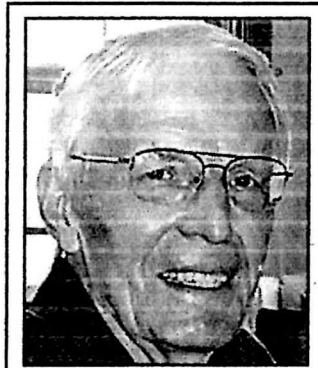


# The Carnegie Library, a literary cornerstone CS 8/26/10

Washburn's first library, approved by the town voters in April 1886, was opened in the Pioneer School in January 1887. Later that year the library was moved to the new town hall, the town clerk serving as librarian. A year later it was moved once again to a building on the south side of Bayfield Street, halfway between Central Avenue and First Avenue East. The library offered 160 books, including classics and favorites of the time, all of which were listed in the Itemizer article that announced the library opening. This library was destroyed in the great fire of September 14 1888.

At a special town meeting in November 1891, \$1,200 was voted for a "free public Library and reading," which was temporarily established in the town clerk's office. In December the town board appointed a board of directors for the library, which immediately began planning for a new building. The following September a contract for \$3,200 was awarded for the construction of a building on a site on Washington Avenue, near the present intersection with Bayfield Street. The library opened in December 1893. The building was constructed of brick, finished on the inside in natural pine. It was divided into a main reading room, a vault, the librarian's office, and utility rooms. The 1,099 books in the library's col-



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lection were kept in the vault, covered at night by a heavy red cloth. When a patron had selected a book from the card catalog, the librarian retrieved it from the vault. Cuspidors, for chewing tobacco, were located between the chairs in the reading room, and one of the tasks of the librarian was to clean them. Encouraged by the state library inspector, she finally revolted and cuspidors disappeared, denying the male patrons the pleasure of chewing tobacco while they read.

The continuing increases in the size of the library's book collection, in the volume of circulation, and in the number of users led the Town Board, in April 1902, to appoint a committee to correspond with Andrew Carnegie to solicit his support for a larger structure, pledging to raise ten percent of the amount he granted. Carnegie, the wealthy steel and railroad mag-

nate, gave millions of dollars to build free public libraries throughout the United States. In February 1903, Carnegie granted \$15,000 for a library building, provided that Washburn guarantee \$1,500 a year to maintain the library and provide a site for the building. Land on the corner of Third Street and Washington Avenue was purchased for \$1,300. A Neoclassical design for the building, prepared by an architect from Ashland, was selected by the library board and a contract was awarded to local builders James A. Sheridan, Nels Palm, and A.W. Swain for \$15,466. Construction began in April 1904 and the cornerstone was laid in June in a Masonic ceremony. While brick construction was considered because it would have been cheaper, the public's preference was for native brownstone, which was used. The building was accepted by the library Board in November 1904. It was dedicated with appropriate ceremony on April 7 1905 with "vast throngs" in attendance, according to the Washburn Times, which described the building as "the finest public library of any city of the size in the state," praising Andrew Carnegie as a "magnificent philanthropist."

"Handsome doors," between two large Ionic pillars, lead to a spacious interior divided by archways into several room for

young and adult readers, reference, book stacks, and a librarian's office. At each end of the reading room there is a large brick fire place. Over the fireplace at the south end of the room hangs a portrait of Andrew Carnegie, benignly keeping watch over his creation. A centrally placed librarian's desk, adorned with a large brass lamp, provides the librarian with a commanding view of the reading room. Sternly presiding over all from the librarian's desk for many years was Mrs. May Smith Greenwood. She came to Washburn in 1887 with her husband, who operated a meat market. He died in 1896, leaving her a widow with two young daughters. In July 1898 she was appointed the city librarian with an annual salary of \$400. Despite frequent crises in the city's finances—in one such crisis in 1913 her salary was reduced to \$250 and the library appropriation was only \$1,800—she managed the library, served its patrons, and built the book collection. By 1928 the library book holdings had grown from fewer than 2,000 volumes, when she was appointed city librarian three decades earlier, to over 7,000 volumes. (With the opening of the Carnegie Library, the former library building was leased to the Commercial Club; later it became part of the city hall.)