

A History of the Lancaster Library 1821-2021



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The Library Story

1821-1974

By Harold J. Huber

A historic parallel to the story of Lancaster Village is the evolution of the Lancaster Public Library. The fact that it was founded by a veterans' organization, with a religious background, adds interest to the colorful history of this local institution.

On December 11, 1821, about 40 men from the Cayuga Creek Settlement, just east of Lancaster Village, met in the Johnson School House near Broadway and Cemetery Road, to organize the "Cayuga Creek Veterans' Library Society." These settlers, veterans of the Revolution and the War of 1812, elected Theophilus Huntington as president of the organization, and named Henry Johnson, Jr. as Librarian. Books were extremely scarce and expensive, and the first volumes included Milnor's "Martyr's", Doddridge's "Rise and Progress of the Soul", "Journal of a Young Man in Massachusetts", and "Science of Sanctity", among others with little appeal to the majority of modern readers.

The meager collection in the first Library was kept in the Johnson School House until the Presbyterian Church was built in 1832. Then in 1833, the Veterans' Association, all Presbyterians, gave the library to the Church, where it was maintained under the auspices of the original Presbyterian parish.

In 1881, Mrs. Edward F. French, wife of an elder in the Lancaster Presbyterian Church, took charge of the library and conducted a personal campaign to enlarge its book collection. In her horse-drawn basket phaeton, she canvassed the Village and Town of Lancaster in search of new volumes for the Library. People were generous with their donations, which included such books as Baxter's "Saints Everlasting Rest", and Edwards' "On the Will", and others which their owners never read themselves, and no one else would care to read. But there were many good books among the donations, and more were purchased later.

In 1882, the elders of the Presbyterian Church agreed to take charge of the library, assisted by a committee of five ladies, which included: Mrs. C. E. Smith, Mrs. C. W. Fuller, Miss Flora Dykstra, Miss A. H. Coe, and Miss Emily Clapp. The name chosen was the "Lancaster Presbyterian Church Library", and the officers were: Mrs. E. F. French, Librarian; the Rev. William Waith, secretary; and Mr. Myron H. Clark, treasurer. The books were placed in a brick building on the west side of the Church, known as the "Lecture Room", and, on Thanksgiving Day, in November 1882, the Library was opened to the public.

After two or three months, Mr. and Mrs. French, took over the administration of the Library, and, until their departure for California in 1888, Mrs. French held the office of Librarian. Following her departure, Miss Anna E. Thatcher was asked to take her place, at a salary of \$50 per year.

Although the Library was intended to be of town-wide benefit, it was usually referred to as a "Presbyterian Church affair" and the committee felt it would be more generally used if it were changed into a Village institution. Accordingly, in February 1891 they voted unanimously to make a formal offer of the Library, excluding the special Sunday School books, to an association to be legally incorporated.

At a meeting held in the Sunday School Room of the Church, the first Board of Library Trustees was selected. Included were: Dr. F.H. James, C.E. Smith, D.L. Ransom, Willard Brown, David Hummell, F.S. Fosdick, Dr. J.G. Miller, R. Hoffeld, H.B. VanPeyma, George A. Davis, E.K. Norton, Phillip Mook, S.T. Draper, George Huber, and Jacob Gottschalk. In February 1891, the Board of Trustees met and signed the articles of incorporation, and "The Lancaster Library" became a legally incorporated institution. The first officers of the Board were: President, Dr. F.H. James; Vice President, E.K. Norton; and Secretary and Treasurer, F.S. Fosdick.

In 1894, there were only 35 ticket holders and two life members. The expenses for the year were \$82.25, the receipts were \$38.95, and, if it had not been for a gift of \$50 from the president of the Board, there would have been a serious deficit in the treasury for that year.

At the annual meeting of the Board in 1895, the financial situation was discussed, and a committee was appointed to report on the feasibility of removing the Library to another location to enlarge its scope. Another meeting was held in the Town Hall, to which the public was invited. The committee reported in favor of a meeting room in the Town Hall at \$60 per year, and their recommendation was approved and acted upon at once. In April 1896, the Library was reopened in its new location in the Town Hall.

In 1909, the Reading Room was established in a large office on the north side of the Town Hall. In 1911 the New York Telephone Company applied to the Town Board for rental of the space used for the Reading Room, which was being used by the Library without charge. After much discussion, it was decided to move the entire Library into the Reading Room and pay a rental of \$10 per month. The move from the north to the south side of the Town Hall took place in May 1911.

Increasing financial difficulties made the maintenance of the Library a problem, and, at a meeting held in January 1915, it was voted to ask the Town Board to

assume this responsibility. The matter of acceptance of the Library, with all its books, furniture, and other property, for operation by the Town of Lancaster was submitted to the taxpayers at a special election on May 26, 1915, and was overwhelmingly approved by a vote of 127 to 21. Thus, the Library became a Town institution.

The Town Board proceeded immediately to obtain a new charter from the State Library of New York, and the institution became a free Library on September 18, 1915. The books were re-catalogued and the Library was moved back to its original location on the north side of the Town Hall.

Miss Thatcher retired from her position as Librarian on March 30, 1935 after nearly 47 years of continuous contribution to the cultural life of the community. She was succeeded by Miss Helen Reiman (1935- 1936) and Miss Winifred Lipp (1936- 1937). In June 1937, Miss Betty Ehrenzeller, now Mrs. Richard Laxton, became Librarian. Her successors were Miss Alice Brown and Miss Edna Pettit. Miss Felicia Woloszyn (now Mrs. Harry Zajdel) was children's librarian for a total of eighteen years from 1953 to 1971.

In 1940, the Town Board accepted the offer of the estate of Mrs. Fanny Potter Eaton to donate the Potter residence, then located on Broadway, to the Town of Lancaster for a Library. The beautiful white frame building was moved north from its Broadway location to the rear of the Town Hall lot on Clark Street, and a commercial building was erected on its former site. Since 1941, the old mansion, which was erected after the great fire of 1984 destroyed the original Potter residence, has served as the Lancaster Public Library.

Increased patronage from the fast-growing Village of Depew resulted in the establishment of a branch library in the Depew Village Hall in 1947. On December 17 of that same year, the Town of Lancaster Public Libraries contracted to become a part of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System. With the Buffalo Central Library as its headquarters, services and resources are provided which would have been unavailable to local residents under the old Town Library system. These facilities are at minimum cost to Town taxpayers, because, under the contract arrangement, the cost of books and periodicals, the cost of operation, including utilities, and the salaries of Library personnel all come out of the Erie County budget. The Town of Lancaster is required to provide and maintain Library buildings and grounds.

Miss Pettit retired in 1958 and was succeeded as Librarian by Mrs. Laxton, who became Library Director in 1960.

In 1963, when Accelerated Public Works funds became available from the Federal government on a matching basis, construction began on a building to

house the Depew branch of the Lancaster Library, which had outgrown the limited facilities provided in the Depew Village Hall. The new building was completed in November 1964, and the project cost was \$130,000, including land and improvements. Half of this amount was refunded to the Town from APW funds by the Federal government. The Depew Branch is located at 321 Columbia Avenue, Depew, and has a capacity of about 21,000 volumes. Mrs. Mary H. Beck is the Depew Branch Librarian, and her staff includes a senior library clerk, a clerk-typist, a part-time clerk, and part time pages.

On May 22, 1974, ground was broken for a new building to house the Lancaster Public Library. The new facility is being located on the north side of Broadway between Central Avenue and School Street, and the estimated cost, including land and improvements, is \$990,000. This amount will be reduced by \$247,000 in Federal Revenue Sharing Funds, which have been allocated and set aside by the Town Board for library construction purposes. The architecture of the new building is unusual and could probably be called "Early Lancaster", since it is designed to tie in with the architectural features of some of the older buildings in the neighborhood, which include the 150-year-old Presbyterian Church across the street. Completion is expected in the spring of 1975.

The new building will have a capacity of 60,000 volumes. The present building on Clark Street has a capacity of 18,000 volumes, and is bursting at the seams with its present collection of 24,000 books. Mrs. Laxton will continue as Library Director. Her present staff includes Mrs. Patricia Easton, Assistant Librarian in charge of Children's services, a senior library clerk, a part-time clerk-typist, and part-time pages.

A Library Board of Trustees, headed by Dr. Olive P. Lester for the last 25 years, is the policy-making group for both town libraries.

From a shelf of books in a log school house, to thousands of volumes housed in two modern buildings, the recreational, informational, and cultural needs of the Village and Town of Lancaster have been met by its libraries for more than 150 years. The public-spirited citizens who have donated their services as members of the Library Board of Trustees over these years are the least-remembered of all Town officials, yet the heritage of culture which they have left to generation after generation of Lancaster residents is one of our greatest assets.

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The Story Continues

1975-2021

By Albert E. Martin and Suzanne M. Jacobs

Construction on the Broadway building of the Lancaster Public Library began in May of 1975. It would provide space for 60,000 volumes and was built at a cost of \$990,000.

The grand opening of the new library was held on March 15, 1976, with the dedication ceremony held on March 23. Dr. Olive P. Lester and her fellow board members spoke with pride about the accomplishment that was shared with the Town of Lancaster and the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System. Opening day circulation was 3,442.

In this same year of 1976, and in what would be the first of many threats to the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System's sustainability, County Executive Edward Regan ordered an immediate library budget cut of 15%. This was in addition to a recent slash in the system's book budget. Lay-offs and decreases in libraries' hours followed.

Again, in 1984, County Executive Edward Rutkowski directed the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System to make plans to close all public libraries in Erie County. Fortunately, the community rallied, and that drastic measure was never taken. A pattern developed, however, that indicated that when the county budget was strained the libraries would become vulnerable.

In a response to these financial uncertainties, the Friends of the Lancaster Public Library group was formed. Mrs. Marilyn Thomson and Mrs. Barbara Cardwell created the group as a means for the community to offer financial support to the library. The specific aim of the Friends group was to raise funds to open the library on Sunday afternoons. This effort was quite successful and continues today.

Other community partners have been the Lancaster Women's Civic Club and the Lancaster and Depew Lions Clubs. The former holds an annual used book sale and contributes the proceeds to the library. The Lions Clubs have donated large print books, books on tape, and a magnified reader for those who are sight impaired.

At the beginning of the "Information Age", the technology of 1983 became available to patrons of the Lancaster Public Library. One typewriter was offered for public use, Polaroid cameras began circulating, and the Lancaster Central School District loaned the library one Apple II microcomputer for the summer. By 1989-90, circulation and registration were done online, with a system known as TOLIS. Our librarians were getting up to speed on word processing and spreadsheets. In 1993, it was time for new carpeting at the Lancaster Library, and in 1997, the Depew branch celebrated the 50th anniversary of its 1947 opening in the Depew Village Hall.

By March of 2000, Lancaster had four internet computers, while Depew had three. In 2001, the first computer classes were offered to patrons for online card catalog use and the use of Internet Explorer, Yahoo and Hotmail. A cyber camp for students in grades four through eight was offered.

In 2001 County Executive Joel Giambra first began to suggest consolidation of libraries in Erie County. The 52 libraries in the system shared a \$30 million budget;

consolidation would, he said, save \$10 million. The public – and even some legislators – were outraged. Communities held their libraries in high regard, and there was great resistance to downsizing. The Central library board and administration were forced to develop metrics by which decisions would be made about which libraries to close. When the conclusions were made public, our Depew branch would be one of the libraries closed.

In 2005 the materials from the Depew branch were moved to the Lancaster Library, and on December 16, 2005, the doors at Depew were closed. In 2011, County Executive Chris Collins decreased the library system's budget by \$4.6 million, or by 21%. Again, communities reached out to their legislators and made it clear that libraries had been victimized enough. Cuts were decreased, but from year to year, an adequate library budget was never a certainty. However, with the election of Mark Poloncarz as County Executive in 2011, the libraries had a friend. He promised a 2% annual increase at that time, and has kept his promise ever since.

Since its construction in 1975, the major drawback at the Broadway site of the Lancaster Library was a lack of sufficient parking space. In 2013, however, the house adjacent to the library on School Street became available for purchase by the town. With help from two New York State Library Construction grants, matched by the town, the property was purchased. As we prepared to celebrate the 100th anniversary of our New York State charter in the fall of 2015, plans were made to demolish the house and create an expansion of our parking lot. This finally occurred in 2016, and on September 18 a celebration was held, with Trustee Emeritus Al Martin and Trustee Mary Terranova cutting the ribbon on the new lot.

A more recent improvement in the building has been the 2020 upgrading of patron restrooms, making them ADA compliant as well as more attractive. Another New York State Library Construction grant, along with town funding, made this possible.

The most noticeable change in our library in the most recent decades is the continuing increase in various types of technology. Today, patrons have access to several desktop and laptop computers; classes enjoy the use of the laptops, as well as a large-screen television for group instruction. Patrons use our new RFID system to check out their own books, and children are introduced to all kinds of STEM technology. Free access to information is the library's primary educational mission, and technology is the means to that access today. During the very challenging year of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, technology provided extensive children's programming and took storytelling and crafting into their homes. Through budget adaptations and generous grants from our state legislators, we constantly endeavor to bring the most current technologies to our patrons.

Finally, a special note of gratitude must be offered to the men and women who have directed the library over the last 45 years. Betty Laxton, Patricia Easton Blackett, Ann Kling, William Sutton, Jim Stelzle, and our current director Kara Stock, have not only provided excellent leadership, but they have hired exceptional staff who have served our patrons so well.