

“The Carnegie Library”

If the city were to pledge itself to maintain a free public library from taxes, say to the extent of the amount you name, of between five and six thousand dollars a year, and provide a site, I shall be glad to give you \$50,000 to erect a suitable library building.

--Andrew Carnegie, July 7, 1899.

Between 1883 and 1929, the industrialist turned philanthropist Andrew Carnegie funded construction of 1,689 libraries in the United States. San Diego had the honor of being the first Carnegie library in California.

Since its founding in 1882, the San Diego Public Library had struggled to find adequate funding and a permanent home. Rented floors in a bank building at Fifth and G Streets served the book collection for its first decade. Cost-cutting forced a move in 1893 to rooms in the St. James Building at Seventh and F Streets. Another move came in 1898 to the fifth floor of the Keating Building at Fifth and F. With only meager financial support from the City, a permanent home for the library seemed unlikely.

Library supporters were not discouraged. The Wednesday Club, an "artistic and literary culture" club of San Diego women, adopted the library as their special project. Led by Lydia Knapp Horton, the wife of San Diego founder Alonzo Horton, the women began a library building fund.

In October 1897, Lydia Horton wrote to Andrew Carnegie requesting pictures of library buildings he had sponsored. The philanthropist mailed a set of prints, which the Wednesday Club exhibited as a fund raiser. Mrs. Horton continued the correspondence, telling Carnegie in May 1899, “the library needs of this place are very apparent . . . we feel more than ever the need of permanent quarters.” Carnegie responded with the offer of \$50,000 to build “a suitable library building.”

Amid the excitement over Carnegie’s generous offer, the project immediately bogged down in debate over where to locate the new building. Several different downtown sites were promoted for the honor. The size of the property was also questioned; businessman George W. Marston argued strongly for a whole block and warned “the city will regret for all time its error if it should let this opportunity pass without obtaining the full square of land for the library.”

After several months of public acrimony a half-block tract of land was purchased at Eighth and E Streets for \$17,000. The City paid only \$9,000 with the rest coming from private donations, including \$1000 from George Marston and \$500 from the Wednesday Club.

Bids for the construction of the library were solicited in a national competition. The request for proposals called for a building “as nearly fireproof as possible,” using granite or brick construction. All rooms were to receive as much natural light as possible “as all Californians recognize the necessity of sunny rooms.” The successful architects would receive 5 percent of the building budget as full compensation for their plans and specifications.

The design competition was won by the architects Ackerman and Ross. The New York firm had recently designed a Carnegie library in Washington, D.C. The San Diego architects Hebbard and Gill were sub-contracted by Ackerman and Ross as construction superintendents.

Construction for the library began in December 1900. Sixteen months later, on April 23, 1902, the library opened. The completed building was a beautiful, Classical Revival style structure, built of brick and covered with white cement, giving a marble appearance to the exterior. The library was fronted by a grass lawn with landscaping designed by horticulturist Kate Sessions and funded by George Marston.

Library historian Theodore Koch (*A Book of Carnegie Libraries*, 1917) described the library's interior:

The delivery room [circulation desk] occupies the center of the first floor; opening from this, on the one side, are a children's room and a women's magazine room; on the other a men's magazine room and a reference room. Behind the delivery room are the librarian's and catalogers' rooms, back of which are the stacks. The second story contains an art gallery, a lecture room with seating capacity of 100, a museum, trustees' room, and two small rooms for special study. The light green tint of the walls throughout the building blends harmoniously with the color of the oak furniture.

With furnishings, the building had ultimately cost \$60,000. The steel book stacks alone, cost nearly \$10,000. Fortunately, the Carnegie foundation decided to increase its gift to cover the added costs, with the condition that the City of San Diego agree to support the library with at least \$6,000 per year.

The new library reflected both new and old attitudes of public librarianship. Separate reading rooms for men and women were normal practice for the day. A central delivery desk for requested books was also a time-honored practice. But the library's interest in service for children—apparent in the large children's room—was quite modern. More revolutionary still was a willingness to allow patrons into the library stacks to choose books themselves, without a librarian's help. In 1902, the San Diego Public Library was among the first public libraries to offer “open stacks.”

The size of the Carnegie building, designed for a city population of only 17,700 in 1900, seemed to shrink rapidly in just a few years. By 1910, the San Diego population had more than doubled in size and the library began to suffer from crowding. In a few more years, shelving covered every available wall surface. Short-term relief came from moving several departments to rented spaces in nearby buildings. Remodeling the



Carnegie in 1930 added more floor space, and the addition of new branch libraries took some pressure off.

But the need for a larger library was clear. After failed bond measures in 1923 and 1937, the voters finally approved \$2 million in bonds in 1949, to build a new main library and improve the growing branch library system. Three years later, the library moved into temporary quarters in an old Exposition building in Balboa Park. The venerable Carnegie library, at age fifty, was demolished. The new Central Library, designed for a city population of less than 350,000, was built on the same site and dedicated on June 27, 1954.



The Carnegie Library soon after its completion in 1902. Note the hitching posts for horses along unpaved E Street. *Special Collections, San Diego Public Library*

Originally published as “First library building quickly outgrew its space,” by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 24, 2008.