

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

Preface

Some of my earliest memories involve public libraries. When I was a child in what was then the small town of Fayetteville, Arkansas, my mother would drop me off at the Fulbright Library while she was running errands. In the company of solicitous librarians, I spent many pleasant hours: these librarians were literally my first *alma maters*. Perhaps the proudest early moment of my boyhood was when a librarian whispered to me something like “Let me show you some books in the adult section (actually, the history section – at that age I was captivated by military history).”

Until I began this book project, I had assumed that the library was named after U.S. Senator J. William (Bill) Fulbright, a Senator best known for the creation of the international fellowship program that bears his name. Likewise, I assumed that the University of Arkansas’ Fulbright dormitory was also christened in Bill’s honor.

Wrong on both counts: I was guilty of misguided assumptions and ignorance. The library and dorm were both named after Bill’s mother, the powerhouse Roberta Fulbright. Roberta, who became a prominent businesswoman and newspaper editor after her husband Jay died, wrote the “As I See It” column in her *Fayetteville Daily Democrat* which protested local cronyism and corruption and advocated for women’s rights. In one of her editorials, Roberta wrote that

Science tells us the male of the human species is the vainest animal that lives. We females know it and eternally feed that but sometimes it would seem to me their own sense, and sense of humor, would resent having to be flattered at every turn.

I’m too modest to comment on the relative vanity of the genders. I can note that, at least in the world of Wikipedia profiles, men are more likely to be writers, and more likely to write about other men. [A study in 2021](#) found that about eighty percent of Wikipedia biographies were about men, and so only one out of five profiled women (a small percentage did not identify as either women or men). Perhaps not coincidentally, some eighty percent of profiles written were penned by men. The profiles of women are also more likely to be nominated for [“deletion” \(removal\) and to be “orphans”](#) (not linked to other Wikipedia pages).

Librarians are not, as a profession, self-aggrandizing, nor are they commonly aggrandized. They appear to be more willing to promote libraries, and the books and services they provide, than they are to promote themselves. This is not a rule, of course, and there are a number of books by and about public librarians, which are listed in the bibliography.

When I retired in 2023, I knew that I needed a project that would engage me. I love to travel, and so hit upon the idea of doing a seven-month driving tour of the 48 lower states. I also knew that I needed an itinerary that would have some goal, in contrast to a go-with-the-wind approach. Knowing that [Carnegie libraries were built across the country](#), and knowing how much I loved libraries, I decided that I would draw my itinerary from Carnegie-to-Carnegie across the lower 48 states. Given that nearly 2000 Carnegie libraries were built in the United States, I chose to visit only the ones that continued to serve their intended purpose. Visiting all of these still seemed too ambitious and I reasoned that, even if I visited only a couple of hundred of them, that would be enough.

In my preliminary research, I would simply click on each library's Wikipedia page (unfortunately, most Carnegie libraries listed do not have their own page) to read up on it. For most of the libraries that do have an entry, the building itself is described in some detail, such as the description of the library in [Madison, Maine](#):

It is a single-story structure built of brick and stone, with Classical Revival features. The building is roughly triangular in shape, with two rectangular sections joined by an angled main facade that faces the street corner. The rectangular sections have standing-seam metal hip roofs, interrupted at the center by an octagonal tower, whose front-facing sections have diamond-pane windows, and which is encircled by a band of decorative brick corbelling...

Most often, as in Madison's case, little or nothing was said about how the library was brought to the town or the people who were involved in efforts to obtain it. Recognition was given to the structure, not to those who made it possible (with the exception of Carnegie himself, who is always mentioned).

This made me wonder "Who were those people?"

One of my goals on this trip was to learn more about them. I knew that women numerically dominate the library profession. Sources vary, although it seems that between 70 and 80 percent of librarians today are women, and the number was close to [80 percent in 1910](#), when the Carnegie library program was blossoming, so I suspected that women were often instrumental in the history of those libraries, as well as others.

Instrumental, and until the late 1990s, mainly ignored. As Suzanne Hildenbrand, who has [written extensively](#) about the roles women have played in libraries, wrote in her 1996 book *In Reclaiming the American Library Past*

[T]he narrow focus of library history, celebrating white male leaders and their institutions, reflects the politics of library history. It has forestalled the

development of a realistic library history in step with contemporary historiography and fails to show the centrality of women to library development.

I wanted to learn stories about these women, in part, to give credit to those who advocated for these libraries, those who led them, those who staffed them, and those who raised funds for them and served them in various other ways over their lifetime. I did not want to write about just those women who might deserve their own Wikipedia page, as those requirements by definition would exclude most librarians; I also wanted to write about those who served, except in their own communities, anonymously. Librarians who did not do the kind of work that would win (much) public renown. Librarians who are likely to have been forgotten, and who often were.

This would be a challenging task, and I was uncertain what I would find. I assumed that the personal papers of the “library women” would not usually be readily accessible if they existed at all, and that unless the individual was especially prominent in library history that little would have been written about them.

Much of what I learned came from the letters women wrote to Carnegie when they were seeking a library for their town. The Carnegie Corporation archives at Columbia University, which contain much of the correspondence pertinent to these libraries, were invaluable in this regard. These letters imperfectly reflect the personalities of their authors, of course: they are, after all, asking a rich man for his money. Some of the women I profile were also profiled in newspaper stories, obituaries, or other sources of tributes. These sources never speak ill of the dead and rarely of the living; the images they present do not reflect the full range of human emotions, attitudes, and behaviors and so display more saintliness than might be warranted. Many of the libraries I visited, Carnegie or otherwise, also maintain at least some records of their history, and the librarians I met were (almost) uniformly helpful to me in my search.

During my trip I visited over 400 Carnegie libraries (and some 500 other ones), often merely to take a picture or pop in to look around. The profiles contained in these pages contain what I found during my trip and my conversations with librarians, as well as research I conducted after I concluded my travel. The material I present is neither comprehensive nor complete; it reflects what I learned about the libraries I visited or other stories I came across. In many cases, I could find only faint traces of the history. Still, reporting on these traces can provide some recognition to the many thousands of women who devoted time, talent, and effort to our nation’s public libraries.

It’s a small thing, I know, to edit a Wikipedia page. I am nonetheless pleased to report that the page of the Madison, Maine, Carnegie library now reads:

The idea of the formation and the founding of a public library in Madison originated with some ten or fifteen young ladies known as the "Ladies'

Non-Sectarian Club" which was formed in 1885. Among its members were Ruth Manter, Alice Blake, Jennie Knowlton, Emma Manter, Addie Smith, Mable Simonds, Fannie Perkins, Ada Towne, Emma Heald, Nellie Moore and Gertrude Kent.

Much of the historical material I have read commonly uses the term "ladies" which obviously is dated. I use it only in quotations. In starting this project, I thought that "woman" was used as a noun and "female" as an adjective: a female librarian is a librarian who is a woman. [I now recognize that the choice is a matter of some dispute.](#) I'll confess that it felt weird to me to use the term woman as an adjective, in large part because man is rarely used as an adjective: I've never heard anyone called a "man librarian," and "male librarian" sounds more familiar to me. I've been persuaded – not least by my niece, Lizzie, who is a writer – that woman is a more appropriate modifier because it refers to gender, rather than sex, and there are women who would not identify themselves as female. Moreover, it's preferable to avoid gender specifications unless necessary for specificity, e.g., "the first woman Library Director."

When possible, I refer to individuals by their first names. I do so, in part, to avoid confusion. Often, a wife and her husband are part of the story, and if I used their last names it would be impossible to tell which one I'm referring to. Calling one by the last name, and the other by the first, might imply differences in stature. I also prefer to think of these individuals as people I would like to know and, if I knew them, I would want to call them by their given name. The exceptions: because I refer to them so often, and their given names are common (Andrew and James), I call Andrew Carnegie "Carnegie" and James Bertram, his personal secretary, "Bertram." Those journalists and scholars who have written about libraries are also referenced by their last names.

During the times of Carnegie's library grants, it was common for married women to address themselves, and to be addressed, by their husband's name, as in Mrs. Thomas Jones. When I encountered this, I tried to learn the woman's first name through other sources, such as [Ancestry.com](#) or [findagrave.com](#). This proved tedious and frustrating, especially when the name (like Thomas Jones) produced lots of hits. I did the best I could. I retained the use of Mrs. the first time I introduce a person if that is how they were introduced in the documents; I dropped the term Miss to identify an unmarried woman, even though it was commonly (yet not always) used in the documents I read.

The book is divided into chapters that contain clusters of states I visited along my journey. Within each chapter, I progress day by day, listing my starting and ending points of travel and the Carnegie libraries I visited. I proceed chronologically rather than thematically to reflect my discoveries along the path. I focus on Carnegie libraries, although I include stories of other libraries as I discovered them. This book is not

intended to be a definitive social history, yet it seemed unwise to tell the stories without reference to broader matters concerning women's rights, race and racism, and other cultural issues.

You can find my adventures on this journey in the companion book *Seven Months in a Subaru: Driving Across America in Search*. While traveling 35,000 miles across 48 states, I lived in my trusty Subaru, "Goldfinger."