

Winter 2015

The Landscape: Carnegie Libraries

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Linn (2015). "The Landscape: Carnegie Libraries," Winter 2015 Metroscape, p. 4-5.

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Carnegie Libraries

by Linn Davis

Among the many uniting characteristics of Portland-area residents—besides being independent, outdoorsy, pro-canine, and anti-umbrella—is this fact: we love our libraries.

The Multnomah County Library is second only to the New York Public Library in total circulation, a tremendous feat considering the Portland metro area is only the country's 24th largest metropolitan statistical area, ranked by population. What's more, Multnomah County's turnover rate (the rate of use for each item the library owns) is the highest in the United States, outpacing the national average by a factor of four. Meanwhile, Washington County weighs in with a circulation rate around three times the national average, and Clackamas County isn't far behind.

Moreover, in recent years, voters in the Portland metro area have shown their support for local libraries by approving major bond and levy measures. A bond measure in Beaverton allowed the city to build a new library that is now the second-largest in the state.

But this support is nothing new. Depending on whom you believe, Multnomah County is home to either the oldest or the second-oldest public library west of the Mississippi (one in St. Louis also claims the title). And, interestingly, Pacific Northwesters were among the most enthusiastic applicants for Andrew Carnegie's famous library grants.

In Oregon, Carnegie ended up donating—according to the Oregon Encyclopedia—an average of about 50 cents for every state resident, a significant sum in the early 20th century. That amount placed Oregon among the ten best-funded states, per capita, in the nation.

History writer Finn J. D. John attributes this enthusiasm to several factors. First, Northwest cities were just beginning to urbanize. Plus, since this was still the far-out homesteading frontier, attitudes about class tended to be less rigid and more egalitarian than back East, and this was exactly the sort of attitude that appealed to Carnegie. Rather than filter out “undesirables,” he demanded that his libraries be open to the entire public, children included, and he dictated that their architecture be appropriately simple. Poor immigrants were in; plush private smoking rooms were out.

Add to this the fact that while some east coast towns—more familiar with Carnegie's ruthless business practices—refused the money on moral grounds, western states ended up with a relatively large number of libraries. Oregon was the only state in the country, writes John, where every single project that was offered a Carnegie grant was able to come up with the matching funds necessary to see the library to completion.

In the five counties on the Oregon side of the Portland metro area, this all amounted to a dozen libraries, eleven of which were public while the other was the first library at Pacific University. Of these, all of the buildings are still standing, but only five are still used as libraries (McMinnville, Newberg, Oregon City, North Portland, and St. Johns). The only Carnegie library ever built on the Washington side of the metroscape, in Vancouver, now serves as the Clark County Historical Museum.

A Tale of Homecoming in Oregon City

Oregon City's Carnegie library is one of the best preserved in the metro area. Set on a



Oregon City's Carnegie Library

square block of sloping parkland and shaded under a lush canopy of trees, the one-story brick building is the picture-perfect Carnegie archetype: humble, yet monumental in its small way. The library features a miniature grand staircase in the front, simple lettering over the door, enormous windows throughout the main floor, a fireplace, and a cramped basement.

For 15 years, however, the library was at risk of never lending another book. Carnegie's puritanical simplicity had left it with a severe space shortage well before 1995, when the City finally moved it to a new location in a suburban shopping center toward the edge of town. A successive string of nonprofit businesses then occupied the old building—a coffee shop, a children's museum, an art gallery—but by 2010, the library was searching for a home, once again.

The shopping center was being redeveloped, and the library's first choice for a new storefront, an old school building, was going to be far too expensive to retrofit. So back to the Carnegie they went, reopening the building exactly 97 years, to the day, after it had opened the first time.

The move was supposed to be only temporary, but it wasn't to be. Library staff could find no suitable alternatives, and besides, the Carnegie building had devotees.

"It's beloved," says Library Director Maureen Cole. "I mean, beloved."

The library will stay, but it is getting a few modifications. Utilizing part of a \$6 million bond just passed this year by Oregon City voters, the original 6,000 square-foot building will be restored to its original state, and the back of the building will get a 15,000 square-foot addition. The old Carnegie space will revert to more of an open reading room, as it once was, and the addition will house most of the books, computers, offices, and meeting rooms.

After considering several alternatives, community members and the library board decided on a simple, low-profile design that will sit entirely behind the current building and cut into the hill, so as not to upstage the star attraction or disturb the main useable park spaces. The trees and grounds will largely remain unchanged, the old entrance will remain the new entrance, and the words "PUBLIC LIBRARY" will be replaced once again over the front doors. **M**