

History of the Wilbraham Public Library **by Mary Bell**

The Wilbraham Free Public Library was established in 1892 at town meeting on April 4. The voters appropriated \$25 plus the dog tax to the library that year. The books were kept in the Selectman's rooms, which were open to the public for four hours every Wednesday in a building near the railroad overpass on Boston Road in North Wilbraham. The first trustees were Henry W. Cutler, Jason Butler, and Emeline Collins. Early librarians included Mabel Gates, Eunice Bell, and Minnie Morgan.

The location moved to the North Wilbraham post office in 1898. The post office was open every weekday from 2-3 and 6:30-7:30 p.m. which expanded the times the public could come for books. They would come in, make their selections from a catalog at the front desk, fill out a request slip, and staff would get items from the back to check them out.

About that time, Fred Green delivered mail on his stage and he also delivered library books around town. He started this before the library moved to the post office, about the mid-1890s. He was paid a stipend averaging about \$10 a year and continued in this post until 1913.

In the early 1900s, the number of books in the collection increased slowly but steadily. These numbers varied dramatically, anywhere from 15 volumes in 1902 to 263 in 1903, and in the next decade staying around 30-40 titles. To put that in perspective, in a given month I order about 40 titles just of adult fiction.

About 1907 or 1908, Eunice Bates began giving "rent and care" to the library. Merrick's *History of Wilbraham, U.S.A.* elaborates that she was the librarian until 1912, and the library was in her home next to the Collins Inn on Boston Road. In 1912, Lelia Atchinson became the librarian, but the books stayed in Eunice Bates' house until 1913 when the Henry Cutler house officially became the library and town offices.

Henry Cutler owned this house on Boston Road, and donated it to the Town of Wilbraham in his will. When Wilbraham celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1913, the festivities on June 19 included a dedication and grand opening of the new library which no longer stands but was near where the Fire Department is now. For those of you who remember this building, I'm told that book returns made after hours could be placed inside a bench on the porch. The building was also used for Town Offices.

In 1914, the library's hours were increased to three afternoons and three evenings a week, circulation was up over 4000 volumes a year, and the trustees hired a room as a branch library that was open Saturday afternoons. The library would also make regular deposits of books at several of the public schools in town. Mrs. Jennie Abbott was hired as librarian.

In 1915, the trustees reported that the Librarian completed the library's first card catalog with assistance from the State Library Commission. That year, the trustees' annual reports begin listing the circulation not only of the main library, but also of two branches in the center of Wilbraham and Glendale. When the library had branch locations, these were sometimes in the schools or individuals' homes. Miss Ruth Calkins and Mrs. Charles Hitchcock both received stipends for offering this service in their homes.

During World War 1, the library collected books and sent them overseas. The trustees reported in 1918 that "480 books have been sent overseas and to Camp libraries. Scrap books and post card folders, have been sent overseas and to the base hospital library at Camp Devens. All express charges have been paid

by the sale of old papers and magazines."

The trustees reports about this time were all about the numbers, simply showing the number of books added that year, the total in the library, total circulation, and the library budget. But sometimes, such as the year the library was involved in the war effort, you see broader history affecting our town. Another example is in 1921: the annual report noted the number of volumes not just discarded, but "due to diphtheria," (so, a bit worried about germs!). The following year, even more were discarded due to "infectious disease."

The library continued expanding the number of volumes and services over the years. Community groups such as the Red Cross and Study Club (now the Wilbraham Women's Club) would meet inside the library. In the early 1930s, a children's room opened and Mrs. Abbott was able to hire an assistant.

Jennie Abbott continued as librarian (and, incidentally, Town Clerk) until her death in 1943.

Her daughter Ruth Abbott was hired to take her place on November 1 of that year. She was paid \$200 cash and "the use of the apartment over Library, the heating and lighting of apartment to be included." Since she also worked in Ludlow at the Hubbard Memorial Library, she had to pay a substitute librarian when she could not be in Wilbraham.

Early in Ruth's tenure, a story hour was offered at the library by Mrs. Clifford DuBray. Students from the North Wilbraham School - the building which recently was the police station on Main Street - would cross the street to the library and spend a class period there, checking out books, reading, and looking up information.

The library was already starting to run into some challenges using rooms in a former house. For example, the trustees originally explored getting new fluorescent lighting in 1943 and the lights were finally installed in 1947; heating by coal could be inefficient; various repairs included roof, walls, and ceilings.

And, of course, having enough space for a growing collection could be challenging as well. Town Offices moved to that North Wilbraham School building in 1951, so the library was able to take over that space, moving partitions and renovating. But only a few years later, the library was once again outgrowing the space and the trustees were dealing with upkeep of an old building. Chimney repairs and converting the old coal boiler to oil were just some of the major undertakings discussed by the trustees.

Alice Cahill came from the Department of Education Division of Library Extension in 1956 and wrote a report detailing the needs of the library building and services. She recommended a new building that would cover the next 20 years' needs in a growing community of approximately 5,600 people. Specific recommendations included adding more shelf space, increasing children's services, hiring a children's librarian, adding more seating, and building a meeting room and a staff room with kitchen facilities. To address these recommendations, Abigail Rudge was hired as a children's librarian in 1957. She instituted story hours for children in the fall of that year, and the trustees noted in their November meeting that attendance for Saturday morning story hours had been increasing steadily as word spread about it.

In 1959, at the age of 70, Miss Ruth Abbott retired and a party was held at the library in her honor.

The new head librarian was Katherine Dingman. The staff now included four librarians - Katherine Dingman, Abigail Rudge, Mrs. Alexander Murphy, and Coralie Gray - three part-time assistants, and one high school student page.

In her 1956 report, Alice Cahill had also recommended joining a regional library system. This was done in 1963 when the library joined the Western Massachusetts Regional Library System.

The bookmobile, bringing collections to various libraries in the system, was one of the largest draws to being a part of the system. It meant the library could have access to a rotating collection of popular books in addition to the purchases made out of the library's budget. This was the precursor to the deliveries we now every get every weekday allowing us to borrow materials from over 150 libraries in our network – over 16,000 items were sent here last year.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, discussions continued about a new library, and the trustees began advertising the need.

One of the first challenges was a legal matter: Henry Cutler's will. In part it read that his house was to be "devoted exclusively to the use, improvement or support of the Town Library." In order for a library to be built in a new location, the trustees and the Town of Wilbraham first had to go through a legal process to allow them to sell the house and land despite those restrictions. Petitioning Massachusetts Probate Court on January 29, 1960, the Town basically asked that the Court would interpret the will to allow the sale or rent of the building and land, if that money from the sale would be used to purchase another property or construction of a library building. The court found in favor of the town in April 1960, and after that real plans could move forward in building or purchasing a new library building.

A Library Survey Committee was created, and they looked first at existing buildings. In fact, for awhile they seriously considered purchasing the Parish House of the Congregational Church, which was in the center of town and had fallen out of use after the merger of the Congregational and Methodist churches into Wilbraham United Church.

In the midst of all this planning in 1965, Katherine Dingman left the library for a new position, and the children's librarian Abigail Rudge became the director.

The library building issues were becoming serious, with one event highlighting both the challenges and the ingenuity of staff and town officials. In a letter to the library trustees dated October 21, 1965, Abigail reports:

the lighting fixtures over the circulation desk recently fell, during Thursday afternoon, October 6th, while the library was open. It was some hours later in the evening-before professional help could be rounded up to make a temporary repair, by tying the fixture to a small screwdriver driven into the ceiling...Fortunately the firemen are always helpful in an emergency, and were able to prop up this fixture with a step ladder plus a dictionary. I am sorry that I was not available that day. A picture most certainly should have been taken of this arrangement. The staff behaved with great aplomb and carried on business as usual at another desk.

This was, in fact, the second time a light had fallen, and the first light had never been replaced since the ceiling was judged too weak. After the second fixture fell, one of the firemen quipped that the building would be condemned for public use if a state inspector happened to look in.

J. Loring Brooks, a local businessman who had been working with the committee along the way making recommendations, stepped in with a proposal. He and his wife, Barbara, would donate their

own land, located behind the town post office. He had first made the proposal in 1959, but the trustees had decided to wait at that time. Since then, after several false starts in acquiring land or a new building, the Library Survey Committee chose to accept the proposal. A deed was drawn up and signed on January 3, 1966, giving about six acres "For the purposes of a public library, a municipal office building and roads, sidewalks and parking areas needed therefore."

At the 1966 Town Meeting, attendees voted to accept the deed of land and to appropriate money for consultants, preliminary plans, and architects. They also voted unanimously to apply for a grant of federal funds for construction of a new library. That grant application was successful, awarding the new library \$85,000 towards construction. The 1967 Town Meeting addressed the rest of the \$395,000 total construction cost, ultimately including a loan of about \$300,000.

The library building committee first convened on May 23, 1967, and met 25 times from 1967 through March 1969 to work with architects and contractors, discuss the library furnishings, and more. Meetings often ran until 10 or 11 p.m., and even once past midnight. Plans were made, designs considered, and architects hired. Walter Howe of the Civil Defense agency came to a meeting to ask that part of the library be constructed as a fallout shelter, which was ultimately rejected because the necessary changes could not be made to the design at that point. A new Town Hall (then located at the old police station building on Main Street) was potentially going to be constructed next to the library, but that also fell through.

Construction began in the spring of 1968. The library building committee spent much of that time choosing furnishings, including clocks, lighting fixtures, and a couple of items you may remember. For example, the purchase of a large trestle table and 80 stacking chairs that are still used in the Brooks Room today were discussed. Outside of the building, the Garden Club designed the courtyard and gardens. By December 4, 1968, the building was nearly complete and the building committee met in the new library where members approved the certificate of substantial completion.

Despite a carpenters' strike and rising construction costs, the Trustees reported the building was completed in less than nine months and came in on budget. The library on Boston Road closed its doors on December 6, 1968.

The movers and volunteers came on December 7 to bring all the materials to the new location, and the new library building opened its doors for business on Monday, December 9. There were still a few hiccups to work out, particularly the heating system which first needed repair only a month later and lighting in the parking lot. In an enthusiastic report to the town, however, the Trustees reported a 60% increase in circulation and substantial use of the new meeting room.

Since the construction of the library, some renovations have been done, most notably the creation of a teen space in the mezzanine, a new stairway, and new service desk in a central location. The meeting room has stayed much the same - though we have taken down the original drapes - and was dedicated on February 4, 1973 as the Brooks Room in honor of J. Loring and Barbara T. Brooks. Adding computers and taking out the card catalogs have changed the look of the library on the surface, but much of what you see now was similar in 1968.

Now, as then, the library remains committed to serving a diverse population and their interests in providing a variety of materials and programs to serve our patrons' needs.

Works cited:

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