



Farmington Libraries: A Short History 1917-2017

“A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us.” - Franz Kafka

Part I The Villages

The 1881 Connecticut General Statute, CX section 1., enabled the American tradition of a free publicly funded library to begin in Connecticut. Before that point, subscription libraries provided lending collections exclusively to those who could pay the annual fees. Among those barred from access to America's subscription libraries was young Andrew Carnegie, whose denial spurred a passion for free public libraries resulting in his global philanthropy of 2,509 libraries.

Farmington's first subscription libraries were located in private homes beginning in Samuel Gridley home in 1704 and continued through the end of the 19th century. These small enterprises spawned and evolved into larger public venues through the near-end of the nineteenth century. Julia Brandegee, like Carnegie, organized the free Tunxis Library in 1882, which eventually reorganized as the Village Library Company. Julia's egalitarian enthusiasm had apparently struck a chord throughout Farmington. Where in 1901, Sarah Porter either shared or was ignited by Julia's populist beliefs, as evidenced by her two-acre land bequest and three thousand dollar trust to build a public Park. The tax-exempt, Farmington Village Green & Library Association, (The Association) was created to receive her gift in 1901. The Association's president, D. Newton Barney, was captivated by the challenge of

fulfilling his mother's dream and eventually financed and managed the design and construction of the new neoclassical Sarah Brandegee Barney, Memorial Library, which he and the trustees dedicated to her memory in 1917.

This bibliographic confluence affected Unionville as well, where the free West End Library's 1894 beginnings became the new 1917 Renaissance-styled West End Carnegie Library. Carnegie demanded the petitioning grantee to provide the site, while Carnegie provided for the design, construction and interiors costs. This library served Unionville through 1959 under the leadership of the West End Library Association, which initially had petitioned Carnegie for a library. However, after significant deliberation, the West End Library Association, having moved from the original Carnegie building, was subsumed into the Farmington Libraries, therein becoming the West End Branch Library.

Part II

The Farmington Library

The Brandegee Memorial Library became the Village Library through oral tradition, and as its name changed through the years, its ability to serve all the people of Farmington also waned. These inadequacies became increasingly apparent during the late 1970's when, although additions were made, the town's population growth, increased demand for more library space, and the idea of consolidation of resources into a new central library to serve both Farmington and Unionville became the Association's goal. This amalgamation of library service for the two boroughs was constituted and realized through negotiations between the Association, Library Board, Building Committee, Town, citizens, and donors. The new Farmington Library was designed, constructed, and finally commissioned in 1983. This modern, mid-century modern structure provided a flexible and broad platform from which to continue the traditions of Farmington's library service developed at the Village and West End libraries, engaging the two communities together as a united Farmington. The Town purchased the Unionville library for other purposes, while the Village Library—renamed The Barney Library to honor its founder and continues as an active branch library, serving the Eastern part of the town and as a central focus in Farmington Village.

Part III

The Millennium

The digital revolution, Farmington's continued growth, and a rapidly changing landscape, each demanded involved, community-focused, technically oriented library programming. To that end, the additions and renovations to the library were undertaken and commissioned in 2001-2003. This state of the art, fifty-two thousand square foot, twenty-first-century program space provides a home for one of the most comprehensive library programs in Connecticut.

Part IV

The Barney Library Dilemma

The Barney Library's early twentieth-century infrastructure placed a high fiscal load on general operations and structural program redundancy. Alas, the question remained, what to do with this old neoclassical building? A committee was formed to review the alternatives, and while looking out from the Barney portico over the historic Green to Miss Porters School, the question became moot; "we must preserve this lovely and historic building"!

After deliberation and investigation of alternative uses for the building, including demolition, the Board voted to continue to use the building as it was intended, like a library. From that point on, the principal rationale for the project was to meet current ADA requirements and improve HVAC and other inadequate systems to current efficiency and ergonomic standards. In particular, the existing physical layout of the building presented difficulties for wheelchair users, the elderly, mothers with strollers, and those who are physically challenged. Furthermore, the book stacks were often too close together to allow access to these patrons.

The need for an elevator, the removal of the antiquated exterior iron fire escape and the addition of a safe interior stairway for access to upper and lower levels of the building were critical to the Library's efficient operation. Without an elevator, the use of the upper-level meeting room and the lower-level program space was not feasible for public programming.

The project was successfully based on three funding sources: 1) One million by a Connecticut State Library construction grant; 2) One million by referendum; 3) One million by fund raising. The Barney Library delivers high-quality popular library services to those who use it regularly. It provides children's programming, a Teen Space, information services, technology, and a milieu of time past. The Barney Library is a tour de force and functional link to the world.

Part V

Maker Space

Continuing the traditions of the Farmington Libraries, the Association, Library Board and Library Team developed the plan for a Maker-Space/Media-Lab 2012-2016. These new spaces continue to change the library's function into a contemporary learning environment while enhancing our efforts to provide additional 21st-century programs for the citizen-customers the Libraries serve. The completed Maker Space opened in the spring of 2016, delivering more than promised.

The Maker Space provides access to new hardware and software tools, such as Computer Aided Drafting programs to create models of 3-D printers. The new space is designed to be a community gathering point and hands-on experiential learning center, where classes will be held to teach a range of skills from live cooking classes to bicycle repair. It provides learning resources to edit digital media, convert analog media to digital and to enhance analog media utilizing digital tools. The lab also provides a platform for video production and video-casting.

As we continue to traverse time, we must continue to develop organically and with prudence, while moving forward after charting new pathways to learning.

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Jay Johnston, M.S.M.A.
Executive Director