

A History of the Stoneham Public Library



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The Beginning

The best account of the Library's nineteenth century beginnings can be found in Judge William B. Stevens' History of Stoneham (1891) Ironically this is the same Judge Stevens who, while lavishing praises upon the Library's first proponents, chaired a committee that issued a minority report urging the people of Stoneham to turn down Andrew Carnegie's 1903 offer of funds for the construction of what today is the oldest part of the plant.

Steven's account follows:

"Previous to the year 1858 the wants of the reading people of Stoneham were largely supplied through several private libraries owns by societies, and the idea of a free public library was not advanced until the winter of 1858-9, when several gentlemen who were interested in the establishment of such an institution advocated and spread abroad their sentiments in regard to the matter, urging the opinion that a free public library would be of more real value to the community that a half-dozen small enterprises of a private character".

Leading citizens advocated the founding of such an institution among them being J. Parker Gould, Dr. William H. Heath, Lyman Dike, Amos Hill (2d), John Hill, William Hurd, and others.

The movement culminated successfully, it being voted, "that a free public library be established for the free use of each citizen who shall become a legal voter of Stoneham and three hundred dollars be granted for that purpose."

Trustees were elected to make all necessary arrangements to purchase books, procure a suitable apartment, and formulate rules and regulations for the proper management of the new library. The following constituted the Board of Trustees: Lyman Dike, John Hill, William H. Heath, J. Parker Gould and William Hurd, three of whom, Messrs. Dike, Hill and Hurd are now living.

A nucleus was soon formed by the generous action of a society called "The Social Library Association," which had been established since 1792, which voted to lean its entire collection of nearly six hundred volumes, together with its fund of one hundred dollars held in trust.

The desire to assist in forming the library soon spread to other societies and "The Young Ladies' Circle" presented its entire collection of three hundred volumes to the Trustees at a meeting held March 17, 1859, and at a subsequent meeting "The Philomathean Society," a society connected with the High School contributed ninety volumes. To these generous contributions the town and various individuals added about five hundred volumes the first year, and the new institution was an established success, starting on its second year with a collection of 1470 volumes. The union of the smaller libraries and the foundation of the public library were mainly due to the efforts of Colonel Lyman Dike and Dr. William H. Heath.

Colonel Dike states that the first suggestion of a free public library came from Dr. Heath. They were riding to Salem together in a carriage, to participate in a military parade of the regiment of which Colonel Dike was commander, Dr. Heath being surgeon on his staff. On the way, Dr. Heath, who was then Secretary of the Social Library Association, proposed that an attempt be made to unite the several private libraries, and found a free public library, and enlist the citizens of the town in this movement. Not long after Colonel Dike and Dr. Heath set to work to accomplish this and labored indefatigably until success crowned their efforts.

Colonel Dike was chairman and one of the purchasing committee on the Board of Trustees for thirteen years, and Dr. Heath was Secretary of the Board until he went to the Civil War.

The library was established just before the Legislature passed the Act giving permission to towns to take the citizens for the support of such an institution, and is thought to have been the second free public library founded in this state.

The Library was first opened in May, 1859, in a long, narrow room in the building on Main Street, just south of Montvale Avenue, owned by Mr. James A. Green [in 1998 the site of the present day Cleveland Building]. The room is situated on the second floor, in the centre of the building, and was built for a connection between what constituted two buildings, as is shown by the two separate pitched roofs. Here Dr. Heath had his office, but removed into adjoining rooms to make way for the new library. These quarters were soon outgrown and became inconvenient, and the trustees cast about for better accommodations, which were secured above the store of Warren Sweetser, then located on Main Street on the site of the present Chase Block, on the spot now covered by W. E. Clark's department store. A lease was taken for five years and in the summer of 1862 the library was removed to the new quarters. That building is still standing on the southerly side of Franklin, opposite Fuller Street, having been removed there just previous to the erection of the Chase Block.

At the end of the five years' lease more room was needed and a lease of the present quarters in the Dow building was taken for a term of ten years and the library was removed in 1867 and has since remained. [1891]

In their report of this removal the trustees said "the library was removed to its present spacious quarters in Dow's building, where there is ample room for year to come. From a cramped and inconvenient room it has passed into the best location which the town can afford for such a purpose, furnishing unsurpassed conveniences to those applying for its benefits." A comparison of the present needs of the patrons of the library with what is shown by the above statement, gives forceful evidence that the growth among our people of a desire for knowledge and the culture to be obtained from good reading, has kept abreast of the increase in population. The accommodations are now wholly inadequate for the purpose required, [1891] and herein lies an opportunity for some gentleman of wealth to do for Stoneham what Mr. Jonathan B. Winn did for Woburn, present to the

town a public library building, and thus immortalize his name and erect an everlasting monument which shall be a memento of his generosity and interest in public welfare. At each annual meeting the town has voted an appropriation of from one hundred to five hundred dollars for the purchase of new books; also a sum sufficient to pay the annual expense of maintaining the library.

In 1864 "The Agricultural Library" presented its collection of one hundred and thirty volumes, and in 1865 Hon. John Hill, then one of the trustees, made a generous donation of \$230.00 towards the purchase of books.

In 1866 a catalogue of books in the library, then numbering 2,575, was published at an expense of 450.00, and this with two appendices, served the public until 1878 when the catalogue in present use, compiled by Mr. James Peyton, Secretary of the Board of Trustees, was issued, the sum of five hundred dollars having been appropriated at the annual town meeting in March 1877, and an additional one hundred dollars at the meeting in March 1878. A supplementary catalogue was issued in 1887, and as has often been deemed necessary since that time bulletins have been added.

When the 1878 catalogue was issued there were 5,314 bound volumes in the library, while according to the last statistics, August 1, 1890, there were 7,269 and 855 law reports, public documents, magazines, &c. This shows an average of nearly 200 new books added per year during the twelve years preceding that date.

There were 1,125 persons who had taken out books during the year from August 1, 1889, to August 1, 1890, the number of volumes taken amounting to 22,975, an average of about twenty books each.

The town has been liberal in her appropriations, and has given little cause for complaint in this respect, and in nearly all their annual reports for the past twenty-five years the trustees have expressed their gratitude to the citizens for doing so well. Only twice have they made urgent appeals for more money, and their requests were granted.

The Carnegie Building ~ 1904

Andrew Carnegie, often referred to as the "Patron Saint of Libraries," in his lifetime made new library buildings available to hundreds of communities all over the world. He donated \$56,162,622 for the construction of 2409 library buildings throughout the English-speaking world. More than \$40,000,000 of this amount was given for the erection of 1679 public library buildings in 1412 communities of the United States.* Stoneham was one of these.

*Bobinski, George S., Carnegie Libraries (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), 3.

The earliest public mention of Carnegie's gift to Stoneham appeared in the Stoneham Independent in January of 1903 in the form of a letter to then Trustee, George A. Hinchcliffe and is outlined below:

"Following this will be found an interesting letter from our kind hearted congressman, Hon. Ernest W. Roberts.

My Dear Mr. Hinchcliffe: I take pleasure in informing you that Andrew Carnegie has decided to give the town of Stoneham the sum of \$15,000 for a public library building, providing the town will maintain the institution in accordance with my last letter to you. I understand that Mr. James Bertram, Mr. Carnegie's private secretary has communicated direct with the trustees. I have been at work on this matter ever since you first broached the subject a long time ago, and the gentleman to whom we owe much, is Hon. Wm. R. Smith, superintendent of the National Botanical Gardens in this city. Mr. Smith is a personal friend of Mr. Carnegie and was very glad, indeed to render the aid he did. Hoping this information will prove good news, and assuring your trustees that I was very glad to do what I did in bringing about such a favorable result, I am Very truly yours, Ernest W. Roberts."

In fact, Carnegie's secretary, Bertram, communicated directly with the clerk of the Selectmen who was Joshua T. Nowell. In a letter dated January 13, 1903, he wrote: "Responding to your communications in behalf of Stoneham -- If the City agree by Resolution of Councils to maintain a Free Public Library at a cost of not less than Fifteen Hundred Dollars a year, and provide a suitable site for the building, Mr. Carnegie will be pleased to furnish Fifteen Thousand dollars to erect a Free Public Library for Stoneham."

Needless to say, the 1903 annual town meeting did accept the Carnegie offer despite the minority report that urged rejecting the gift because: "to accept the money under these conditions, we believe, would be at the expense of our self respect, and would almost cause a blush of shame to a citizen who takes pride in the place of his birth or adoption. It would be contrary to the spirit of a proud and self reliant New England town...we are not satisfied such a building, suitable for future wants, and commensurate with the usual requirements of Public Libraries, can be erected without a considerable appropriation in addition to the proposed gift."

Land referred to as the "Rounds lot" was purchased at the corners of Main, Maple, and Warren Streets and the contracting firm of Hapgood, Frost & Company of Wellesley, MA was selected to build the library that was designed by the architectural firm of Loring & Phipps.



The original Carnegie Building which remains part of the current facility.

The Brown Addition ~ 1931

When Stoneham resident, Annie Hamilton Brown died in 1929, she was not only one of the wealthiest members of the Stoneham community, her wealth and influence extended well outside of Stoneham throughout greater Boston. During her lifetime she had taken a fortune inherited from her father and multiplied it many fold. In her estate she left trust funds for medical care of Stoneham residents at the Massachusetts General Hospital, most of the lands on Plum Island to the Massachusetts Audubon Society and \$100,000 to the Stoneham Public Library "for its further extension and equipment."

This gift could not have been timelier. It was only in the 1930's that the public library movement took another step forward in addressing the need for libraries for children. Heretofore, libraries in rural and suburban communities never saw children as a primary audience. The Brown addition to Stoneham's library, besides containing a Trustees' room and meeting room, was to be exclusively used as a children's library.

The firm of Coolidge & Carlson of Boston were selected as architects and the R. L. McPhail Company of Brighton served as general contractor. In the final report of the 1931 Public Library Building committee Chairman Charles H. Chase advised the public regarding the Brown bequest that "of the \$100,000, after expenditures of \$10,000 for land and about \$73,000 for the building and equipment, approximately \$17,000 is left for investment to apply to operating or other expenses." The Brown fund was used again in 1956 for modest interior upgrades and continues today [1998] as a trust fund to purchase books.

However, it was to be more than fifty years before any major upgrade of the physical plant of the Stoneham Public Library was to be taken up by the people of Stoneham.

The Great Depression & World War II

The Great Depression's impact upon Stoneham's library was no less than upon any similar community across America. Use of the library skyrocketed and per capital circulation figures have never been since equaled. In a poignant excerpt from the Trustees' report of 1935 Mr. Chase, who had overseen the 1931 addition and Mr. Hinchliffe who was so instrumental in securing the Carnegie funds a generation earlier wrote: "the Public Library has contributed in a large degree to the well-being of the citizens of the town throughout a difficult year, when a period of lessened opportunities for employment has made the wise use of leisure time a serious problem for all who are interested in social service as well as for those who are without work." The writer related a story related to him by a former library janitor of this era who recounted that the library was so low on funds that electric lights in the stacks were turned off; if you wanted a title, you would request it at the circulation desk and the librarian would take a light bulb to the stack, insert it only briefly enough to illuminate the area so that she could retrieve the book desired.

And like the rest of the country things began to improve so that in the 1938 Trustees report it could be boasted that janitors no longer had to shovel coal at the library because an automatic stoker was in place! In a more serious note it was also reported that the library suffered very little damage from the Great Hurricane of 1938.

History well documents the fact that never have the people of the United States ever cooperated in such a unified manner as in the prosecution of World War Two. From the White House to Main Street every American institution was mobilized to eliminate the Fascist scourge. In the 1942 Trustees' report it is recorded that "a global war has brought to our attention many places in distant lands and seas which have until now been unfamiliar locations on a map.....this has brought many requests for books concerning the places where the war rages and where many of our own boys are now in active service.....we have cooperated in every possible way with all activities connected with war and defense work.....hundreds of books and magazines have been collected and sent away for use of our armed forces.....Library Hall has been designated an Air Raid Shelter.....the Library is protected from air raid attacks as far as possible.....blackout curtains have been placed wherever they are necessary.....the skylight and rotunda roof lights are now covered to prevent any sky glow."

A now deceased library staff member told this writer that when she came to work here in the early 1950's a large clientele of readers were the now returned GI's who wanted the library to purchase as many materials on various phases of that war in which they participated. The librarians gratefully obliged!

Post World War II ~ Decline

The unprecedented prosperity that swept America in the aftermath of World War II was slow to affect Stoneham's library. During the 1950's and 1960's Stoneham became primarily a bedroom community and the priorities of the local government changed

considerably. The post-war birth explosion required above all housing and schools; and the infrastructure to support these--a larger police and fire presence, more roads and water, etc. Clearly throughout these decades the library was not a priority. While the population of the town had doubled between the 1930's and the 1960's, the library's physical plant had remained the same as in 1931.

In the 1970's the then Board of Trustees made several inroads, although not successful, to address the spatial needs of what was clearly an obsolete physical plant for a community of this size. They got a commitment to use the site of town owned property, formerly an Armory, at the corner of Main Street and Flint Avenue for a future Stoneham Public Library. They also got funds for bid documents to erect an entirely new Stoneham Public Library on that site. After several attempts to secure bonding for construction at Town Meeting, the plan was abandoned. In the view of this writer the 1970's proposal failed for two reasons: first the people of Stoneham had little experience in paying for the construction of their own municipal buildings; many of the schools built before 1940 were gifts of the federal government; both wings of the library came from private philanthropy; the Town Hall was constructed with federal money, as was the public works department garage; and in fact virtually all of the schools built after World War II were bankrolled by at least fifty percent state matching monies. Secondly: one cannot discount sentiment when it comes to an individual's vote--many citizens who voted against the 1970's proposal did so because they did not want to abandon the existing site. Although library proponents in the 1970's always secured a majority vote at various town meetings, they never got the two thirds required to bond any construction project.

Post World War II ~ Rebirth

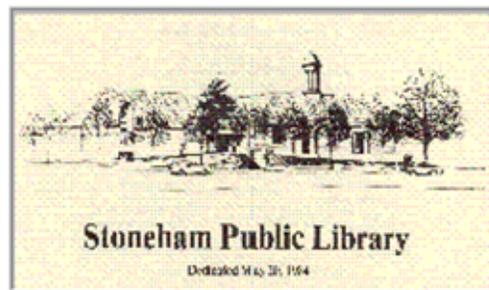
This writer attributes the genesis of the library's successful building and automation program of the 1980's and 1990's to local businessman and pharmacist, John L. Bracciotti. Mr. Bracciotti came to the December 1979 Trustees' meeting and told the Board that the properties on the south side of the library would soon be for sale; and if they were to purchase the aforesaid, he would serve on a library building committee. What follows is from the Library Director's 1980 annual report: "1980 saw a major departure from ongoing attempts to upgrade the library plant. By a vote of 330 to 62 the Town Meeting endorsed the Library Trustees' proposal to abandon the Flint Ave. Site and the proposal for a separate new facility. In place of this plan the Town Meeting endorsed by the same vote some \$302,500 to purchase the entire block of properties adjacent to the south wing of the present library. This includes buildings on a land site that totals nearly 30,000 sq. ft. A further \$50,000 was approved for demolition of buildings sometime in early 1982. In addition \$95,000 was assigned to a Building Committee to come up with bid documents for an addition to the current facility. In this single act the Town of Stoneham has provided more money for the capital improvements on its library than in the previous one hundred twenty years of the library's existence."

In 1981 the Library Director reported that: "in the October 1981 town meeting the longtime wishes of many Stoneham citizens were realized by that body's endorsement of a 1.33 million dollar capital outlay proposal for an addition and renovation of the present

library facility.....the Moderator appointed a Building Committee of the following members: Rita Ahrens, John L. Bracciotti, Treasurer, Robert M. Grant, Trustees' Liaison, Patricia F. Hatch-Wakeley [succeeded by Susan C. Mansur] and William A. Previdi, an architect by profession chosen as chairman."

The committee went on to select Architects Design Group II as the principal designers and Crissman & Solomon of Watertown MA as the interior decorators. P&H General Contractors of Revere MA served as the general contractor.

In a very formal ceremony Stoneham's, now state of the art library, was open to the public in May 1984.



Artist's rendering of the library from the May 1984 dedication ceremony

NOBLE Membership

In late 1984 Library Trustee Chairman, Robert M. Grant was advised by the law firm of Hale & Dorr that a corporate donor wished to make a gift to the library that would enable Stoneham to join the North of Boston Library Exchange (NOBLE). The donor insisted upon one stipulation and it was that the gift be anonymous. Acting for the Board of Trustees, Mr. Grant signed a trust instrument that would turn over \$40,000 to the library for its admission fee to NOBLE and the purchase of computer hardware that would lead to an on-line circulation system for Stoneham.

In early 1985 Stoneham officially became the thirteenth member of NOBLE and staff members began data entry of the library's collection. While resource sharing with other libraries began almost immediately, data entry was not completed until 1987 and circulation functions went on-line.

The severe cutbacks of library funding in the he late 1980's and early 1990's made continued NOBLE membership a beacon of light for Stoneham library users -- the library may not have funds to purchase a title, but the same title could be borrowed from a neighboring library in a timely manner because of instant on-line bibliographic information.

By 1992 the traditional card catalog, in place since the early 1900's was eliminated and the on-line public access catalog was adopted. Stoneham library users could not only view the holdings of the local library, but also scores of public, private and university libraries across the Commonwealth.

In 1997 complete internet access became available to Stoneham residents via library membership in NOBLE. Public access terminals that initially offered text-only were succeeded by PC's offering not only text, but also complete color graphics.

Long Range Plan

On April 14, 1997 the Board of Trustees adopted a five year plan of the library that would project future needs well into early in the next century. Throughout 1996 and 1997 a committee appointed by the Trustees worked assiduously on what was to be a first of its kind document for Stoneham's library.

Serving on the committee was Library Trustees' Chairman, Rocco Ciccarello, Town Clerk Annamae Arsenault, local residents Alan Grometstein and Elaine Maienza, staff member Elaine McKenzie and the Library Director. Particular credit for the success of this endeavor is due to the former Assistant Library Director Cornelia A. Rawson who currently serves at the Cary Library in Lexington and worked so diligently to bring this project to a successful conclusion.

The Report of the Long Range Planning Committee for the Stoneham Public Library is available on this site.

Library Time Line

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| 1859 | Library founded by a vote of the Town Meeting. |
| 1859 – 1903 | Library located on sites of present Cleveland, Chase and Dow buildings. |
| 1878 | Catalog of Library holdings published in book format. |
| 1894 | Library relocates from Dow to Chase building, where it remains until Carnegie building constructed. |
| 1895 | Last complete edition of library's holdings in book format is published. |
| 1896 | Trustees adopt Dewey Decimal System. |
| 1904 | Library moves to Main Street Carnegie building. |
| 1910 | Card catalog of holdings is completed and book format catalog is discontinued. |
| 1931 | Library doubles in size with addition of a children's library and meeting room from local resident Annie Hamilton Brown. |
| 1942 | Library Hall designated as an air raid shelter during World War Two. |
| 1956 | Trustees authorize interior improvements with funds from the Brown Trust. |

- 1976-1978 Town Meeting authorizes monies for bid documents for new library, but turns down bond proposal for construction.
- 1980 Town Meeting votes \$447,000 to purchase land, demolish buildings and secure blueprints for expansion.
- 1981 Town Meeting votes \$1.33 million for renovation and expansion of the library.
- 1984 Present facility opens.
- 1985 Stoneham becomes newest member of NOBLE.
- 1987 Stoneham, through NOBLE membership, initiates on-line circulation system
- 1992 Card catalog is eliminated and on-line public access catalog is adopted.
- 1997 Internet access with full graphics becomes available to Stoneham patrons through NOBLE membership .
Trustees adopt first five-year plan.