selected a site on North Maple Avenue in the community’s Sulphur Park for the building, and appointed Wilson B. Parker of Indianapolis as architect. W.H. Fidler and Fred Preacher of Orleans received the contracts to construct the building.

Approximately one year after applying for the Carnegie grant, the completed Orleans Town and Township Public Library was dedicated with grand ceremony on October 14, 1915. The Library Board held an informal social in the main reading room, entertained by the Orleans Orchestra. The president of the library board, Mrs. Roscoe Jenkins recounted the history of movement leading up to this moment and proudly proclaimed that the new library contained approximately 1,000 volumes, ”with perhaps less of the trash that usually accumulates in a public library.” Dr. W.D. Howe, head of the English Department at Indiana University, delivered the main address. He “spoke of this event as epochal in the history of Orleans and showed with considerable ability the advantages of good reading.” (*Orleans Progress-Examiner*, October 22, 1915). The ceremony was well-attended and many people remained afterward to examine the library. Also, in the same issue, the editor of the *Orleans Progress Examiner* captured the spirit of the occasion:

In the completion of the splendid new public library, our Town and community has at last realized a long-cherished ambition, which only a few years ago, seemed a phantom-like hope, the culmination of which was in the remote future.

“Library fever” had also taken hold of the women of Paoli. The fledgling Delta Chapter of Kappa Kappa Kappa Sorority began seeking support to establish a library as early as 1903.

With the assistance of Public Library Commission of Indiana Organizer Carl Milan, the Tri Kappas opened the first Paoli Public Library on November 25, 1911 in a room of John T. Stout’s retail establishment. Eight of the young women acquired the books, staffed, cleaned, and repaired the facility. It soon became apparent that the library had outgrown its space at Stout’s store, and on July 20, 1912, Paoli resident Judge Thomas Buskirk of the 42nd Judicial Circuit wrote to James Bertram of the Carnegie Corporation, requesting a grant to pay for the construction of a new library building. He stated that Paoli was “a beautiful country town, romantically situated, and its citizenship is a progressive one.” He also emphasized that the town had five churches, “one of the best high schools in the state”, and no saloons. He received a reply from Bertram in January of 1913, offering a grant of \$8,000 for the purpose of constructing a library building provided the town agreed to establish a tax levy amounting to ten percent of this sum annually to pay the library’s operating costs. This was a standard provision for all Carnegie grants; the Carnegie Corporation would pay for the cost of the building, and each town was responsible for the costs of staffing, books and maintenance.

Up to this point, the path that Paoli followed from the establishment of its free public library to the offer of a Carnegie grant to construct a new building was similar to that of Orleans. It then took a very different direction. On August 23, 1913, William Chestnut, Paoli Township Trustee, wrote to Bertram informing him that “there seems to be quite a dissatisfaction among the tax payers of the Town of Paoli and Paoli Township. So if there is anything compulsory about it there will be an injunction against the tax levy.” Bertram wrote back informing him that it was indeed compulsory; no tax support, no grant. The issue had not been resolved by December of that year, and Chestnut wrote to Bertram again on December 8, saying “the tax payers of town and township objected to the Town and Township Board levying any tax to support the proposed library... So we just dropped it for the present.”

The matter may have been dropped for a time, but it was not forgotten. In February, 1917, the diligent work of the newly-appointed library board enabled the town to establish a tax levy of not less than \$800, allowing the project to move forward. Mr. Chestnut wrote to confirm that the Carnegie offer of 1913 was still good and Bertram assured him that it was. Norman H. Hill of Indianapolis was selected as architect, and construction contracts were awarded to McVey and Lutes of Paoli and Charles Shirley of Orleans.

On the night of December 8, 1917, just after two carloads of brick were being delivered to the proposed building site on West Campbell Street, a fire ravaged the town square, destroying the Arlington Hotel. As the initial shock of the blaze wore off, local businessmen recognized the benefit of locating the new library right on the town square, as did many of the townspeople, including the editor of the *Paoli Republican*:

We understand that the site selected for the building is not satisfactory to many citizens and a movement is in foot to change it to the east side of the Public Square, on part of the recently burned district. We have been told that Mr. Charles Shirley, the contactor, would be pleased if the proposed change be made, but the change, if made at all, will have to be performed at once, or it will be too late.

The Paoli merchants acted at once, collecting \$1,000 and offering it to the library board for the purchase of the site. The library board also acted promptly, accepting their offer. The carloads of brick were moved to the new site and construction began on March 20, 1918, with a scheduled completion date of June 1.

By Mid-May the building's exterior walls were finished, the roof was on, and the concrete basement floor, steps and sidewalk were laid. Interior work was completed by early July; however, delays in the plumbing and heating work resulted in the contractors missing the targeted completion date.

Finally, at a meeting on August 28 the library board officially accepted the completed building and the librarian, Mabel Buskirk arranged to relocate, requesting that patrons refrain from calling for books until the move was complete.

On October 12, 1918, the new Paoli Public Library building was dedicated. Although there are no surviving written accounts of the dedication, the citizens of Paoli certainly exhibited the same pride and excitement in the ceremony as their counterparts in Orleans. This pride was reflected by the editor of the *Paoli Republican* on July 3, 1915, even as the building was under construction:

Some towns may boast of larger and more costly library buildings, but we feel sure that not another town in the country has as much for the money expended as Paoli will have when this one is finished. It is a beauty, as pretty a small library as can be found anywhere.

To this day, almost a century after their construction, the two Orange County Carnegie structures stand as monuments to the determination and tireless efforts of the citizens of Orleans and Paoli to establish permanent free public libraries in their respective communities. The Orleans Public Library continues to serve its patrons from its Carnegie building on North Maple Street. By the early 2000's the Paoli Public Library had outgrown its Carnegie building, and moved into a new 5,000 square foot facility in August, 2010. The Carnegie building is still in good repair and the city is currently looking at alternative uses for this venerable structure.

References

A brief history of Orleans. (1915, March 5). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 1-4.

A new library building. (1915, January 14). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 4.

Bobinski, G. S. (1969). *Carnegie libraries: Their history and impact on American public library development*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Brick for the construction of the new Library. 1918, February 29). *Paoli Republican*, 3.

Carnegie Library contracts awarded last Saturday. (1915, May 6). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 4.

Dedication of the Carnegie Public Library. (1915, October 22). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*. 1.

Go to the Library Friday night. (1915, November 4). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 3.

McPherson, A. (2003). *Temples of knowledge: Andrew Carnegie's gift to Indiana*. Kewanna, Indiana: Hoosier's Nest Press.

New Library at Orleans. (1915, October 11). *Indianapolis News*, 18.

Orleans Public Library has fiftieth birthday. (1965, August 5). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 3.

Points for consideration in determining the Library site. (1915, January 21). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 6.

Some towns may boast (1918, July 3). *Paoli Republican*, 2.

The Library contractors, Fidler and Peacher, are making good headway. (1915, July 15), 5.

The New Library. (1915, August 12). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 2.

The new Library Building is beginning to look. (1915, August 5). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 5.

The Orleans Town and Township Public Library Board. (1915, April 8). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 2.

The work on the new Library building. (1915, July 1). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 3.

This is one proposition that the people of Orleans. (1915, January 14). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 3.

We are glad to hear that our sister town, Orleans. (1915, January 21). *Orleans Progress-Examiner*, 6.

We understand that the site selected for the building. (1918, February 29). *Paoli Republican*, 5.

About the Author

Kenneth Perry McCune is the Assistant to the Director of Alumni Relations and Fundraising, SLIS Indianapolis.