

“San Diego’s First Public Library”

The Free Public Library . . . this literary resort is fast becoming a most popular place for lovers of reading, and those who wish to spend a quiet afternoon with their favorite author The public appreciate the commodious, well ventilated apartments now occupied by the institution, and its patronage is increasing accordingly.

--San Diego Union, June 28, 1889

San Diego’s “literary resort,” the Public Library, was founded on May 19, 1882. After years of stalled efforts, which included a short-lived library started by Alonzo Horton and a casually run “Free Reading Room Association,” five publicly elected library trustees met to organize the city’s first municipal library.

After only two weeks of work the trustees secured a suite of five, rent-free rooms for the library on the second floor of the Commercial Bank on Fifth and G, where it shared space with a dentist, Daniel Cave. The library opened on July 15 as a reading room only; book borrowing privileges were not considered.

The collection was started with books inherited from the failed Free Reading Room Association, augmented by new gifts and donated furniture. Magazine and newspaper subscriptions comprised much of the new collection. The library trustees met regularly in the parlor of the bank building--soon known as the Consolidated National Bank--to vote on new book purchases and subscriptions.

Most purchased books were ordered from Dodge and Burbeck, a bookstore on Fifth and D Streets. These included popular modern titles such as Bullfinch’s *Age of Fable*, Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad*, and Carlyle’s *French Revolution*. One donation brought a large set of classical works from Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, and Thucydides. The small but diverse reference collection included encyclopedias, biographies, government reports, law books, and books written in Latin, Greek, French, and German.

The trustees apparently felt there was no need for a trained professional to oversee the library. The collection was supervised by a caretaker: Archibald Hooker, who was also the janitor.

Janitor-librarian Hooker was authorized to “let out books” beginning in June 1883 but the circulation rules were strict. Borrowers were required to “furnish good security for their return,” or leave a deposit for the full price of the book. The rules were later clarified to specify that “all property owners” could check out books by applying for a library card. All other borrowers needed their library card applications co-signed by a city resident, presumably a property owner.



Lulu Younkin San Diego Public Library

Augustus Wooster, a local attorney, was hired as “librarian” in 1884 with a monthly salary of ten dollars. He was replaced in September 1887 by Lulu Younkin, a former teacher and graduate of the University of Iowa. Hired at \$75 per month, Miss Younkin was asked to “take charge of the library and to index the books.”

Miss Younkin eagerly arranged the book collection by the Dewey Decimal system and produced a 212-page catalog, which itemized the 7,000 volume collection. A chapter on Rules and Regulations stated that books could be checked out for two weeks, by borrowers twelve years of age or older. Overdue fines were five cents a day but severely late books could be “sent for” with a surcharge of twenty-five cents.

As customary for the day, the library shelves were closed to the public. Books needed to be requested from the librarian and no one was admitted behind a rope placed in front of the shelves. “Free access to the books was the source of much annoyance to the librarian and loss to the library,” Miss Younkin explained.

But the “closed stacks” policy was also annoying to the library trustees who preferred “giving the public all the privileges possible, even at the expense of an occasional loss to the library.” After many complaints from library users, they ordered Miss Younkin to remove her rope and permit free access to the shelves. The librarian was appeased somewhat when the trustees allowed her to mark all the non-circulating magazines with the words: “Stolen from the public library.”

A bank renovation came in 1889 and the library moved upstairs after two new floors had been added to the building. The fourth floor was leased for \$150 per month. San Diego’s *Golden Era* magazine approved of the new quarters: “The main room is 50 x 90 feet, with twenty-six windows, thereby insuring an abundance of light by day, while by night a multitude of electric jets illumine the room.”

The renovated library featured two reading rooms: one for each sex. Althea Warren, the city librarian for San Diego’s later Carnegie Library recalled: “Sex determined whether you turned right or left on climbing the stairs to the second floor.” The rooms were identical; “the only way to tell them apart was that the women’s reading room held a potted palm.”

The library was open daily from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m. with one hour lunch and dinner breaks for Miss Younkin and her two assistants. Sunday hours were 1 to 4.

By the late 1880s the public library had become a major downtown success story. The two reading rooms were usually crowded, particularly in the evening hours. Book circulation figures were remarkable: 5,855 volumes circulated in October 1889. Annual circulation neared 70,000.

The local newspapers were consistent boosters of the library. The *Union* declared that the San Diego Public Library, “in proportion to its size,” supplied more reading than any other library in California. “This being the fact,” the newspaper asked, “will not every citizen do all in his power to promote its development?”

But financial support from the city government was minimal and rarely enough to grow the collection or even replace worn out books. Rising utility bills forced the library to turn down lights. The library appealed to the Consolidated Bank for lower rent but the bank refused.

As cost-saving measure, the library signed a five-year lease in April 1993 for second-floor rooms in the St. James Hotel near the corner of Seventh and F Streets. Only six weeks later the library reopened. “The arrangement of the large, airy rooms has been completed in an excellent manner, the *Union* reported. “The public will doubtless be well satisfied with the change.”

The St. James would be the home of the Public Library for the next five years. After another location change, to the top floor of the Keating Building at Fifth and F Streets, a spirited public campaign would raise funds for the city’s first library building. With a \$60,000 donation from Andrew Carnegie the city would build a new library at Eighth and E Streets, finished in 1902.



In 1882 the San Diego Public Library occupied several rooms on the second floor of the Commercial Bank Building on the southwest corner of Fifth and G Streets. *San Diego Public Library*

Originally published as “Library provided literary oasis for San Diego,” by Richard Crawford in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, June 6, 2009. p. CZ.1