

**A SHORT HISTORY OF THE  
NEWPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY**

BY

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## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE NEWPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY

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*As the title implies this is a short history of the Newport Public Library. It deals mainly with the buildings that the library has occupied. Space restraints preclude an exhaustive account of the people involved in its formation ever since 1869 but this does not negate their tremendous contribution. Perhaps someday a more comprehensive history can be produced. Most of the historical information contained here was gleaned from a paper on deposit at the library, written by Sukey Lutman, a URI Graduate student in November 1984. I am deeply indebted to her for making all that research available in one place.*

The Newport Public Library has undergone many name changes since its inception and has occupied several buildings. In 1867 Sophia Louise Little was instrumental in the incorporation of the Newport Free Library and Reading Room. The author, Colonel Thomas W. Higginson, served as its president. The library was located on the second floor of a building on Thames Street. It soon became apparent that its accommodations were inadequate. There was not only no shelf-room for more books but there was no space for additional shelving. At this time the library extended its hours by opening on Saturday mornings and expanded its service to Middletown and Portsmouth residents.

Then a new phase began under the aegis of Christopher Townsend, a local philanthropist. The General Assembly had granted the institution a charter in 1869 and a governing body of trustees, approved by Newport's City Council, was in the process of transforming the Free Library into the People's Library of Newport.

Townsend purchased 7,000 books described as standard works. After careful sorting, 3,000 volumes from the Free Library and Townsend's purchases were combined. The Rhode Island Union bank building (also located on Thames Street) was purchased to house them.

Townsend also provided funds for library salaries and maintenance and when he died in 1881 he left \$100,000 to the library. Although he didn't want his name on the institution the building became known as the Townsend Building.

In 1909, due to vandalism and book loss, the library closed its book stacks to patrons. This caused circulation to go down temporarily, but two years later circulation was again on the rise.

In December of 1912, on Christmas day, George Gordon King gave the city of Newport the land surrounding his father's home to be used as a park and the house itself for the use of the library which had outgrown the bank building.

Although the villa was not exactly an ideal setup for a library, it was apparent that a larger building was needed and this one had plenty of room. The back rooms of the house were converted into closed stacks with concrete floors and glass upper levels supported by steel beams. In 1914 the library was moved into the Edward King House and the bank building on Thames Street was rented out as a source of income for the new facility.

Although the new library was situated in a much more attractive setting there were concerns about its visibility and accessibility. The property was also easily prone to vandalism. The problems of accessibility were solved in part when two deposit stations were opened at 50 Thames Street and 164 Broadway. In 1922 these were closed and a branch was opened at 1 Spring Street.

Also in 1922 it was recognized that children were an integral part of the library and a children's room was opened on the second floor and programs started. The first professional librarian hired in 1923 was a children's librarian.

A more suitable location for the branch library was rented in 1926 on the second floor of the Newport National Bank (now Citizens Bank). The entrance was on the side located on Duke Street. It had a children's room, a fiction room, a charging room, and an additional collection of magazines, newspapers, and non-fiction books, about 5,200 volumes in all. The average circulation at this branch was about two-fifths of the whole library's.

The People's Library was affected by the Great Depression in the 1930s. The number of books and the circulation went down. The city used WPA workers for maintenance in both Aquidneck Park and the King House. The library's funds and endowments could no longer support the operation and in 1938 the library joined the Community Chest which provided the library with \$1,200 that year.

During World War II military personnel heavily used the library but it received no additional funds. By now the library was using \$2,000 a year out of its principal to stay open. In April 1942 the branch was closed. Fortunately the Community Chest was still helping. The State of Rhode Island did provide a small amount of money but there was still no financial aid from the city of Newport. Then in 1950 the city finally voted an annual appropriation for the People's Library in the amount of \$1,000 for the purchase of books. During the 1950s various foundations provided funds and several Newport residents remembered the library in their wills.

When the Recreation Hut opened in 1955 in Aquidneck Park vandalism increased and the repairs resulted in an unnecessary drain out of the small budget. Although the federal government was providing additional funds for libraries, Newport's large population made the People's Library ineligible. The library in 1957 was still depending on Townsend's 1881 endowment for 40% of its income. Christmas 1962 saw another closing by the library and finally the city turned to the state for help. A survey was commissioned of the state's library services, and, in particular, the needs of the People's Library.

In September of 1962 the old bank building on Thames Street was leveled by fire and the income from its rentals was lost. The Community Chest announced that it would close on July 1, 1963 and no longer provide aid to the library. The library announced it, too, would close July 1, if no further funds were available.

The results of the state's survey provided direction for a statewide reform of library services. To make the People's Library eligible for state aid the survey concluded that a new building as well as more books and an upgrade of hiring and salaries with an increase in hours was necessary.

The city council voted \$15,000 into the city budget to keep the library open and salaries were raised. Then things changed for the library. A state bond issue was put together to provide \$900,000 or half the cost of a new building. The city council voted to contribute \$30,000 and the local papers ran a heavy ad campaign for support of the library bond which passed by a ratio of 3-1.

By 1967, in the midst of debate over a choice of the site for the new building two subtle changes took place. The People's Library became the Newport Public Library and a group of Newporters formed The Friends of the Library. This group's mission is "to raise funds to be used to promote the collection, facilities, services, and projects of the library." In 1967 they raised enough money to provide a bookmobile for the library. Today this very energetic group continues to raise money for the library's collections and programs through fundraisers and through the sales of used books in the Friends Book Store founded by Josephine R. Carson.

The city finally ended the debate on the choice of a site when the council voted that it would still be located in Aquidneck Park but along the west side, on Spring Street. It was also decided that the Edward King House would not be torn down and today it serves as a vibrant senior center.

Construction was begun on the new building in 1968 and in October it was opened and dedicated. This was the second library

building to be built in Newport; the first was the Redwood Library building of 1748.

Everything was new and automated but the open book stacks were two thirds empty and exhibited a very sorry collection of books. The city cut back their contribution to the library and by 1971 services and hours were cut back, the bookmobile was discontinued, and a non-city resident fee was put into effect.

At this time Capt. E. B. Henry, Sr. USN (RET) was hired as head of the library. With help from the State Department of Library Services and the cooperation of the Middletown and Portsmouth libraries he was able to put the bookmobile back on the road where it served the three communities until about 1974 when it was returned to just Newport service. By using volunteers, part-time staff, C.E.T.A. workers, and setting up funds and applying for grants, Captain Henry was able to slowly bring the library along. Modern equipment was installed whenever possible, and non-book collections were increased.

Despite steady progress, salaries were still below average, and in 1976 the library received a setback when the city cut the book budget in half. Captain Henry continued to guide the library through these struggling times, expanding services and collections. During his tenure, in 1981, Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Sargent donated their private collection of Chinese artifacts and printed works to the library, creating the foundation of the Chinese Collection. Thanks to a special donation by the Chinese Program Committee, the new room housing our special collections is named in their honor.

After 12 years as head librarian, Captain Henry retired in 1983. Anne B. Toll succeeded him. Under her guidance the library pursued increased funding through more grants and by successfully convincing the City Council to increase its contribution.

In 1988 the library celebrated 20 years in the Henry C. Wilkinson Memorial Building, but changing trends in library operations, primarily in the use of technology, were already revealing weaknesses in a 1968-designed building. Computers were

multiplying, the children's area was overflowing with books, the elevator was aging, and the heating and ventilation system was difficult to control and maintain.

Thanks to good management the library still improved its reputation for quality service, and built a diverse and comprehensive collection. Usage was rising, and by the mid-1990s, Library Director Anne Toll and the Board of Trustees recognized the need for additional space and renovations. A building campaign was started, fundraising began in earnest with George Sarantos, then President of the Board, spearheading the drive, and planning commenced. A package of funding was put together through the efforts of many people, including major gifts by private foundations, and reimbursement funds made available through a Rhode Island library construction program. With this support, came the resounding approval of the Newport community, which as it did in 1967, passed a bond referendum by a 3 to 1 ratio.

Since that day in November 1998 many changes have taken place. Anne Toll retired after 17 years of service. Regina Slezak was chosen as the new Director, George Sarantos was followed by Dominic Varisco as President of the Board of Trustees, Jack Ellis was named Chairperson of the Building Committee. The building project has had its ups and downs, but the community support has never wavered. Today we marvel at the beautiful result of 18 months of construction and renovation, which has transformed our late 60s facility into a modern, well-lighted library of the future. The Newport Public Library has begun a new incarnation, ever remaining an integral part of the community and a treasured resource for all users.

## *Newport Public Library Memories*

A call to members of the community for memories of their library experiences brought forward the following:

*Mary Lozito Bellagamba.* "There are memories from our childhood that stand out more than others. One of these for me is going to the library on Duke Street every Saturday morning in the 1930s when I was in grammar school. We could never take a book home from school, and in our home there were only six children's books given to us by an "American" lady. I say that because my parents came to this country as teenagers without their parents to make their living.

There was rarely anything printed in English, and my sister and I discovered the library from which we could borrow books and keep them for a week or too.

We went through the side door on Duke Street. It was dark inside with oiled, wooden stairs that creaked as we went up. Our hearts usually were racing with the prospect of getting new books to read but it was also because the librarian terrified us.

There was a desk at the top of the stairs and something like a wooden hinged gate that was lifted. The librarian didn't smile or act welcoming. It was scary. I was probably eight or nine years old and my sister ten or eleven.

We went into the children's room on the right. It was small, dark, and had an unusual smell by my standards. I knew the exact shelves to go to as I read the Lucy Perkins' "Twins" series. And then went on to other books that I could read, always fascinated by the way the librarian stamped the card that was in the pocket in the back cover. As I remember the cards were pinkish, or salmon colored. We also had our library cards that were stamped as well.

We lived in the north end of Newport, off Bliss Road, and it was great to be able to walk to Duke Street in the center of town. That library played a big part in my early years. So much so that my chosen profession was to be a librarian...but now, of course, retired."

*Burton Hoffman* "My first encounter with heaven was at the People's Library, It was 1937. I was not quite eight years old, lived on Prospect Hill Street just up from Spring Street and attended Coddington School at the corner of Mill and Spring Streets, now part of Trinity Church's grounds

We recently had moved to Newport from New York City, and I was already familiar with libraries. But the quieter streets of my new city and my nearness to Aquidneck Park and the People's Library, then located in the Edward King house atop the hill, ended the need of an adult to accompany me to the library. I could go there by myself - and I did.

A year later I was in Lenthal School and the park and library were on my path between home and school. It was easier than ever to visit the library's second floor children's section. Its low shelves along the walls held intriguing books and magazines and the scaled down Windsor chairs circling round oak tables were perfect for small bodies and young eyes. I both checked books out and spent hours there reading others. A stamp club met regularly in a side room on the second floor. I attended many of these meetings as well.

The heaven I discovered on the second floor soon all but disappeared when my voracious reading exhausted the books available in the children's section. I sought books from the main section of the library on the first floor, but the librarian there refused to allow me to check books out. Despite this bureaucratic setback, I continued to visit the library, seeking out far corners on the first floor rooms where I could unobtrusively pull books from the shelves and read them - even though I couldn't take them home.

It wasn't long, of course, before I found other sources for books and other ways to get them from the library. The advent of 25-cent

Pocket Books enabled me to buy some of my own and to begin the passion of collecting them. Now, although I own thousands of books, I still visit the People's Library, but mainly to read periodicals and check out tapes.

Reading led me to careers as a writer and editor. My two children, one of whom is a writer, read as much as I and there are now five grandchildren whose own delight in books may surpass that of their forebears.

I like to think it all began in the children's section of the People's Library."

*Len Panaggio* "Back in the early 1920s we lived on Dennison Street. The People's Library was just a short walk through the beautiful Aquidneck Park. Entering the building was like visiting a big and elegant house. If I remember correctly, the only object in that open hall was the circulation desk. Behind it, or nearby, were a tall clock and the stairs to the second floor.

It was on the second floor that pre-teens found their books. There was also a room that faced the park. The lady in charge was Miss Werts. I believe that was her name. She was very friendly and indeed helpful. You asked a question about some subject in which you had an interest and she would go out to the shelves and give you just what you wanted.

Because the library was so close to home, it became my "club." There you would find me looking through various publications while my friends were playing baseball. It was a wonderful place. I must have spent countless hours as a youngster in that place."

*Barbara Angel* "My sister Avis and I often talk about going to the library on Washington Square as we lived on Barney Street and just had to walk down the Square.

As young children we would go to get our books there and walk all the way home reading them. We both are now avid readers. We always say what do people do if they don't read?"

*Teresa C. Trifero* "My memories of the library, it was known as the People's Library then, are so vivid to me even to this day.

I loved the library! I remember climbing that beautiful staircase, which, thankfully, is still there, and going to the children's room on the second floor. During the winter months, I would go there faithfully every Saturday. We lived near Aquidneck Park, so in summertime. I spent many days in the park, at the playground and at the library.

There were round tables and wooden chairs for us - and what a treat when the View Master was available and I could see all the beautiful pictures. This was a hand-held one, and I would point it toward the window for a clear picture.

There was a great selection of children's books and I would take my pick, take them to the librarian's desk and she would stamp the orange-colored card with the return date and slip it back into the book's envelope. We had no totes or backpacks then. Just piled them on our arms and carried them home.

I remember reading those books, and the characters were so real, I felt I knew them. I especially remember one book where the young girl went to visit Italy with her parents. She was dressed in a red coat, white straw hat, white shoes and gloves. It was the white gloves I liked most and I couldn't wait to buy a pair. They went to the Lido to visit. I have been to Italy, but not near the Lido, but maybe on my next visit I will go there and look for the little girl in the red coat.

Then came the transition, and as a high school student I was able to be a down-stairs person. All those wonderful novels, encyclopedias and reference books were there. What wasn't in the school library was always at the park library. I remember Juliet Luistro, who was librarian there for many years. She and the library memories are synonymous.

Those were happy days. Aquidneck Park is a beautiful park. I remember my mother would go to the park on a summer afternoon to meet three other ladies who also lived nearby. They would sit on

the wooden benches near a shade tree for a pleasant afternoon. Some would bring their crocheting or knitting to do.

The trees were beautiful, huge and regal. We would have fun picking up horse chestnuts and some leaves that were large and had lines that we could peel and make a design. Then there were those little leaves that we would pick up from the ground and pry open so we could put them on top of our noses - what fun!

The library has given me many wonderful memories - all those great books. Even though the building is now the Edward King House (of which I am a member of the Board) when I climb that beautiful red-carpeted staircase, I know it will always be the library to me."

*These memories are wonderful. Did you notice how they were all childhood memories? Over the years the ability of children to check out books contributed to the development of many dedicated readers. It is fitting that we dedicate this new wing today with its much needed and expanded children's section where the current and future generations of Newport's children can find escape into the world of books.*

*Please feel free to write up and send your memories of Newport Public Library to us at: Newport Public Library, 300 Spring St., Newport, RI 02840 or email them to us at: [nptref@lori.state.ri.us](mailto:nptref@lori.state.ri.us)*