

Draft: *America's Public Libraries: Finding the Women Who Make Them*

Chapter 1: Libraries and Librarians

Ask the person on the street for the name of a librarian and they are likely to be stumped, although some will be likely to remember one or more they know from their local public library. Librarianship is not exactly a career that brings fame.

If you ask them “Have you heard of Andrew Carnegie?” it is somewhat more probable that they will respond “Yeah, I’ve heard of him. Rich guy, right?” They might even have heard of Carnegie libraries, as he funded scores of them, in every state except Alaska – the largest, by land mass – and Delaware, the second smallest. Because there are so many Carnegie libraries ([about 800 still serve their original purpose](#)), they might even have visited one. You can find them in our largest cities (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, among others) and in our small towns (Herrington, Kansas; Eureka Springs, Arkansas; Dillon, Montana).

Even if they don’t know the name Melville Dewey, it’s a fair bet that they’ve heard of the Dewey Decimal System, which is used to categorize books in many public libraries. Other than that? Crickets. You can search any list of the 100 Americans who are of the greatest historical importance, and you won’t find any librarians. (I tried.) If so inclined, you could also search for lists of “notable librarians” and, if you do, you won’t find any names that have broad public recognition. Unless your definition of “the public” involves only those involved in library work.

This book limits its definition of librarian to include only those working “in the care or management of a public library.” This modifies the Merriam-Webster definition “a specialist in the care or management of a library” in two ways. Many of those working in libraries during the Carnegie era were not specialists; they’re called librarians here. I also focus exclusively on public libraries, even though many other kinds of libraries (academic; law, medicine, or other specialized libraries; private) exist.

The book *Pioneers in Librarianship* contains (as the subtitle proclaims) profiles of “Sixty Notable Leaders Who Shaped the Field.” Of these sixty, 38 – almost two thirds – are men in a field that has been (numerically) dominated by women in the United States for more than one hundred years. Of the twenty-two women, only six spent a substantial portion of their careers in public libraries in the United States.

Individual women may not have “shaped the field” as much as individual men; men may also simply be more likely to be recognized. Andrew Carnegie, (who was omitted from the Pioneers list, no doubt because he was not a librarian) by donating the funds to build 1689 public and academic libraries across America, shaped American public libraries far

more than any single woman. But it took thousands of women (and men), often working together in groups, to bring these libraries into the individual towns.

Prior to Carnegie's generosity, public libraries were uncommon in the United States. To be considered "public," a library has to have two main features. It must be supported by taxes, whether the monies come from general revenues or levies specifically designated for the purpose. They must also be free to the patrons and, one would hope, open to all who want to enter the doors. Not all public libraries met this criterion. In the Jim Crow South, prior to the 1960s libraries there were almost always segregated. A few places had libraries designated for use by Blacks. But only a few.

The [Franklin Public Library](#), in Franklin, Massachusetts is considered to be the first library in America in which residents were allowed to check out books without paying for the privilege. After the town in 1778 changed its name from Exeter to Franklin, in honor of Benjamin Franklin, he donated books from his personal library to it. In 1790, at a town meeting, the residents voted to make the books free to those who lived there. If you want to browse its stacks, you can: the library has been in continuous operation since its founding. Peterborough, New Hampshire – a town on my itinerary – claims bragging rights as having been the first library supported through taxpayer support, which was approved in a town meeting in 1833.

When Carnegie began funding library construction in the United States, public libraries were uncommon: [only some 649 existed](#) in 1887, the year his funding program took off. Carnegie made his initial grant, [to Pittsburgh](#), in 1881. He offered the city \$250,000 to build a free library, so long as Pittsburgh bought the land and funded the library's operations. [Pittsburgh did not take Carnegie up](#) on this, asserting that the city was not permitted to use taxes for such a purpose. In 1886, city officials determined that they were indeed allowed to allot revenue to libraries, and they enacted an ordinance to do so. (The state's General Assembly formalized this policy in 1887.) They reached back out to Carnegie and he raised his offer to \$1 million to construct a central library and four branches. Pittsburgh was gratified to accept this offer.

In 1886 Carnegie presented his first (accepted) grant to Allegheny for a library to be supported by tax dollars. Meanwhile, Carnegie proceeded to fund and endow a library in Braddock, a Pittsburgh suburb and the home of one of his steel plants. In 1889, it was the first Carnegie to open; Allegheny was the second, opening in 1890. All but one of Carnegie's grants in the early years were to places, mainly in the Pittsburgh area, to which he had a personal connection; Fairfield, Iowa, in 1892, was the exception.

Carnegie hired James Bertram as his personal secretary in 1887. Bertram, another unsung hero of the public library movement, served Carnegie in a personal capacity until 1914; he subsequently worked for the Carnegie Corporation until his death in 1934. (We'll hear a lot from him in the coming pages.) Bertram Those appealing for a Carnegie

grant typically addressed their initial inquiries to Carnegie himself. The answers invariably came from James Bertram, whose typical complimentary closing was “Respectfully yours, P. Secretary” without an actual signature.

Bertram was almost entirely responsible for administering Carnegie’s library granting program. Over time, he was flooded with applications, as Carnegie funded 2509 libraries worldwide, including 1689 in the United States, over roughly twenty years. Over two hundred communities also received Carnegie grants and then turned them down. An unknown number of others applied unsuccessfully, although that number does not appear to be great, as Carnegie would fund virtually every community that met its formal requirements. In total, Bertram distributed some \$41 million dollars – about \$1.3 billion dollars in today’s currency – to public libraries. Bertram was also involved in the granting process for church organs, of which Carnegie funded over 7,000.

Each library application involved multiple back and forths, often with various individuals from the communities writing separate and sometimes contradictory or competing letters. It’s hard for me to grasp the magnitude of Bertram’s efforts (the Carnegie archives contain some 50,000 letters and documents pertaining to libraries, an average of about thirty items per requesting community) when much of the correspondence he received was handwritten.

In my imagination, the women who wrote Carnegie would have done so in an elegant script. Hardly. Signatures are frequently difficult to read, as I expected, as they are more likely to illustrate the personality of the author than to facilitate legibility to the reader. Yet the text itself often appears to have been written by an individual wearing mittens and riding in a stagecoach over rip-rap roads. I tip my hat to those who read archival letters for a living. I found doing so difficult, tedious, and frustrating.

Bertram’s answers are to the point and often curt; sometimes his frustrations are evident. As the vignette “[Quiet Power Behind the Carnegie Throne](#): The Secretary Who Made the Decisions” (published by the American Library Association, the ALA) puts it,

Bertram had a most unusual personality. He was a devoted, meticulous Scot, thrifty, very religious (a staunch Presbyterian), inclined to be irritable, rather brusque in manner, and short and direct in speech. Indeed, brevity was a strong trait. He never used a paragraph when a sentence would do, and a word often served as a sentence.

It was Bertram who scrutinized all the applications, determined the size of the grants, negotiated the library’s design, and ensured that the terms of the grants were fulfilled. The back-and-forths could persist for years.

Bertram approved about a thousand grants in the 1890s, another thousand between 1900 and 1910, and almost 700 more in the 1910s. Over those years, Bertram became increasingly disappointed, aggravated, and perplexed with the proposed library designs sent to him. Too often they contained unnecessary or wasteful features, or were otherwise poorly suited to their tasks. After consulting with those who knew better (say, architects or library specialists), in 1911 Bertram printed his “Notes on the Design of Library Buildings” (as he spelled it, influenced by Melvil – previously, Melville – Dewey’s simplified spelling system, which his boss Carnegie also adopted). He strongly encouraged – insisted, really – communities adopt his notes so that they would have “more open, flexible, and less expensive” blueprints.

Bertram almost never knew personally those who appealed to Carnegie for money. He did not attend library conferences or travel the country. It is possible that this was a matter of personal preference, or due to the demands of his job, or that he maintained his aloofness to avoid accusations of favoritism. He always insisted in his letters that he would not get involved in matters of local controversy and, when correspondents tried to lure him in, his responses fell into the single category of “No.”

George S. Bobinski ends his “Quiet Power” essay with the statement that Bertram

did his work efficiently but quietly – so quietly, in fact, that he somehow never got the recognition he deserves in American library history as an important force in the development of public libraries and public library architecture in the United States.

How true. “Quiet Power,” a single page essay appearing in the *American Libraries* journal in 1975, is the only treatise I have found that focuses squarely on him.

Bertram had his motivations, whether preference, obligation, or principle, to do what he did in the way that he did it. Carnegie surely had his own incentives which, unlike in Bertram’s case, have been the subject of a certain amount of reading room psychoanalysis. Before hearing some of that analysis, let’s hear from the man himself.

In 1889, just when he was starting his library grants, Carnegie wrote the essay “Wealth” (better known as “[The Gospel of Wealth](#)”), in which he warned the rich about the dangers of perishing while wealthy.

[T]he day is not far distant when the man who dies leaving behind him millions of available wealth, which was free to him to administer during life, will pass away “unwept, unhonored, and unsung,” no matter to what uses he leaves the dross which he cannot take with him.

[T]he public verdict will then be: “The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced.”

Carnegie decided to give away as much of his fortune as he could before he died, and among several other purposes he chose to fund the building of public libraries. Why libraries?

In bestowing charity, the main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves; to provide part of the means by which those who desire to improve may do so; to give those who desire to use the aids by which they may rise; to assist, but rarely or never to do all.

Libraries, if free to the public, offer the means for self-improvement for those with the gumption to seek it; anyone, literally, no matter how prosperous or impoverished. [Recalling his own childhood](#) – he was born poor in Scotland – Carnegie stated that

It was from my own early experience that I decided there was no use to which money could be applied so productive...as the founding of a public library in a community which is willing to support it as a municipal institution.

Even though Carnegie built his first libraries in towns with his steel mills, he seems to have forgotten that his workers had twelve hour shifts, six or seven days a week, and so might not have had the time or energy for library-based self improvement, should the libraries even be open during their constricted “leisure” time. And as to whether his money might have been better spent in improving the lives of his workers, well,

[If I had raised your wages](#), you would have spent that money by buying a better cut of meat or more drink for your dinner. But what you needed, though you didn't know it, was my libraries and concert halls. And that's what I'm giving to you.

In addition to improving individuals, Carnegie seems to have been motivated by broader social principles. [At the dedication of the Washington, DC, public library](#), he declared that “Free libraries maintained by the people are cradles of democracy, and their spread can never fail to extend and strengthen the democratic idea, the equality of the citizen, the royalty of man.”

I don't question the sincerity of Carnegie's motivation to offer opportunities for self improvement to those he saw as deserving it, or his desire to enhance democracy's cradles. Yet our motivations are not always clear, even to ourselves, and they may contain other elements we might not wish to acknowledge. Did Carnegie give libraries to atone for his brutal treatment of the working man? It doesn't seem likely, but I wouldn't count that out. Was it a bid for eternal fame? I doubt that Carnegie would admit to that,

although wealthy and powerful men have been known to crave lasting glory. (Samuel Clemens – better known as Mark Twain – surely thought as much: [Carnegie "has bought fame and paid for it"](#); he has deliberately projected and planned out the fame for himself.) Maybe he wanted to gain additional favor with his wife, Louise Whitfield Carnegie, who was one of the original members of the Carnegie Corporation Board of Trustees. Louise was Andrew's "[most trusted confidant](#)" and Carnegie himself is often to have said "I can't imagine myself without Lou's guardianship." Would it really be surprising if, by funding libraries, Carnegie wanted to do good, atone for his past, seek fame, and please his wife?

Given that true motivations are always invisible and often inscrutable, what are we to make of the impetuses that led so many women to devote their time and talents, their skills and their shekels, to the service of public libraries? Many were undoubtedly motivated by their desire to do good for their families, communities, and country, and that engaging in library work might simultaneously benefit all three. Were they spurred to seek fame, if not on a global scale, within their own communities or for them? By advocating on behalf of libraries, in their words and deeds, were they hoping to please their husbands or other family members? Had they hoped, even, to recompense for their mistakes? And if they were motivated mainly to serve the people of their community, which people? The children? The drunks? The "ladies?" As we meet the librarians in the coming pages, I tease out as best I can why women sought to bring libraries to their main streets, and why they led them once they gained them.

Carnegie's gifts were a major factor in the explosive growth of public libraries in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were not the only factor. During this period, women played an essential role, for a couple of reasons. During the Progressive Era (roughly, 1890 - 1920) women's clubs multiplied rapidly across the country. Often started as literary clubs focused on individual self improvement through books (and lectures on and discussions about them), these clubs typically expanded their purview to include community betterment, notably through temperance (opposition to alcohol consumption), women's rights, juvenile justice, and public libraries, among other matters. In addition, by the Carnegie Era, which essentially matched that of the Progressives, women came to dominate librarianship.

The first wave of the women's club movement involved clubs composed primarily of white, educated, middle class, Protestant women, often – definitely not always – with the members having husbands who were prominent in their communities. Feminist journalist Jane Cunningham Croly organized the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) in 1890, and by 1910 it had over [800,000 members](#) from across the country. In its biennial meeting in 1898, the [GFWC devoted](#) an entire morning session to libraries.

The second wave was led by African American women. That they constituted a separate wave can be attributed to the fact, in part, that many clubs excluded Blacks and the GFWC barred Black women from joining it. (As historian [Anne Firor Scott](#) notes in her article “Most Invisible of All: Black Women’s Voluntary Associations,” “Is it any wonder that this era, labeled ‘progressive’ by white historians, is called ‘the nadir’ by those who are black?”) Consequently, in 1896 Black women organized the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC). Scott finds that “By the turn of the century there were associations of some sort in nearly every black community, North and South, in cities, towns, and villages...” By 1914, over 1000 clubs had joined the NACWC and countless other clubs had been formed yet had not joined the national federation.

[Paula Watson](#), a library administrator, in a most useful her most useful review, described the role these clubs played in “[Founding Mothers: The Contribution of Women's Organizations to Public Library Development in the United States](#)” (and also “[Carnegie Ladies, Lady Carnegies: Women and the Building of Libraries](#)”), concluding that “Women's clubs contributed in a very tangible way to the spread of the public library idea and to the foundation of numerous libraries in cities and towns across the country...” According to a study prepared for a presidential commission in 1933, Sophonisba Breckenridge reported that the ALA believed that women’s clubs had initiated three fourths of American’s public libraries (although Watson notes that it was unclear where this number came from, and it has not been verified by the ALA). In doing so, these clubs did it all: raise money; find suitable homes (in many cases, literally someone’s home) for them or create traveling libraries (the predecessors of bookmobiles); lobby for legislative enactments, which included taxing authority and the creation of library commissions; and serve as librarians.

Serve as librarians women certainly did, as Dee Garrison points out in her article “[The Tender Technicians: The Feminization of Public Librarianship, 1876-1905](#).” In 1910, some 80 percent of American library workers were women, and only teaching was a more “feminized” profession. This represented a huge shift in the library workforce. In 1870, about [80 percent of librarians were men](#); by 1900, some 80 percent were women.

There were many reasons for this shift. In the 1800s, few professional opportunities availed themselves to educated women. The library was also equated to the home, where a woman’s touch left a civilizing and cultured influence, and where the kind of home-management touch women were skilled at was needed. (As Garrison writes, “charming theories were developed by both sexes to explain why the feminine mind and nature were innately suited to the new occupation (p. 134).) Whereas “The great mass of men in all fields worked to secure prestige or a higher income,” library work was as “distinct a consecration as a minister or missionary....The selfish considerations of

reputation or personal comfort, or emolument are all secondary (p. 135).” The “ideal library would offer the warmth and hospitality of the home to its patrons (p. 136).”

Moreover, libraries required a lot of (tedious) cataloguing, which women were exceptionally suited for due to their “greater conscientiousness, patience and accuracy in details (p. 137).” Libraries increasingly had children’s rooms, which were the “woman's undisputed domains (p. 137).” Finally, it must be noted, “women soon learned that they were seldom paid the same as men who were doing the same work (p. 137).” Women were seen as providing high quality services at low, low prices.

Carnegie’s grants, women’s clubs, and individual library women were the critical factors in the dramatic expansion of America’s public libraries. I now turn to their stories.