

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BUFFALO & ERIE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY



1836 marked the beginning of continuous public library service in Western New York when the Young Men's Association (YMA) was created to acquire books of permanent or lasting value for its members. Although the YMA admitted its first female member in 1857, it was not until 1886 that it became the Buffalo Library, and later the Buffalo Public Library as the result of a contractual agreement with the City in 1897. In exchange for sufficient funds to support its varied operations, this new institution transferred ownership of its books to the City of Buffalo and was re-established as a free circulating and reference library open to all City residents. Ownership of the building, however, remained with the Library.

A second library, the Grosvenor Library, had been operating in Buffalo as a non-circulating public reference library since 1871. During its proud history, the Grosvenor established a host of noteworthy collections, including patent information and military and legal documents. It also became a depository of the U.S. Circuit Court and Department of Interior publications.

In 1947, yet another library, the Erie County Public Library, was created to provide bookmobile service to rural towns and villages, outreach service to the confined and centralized support services — e.g., book ordering, cataloging, materials processing and consulting — for the County's independent, autonomous community libraries, each with its own Board of Trustees.

As the second half of the 20th century began, the City of Buffalo experienced financial difficulties. Meanwhile, the County of Erie remained on relatively sound financial footing and expressed a willingness to undertake new responsibilities. In an effort to protect the two City libraries and provide improved library services for the entire region, the three library institutions were merged by New York State special legislation in 1953. The merger created one federated organization: the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library (B&ECPL).

Ownership of the Buffalo Public and the Grosvenor Library buildings and their respective book collections was transferred to Erie County. In 1963, these collections were integrated on shelves in the partially completed east block of a new Central Library building. The Central Library was completed in 1964 and officially dedicated on October 18th of that year.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Erie County's economy remained strong. In addition to the development of System-wide services and community outreach programs, a total of 25 library buildings were constructed in Buffalo and surrounding towns. In 1976, however, the financial troubles experienced by the City spread to the County, and there was a need to retrench. For B&ECPL, County revenue shortfalls resulted in service and personnel cuts, although small restorations occurred the following year and a portion of the furloughed staff was recalled. Since then, as the County's industrial base has continued to shrink, the B&ECPL Board and administration have struggled to sustain needed services, maintain adequate materials' budgets and provide appropriate staffing levels.

In 1992, the B&ECPL asserted its independence under New York State Law in a court case that secured administrative and financial authority previously compromised by officials of Erie County government. In that same year, the Library Protection Act was adopted for the first time. This local law, enacted for either one- or two-year terms by the Erie County Legislature, dedicated a portion of Erie County's real property tax for Library purposes and guaranteed that funds appropriated by the Legislature could not be re-appropriated to cover mid-year shortfalls elsewhere in the Erie County budget.

From the early 1990s to the present, automated functions and electronic resources and services have become staples. In 1998, B&ECPL established its presence on the Internet with its web site at www.buffalolib.org. This web site is the gateway to an online public access catalog that includes more than three million items as well as an exciting range of subscription databases and other valuable user services.

Also in 1998, planning consultants confirmed that B&ECPL maintained more library buildings per capita than any other community in North America, arguably more than it needed to serve a population of fewer than one million people and certainly more than it could reasonably afford over the long term. The recommendation to

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consolidate buildings and construct new state-of-the-art facilities on a leaner, more cost-effective frame met with nearly universal resistance when trustees and administrative staff delivered the proposal in a series of 22 public meetings across Erie County. The Library Board responded with the strategic plan, *Expanding Horizons*, which did not abandon the consultants' recommendations but indicated that the Library would pursue consolidations only in communities whose residents agreed to support the concept.

In ensuing years, the Board sought opportunities to advance consolidation projects, most notably in South Buffalo, but an economic crisis in late 2004 put all plans on hold. Thanks to the Library Protection Act, B&ECPL escaped the worst of Erie County's "Red Budget/Green Budget" disaster of 2004/2005, but Library officials knew it was only a matter of time before the deep cuts that devastated almost all County services would be inflicted on the Library.

Trustees and staff took advantage of that one-year "reprieve" to plan for those inevitable cuts, devoting most of 2005 to an exhaustive and objective evaluation of the System to identify those libraries that had the greatest capacity to deliver the most in services and resources to the largest number of County residents. After weeks of data collection and analysis and subsequent meetings with elected officials and the public, the B&ECPL Board adopted a plan that, based on available funding, would support only 36 of the former 52 libraries. Because some of the libraries that were to remain open would not receive enough financial support to meet New York State standards, they would need to raise supplemental revenues independently.

All told, Erie County's fiscal crisis cost the Library System one-fourth of its annual support. That loss forced the closing of 15 libraries; reduced hours of service at almost every remaining location; cost more than 225 full- and part-time Library employees their jobs; took bookmobiles off the road for the first time since 1947 and decreased book, subscription and media purchases to a trickle.

In the aftermath, 2006 was devoted to stabilizing, fund raising and advocacy. Many local communities came to their libraries' aid to offset the reduction in financial support from Erie County. B&ECPL established an internal development operation to raise funds from multiple sources, improve the Library's visibility and coordinate advocacy efforts. Thanks to persistent and persuasive communication and the urging of many stakeholders, the County Legislature approved a \$500,000 increase in the Library's 2007 operating appropriation, allowing some libraries that had failed to meet State standards to meet them and improving hours and services at other locations. Further, by unanimous vote, the Legislature made the Library Protection Act a permanent local law, ending 14 years of temporary renewals.

Also in 2006, the Library System celebrated the promise of the future when the 20,000 square-foot Frank E. Merriweather, Jr. Library opened — the first new library constructed in the City of Buffalo since 1986! This handsome facility, reflecting an African village motif, has tripled the circulation of the library it replaced and is second only to the Central Library in registered computer sessions.

A Brief History of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library

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