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Public Library Buildings in Oregon:

A Historical Sketch

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If you are looking for the first public library built in Oregon, you'll have to settle for driving past the corner of Stark and Broadway in downtown Portland where a parking garage stands today. That is the former site of a building that would become the first public library in Oregon, constructed by the Library Association of Portland in 1893. When it was constructed it was not a "public library" in the strict sense of that term. At the time, the Library Association of Portland did not operate a public library, but a subscription library. It was the most successful of several subscription libraries that emerged in towns in 19th century Oregon, beginning as far back as 1840 (McClintock 2008, 29). In 1893 the new library on Stark Street was not open to the general public, but only to those who could afford a hefty annual subscription of \$12 per year—about \$270 in today's dollars (Gunselman 2001, 435).

Before 1893 none of Oregon's subscription libraries occupied their own building.

The first subscription library in Oregon City was located in a private residence, and other such libraries were located in borrowed or rented quarters. But in 1889 Ella M. Smith left her \$125,000 estate to the Library Association of Portland which enabled the members to build an imposing new library in the Classical style at a cost of \$130,000 (Ritz 2000, 12-13). The building opened in 1893 with a collection of 21,000 books (Rowe 1939, 16). Nine years later, in 1902, the building became a real public library, the first in Oregon, under the terms of a funding agreement between the Library Association and the City of Portland. This opened the library to everyone in Portland, after nearly four decades in which the Library Association served only the elite of Portland. Shortly thereafter, the Association contracted with Multnomah County, and the library became one of only a handful of county libraries in the U.S. (Gunselman 2001, 442-446).

At the same time as these developments were taking place in Portland, Andrew



Carnegie Library in Dallas, Oregon, circa 1912. The city of Dallas received a grant of \$10,000 in December 7, 1911, for construction of this library. (Courtesy Oregon State Archives, Oregon State Library, OSL0030.)



Carnegie had embarked upon what is still today the greatest philanthropic project ever, constructing 1,679 public library buildings in 1,412 communities in the U.S. at a cost of over \$40 million, between 1886 and 1919 (Bobinski 1969, 3). In general, Carnegie was willing to fund the entire cost of a library in return for a community's pledge to provide an appropriate site and to fund the library operations from tax sources in an amount equivalent to 10% of the building grant per year.

In Oregon, 31 Carnegie libraries were built between about 1901 and 1920. The first Carnegie grant of \$165,000 went to the Library Association of Portland to construct seven branches throughout Portland. Then in December, 1903, Carnegie made a grant of \$10,000 to construct the first public library in Eugene. Four years later, grants were made to construct the first public libraries in Baker City, Salem, and The Dalles. The last Carnegie library in Oregon was completed in Grants Pass in 1920. The total amount granted to Oregon was \$478,000 (Bobinski 1969, 207-242). Out of 46 states that received Carnegie library grants, Oregon ranked 22nd in the amount of funding received—not bad for a sparsely populated far western state (Bobinski 1969, 17).

Today, only 10 of the 31 Oregon Carnegie libraries are still being used as public libraries. Carnegie libraries are notoriously difficult to expand and turn into functional modern libraries, but creative efforts have been made to do so. The Ashland Branch of the Jackson County Library turned their Carnegie library into the children's library and added on a separate wing for adults, connected to the Carnegie library by an indoor walkway. The libraries in Newberg and Hood River are also, in my opinion, particularly creative and successful examples of expanding and adapting Carnegie libraries to meet contemporary needs.

The first two decades of the 20th century saw the first public library building boom

in Oregon, fueled by the establishment of new libraries in many Oregon communities and the lure of Mr. Carnegie's incomparable philanthropy. Another notable building from this era (not funded by Carnegie) was the Central Library in downtown Portland that was built in 1913 on 10th Street to replace the older main library at Stark and Broadway, dedicated only 20 years earlier. Designed by noted Portland architect A.E. Doyle, the Central Library today is one of the most beloved buildings in Portland and is unusual in having been built big enough in 1913 to still be adequate as a main library today (Ritz 2000, 35-43). The Central Library underwent extensive renovations from 1995 to 1997 that greatly improved its functionality (Ritz 2000, 69-75). Today it is the first library in Oregon to sport a "green roof" with plantings that create energy savings.

Public library construction slowed down after the first two decades of the 20th century. Carnegie grants were no longer available and the country had entered the Depression and World War II which caused some decline in the construction of public buildings. A notable exception was the Corvallis Public Library, designed by Pietro Belluschi, one of Oregon's most accomplished 20th century architects, completed in 1931 (McClintock 2008, 90-100). Like the Central Library, this building is also well-loved by its community. It has been expanded twice, most recently in the early 1990s (McClintock 2008, 171-180).

The postwar decades saw surprisingly little public library construction in Oregon. For the most part, the buildings built at the beginning of the century were still in use, though many were run down and terribly undersized. A good example is the Salem Public Library, which, in the 1960s was still occupying the small Carnegie library completed in 1912 to serve a population of only about 15,000. Finally, in 1972, the

The Oregon State University alumnus, *Carry Me Back*, is dedicated to "Mother Kidder," the much-loved College librarian from 1908 until her death in 1920. Her body was "laid in state" in the newly completed library building before interment.

—Oregon State University Archives Web site



The Pacific Northwest Library Association was founded in 1909 at a meeting held in conjunction with the Alaska-Yukon Pacific Exposition in Seattle.

—PNLA Web site

Library benefited from citizen support for a new civic center, including a new city hall and library.

Fortunately, beginning in the late 1980s, momentum began to build to replace many of the older public library facilities around the state that had far exceeded their lifespan. Though Andrew Carnegie was no longer around to prime the pump, charitable foundations had begun to be established in the state, and many of them took a particular interest in helping to meet the need for new public libraries in many communities. The Meyer Memorial Trust was one of the first, and for many years one of the most important of these foundations that created strong incentives for local communities to vote for bond measures or raise funds in other ways to build new or expanded libraries. Other important support came from the Ford Family Foundation, the Collins Foundation, and the Oregon Community Foundation.

Support from charitable foundations, coupled with the clear need to replace aging and undersized libraries in most communities fueled a new late 20th century library building boom that far exceeded the boom at the beginning of the century. The desire for new libraries seemed to be contagious. When one community showed they could build a wonderful new library, the neighboring community would develop the motivation to do the same.

Since 1990, the State Library has recorded a total of 107 new or expanded public libraries constructed in the state, about half of all the libraries and branch libraries in Oregon. A few counties, like Multnomah, Jackson, Deschutes, and Baker, have seen all of their public libraries replaced, expanded, or improved. Only six of Oregon's 36 counties have not seen at least one new library built in the past three decades.

Another notable contributor to the Oregon public library building boom of recent

decades is architect Richard Turi of North Bend. Turi got his start designing a new library for his hometown of North Bend and went on to design libraries for small and medium-sized communities throughout the state. By the time he completed his final design for the Seaside Public Library which opened in September 2008, Turi had designed about one in every five new libraries built in the past three decades. Turi is noted for designing spacious, moderately priced libraries that can be run with limited staff. If you travel Oregon you will spot Turi libraries up and down the Oregon coast, in the Willamette Valley, and as far east as Sisters and Prineville. His achievement is remarkable and will never be equaled.


Among the more recent Oregon public libraries, one of the most notable is the Eugene Public Library in downtown Eugene, which replaced a seriously undersized and inadequate facility. It was the first library in Oregon to utilize RFID technology for circulating library materials, and a sophisticated automated materials handling system to sort returned books for reshelving. Just this year the new Albany Public Library became the second Oregon public library to utilize these new technologies.

As we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it appears the latest Oregon public library building boom may have run its course. Construction continues, but at a slower pace. However, the "library contagion" is still out there. Residents of communities that have not built a new library in the past 30 years see new libraries all around them. It becomes a matter of civic pride to replace a clearly substandard library with something better.

There is still a serious need for new public libraries in a number of Oregon communities. Some that come to mind are Astoria, Gladstone, Irrigon, Lakeview, Maupin, Monroe, Oregon City, Scio, and Sheridan. There are great old Carnegie



libraries still in use in Union and Enterprise that, given adequate investment in restoration and improvement, could be made into 21st century libraries. Most of these communities are well aware of their needs and they are working on them. Fortunately, Oregon's wonderful, charitable foundations, that I mentioned earlier, are still highly motivated to help. There are even a few newer ones like the Paul G. Allen Foundation and the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation that have been most generous in recent years.

Oregon is a great public library state. We are nationally recognized for having some of the best and most heavily used public libraries in the country. This phenomenon owes a lot to the outstanding facilities we have built in recent years—to the citizens, elected officials and charitable foundations that supported them, to the architects who designed them, and not the least, to the library trustees, directors and staff who inspired and guided their construction. 

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Story hour at the Oregon City Public Library, 1940. These members of the Elevator Reading Group kept a record of their summer reading in booklets supplied by the library. These were placed on a miniature elevator constructed by a high school student. (Courtesy Oregon State Archives, Oregon State Library, OSL0013.)

