

The first library in Fitchburg, consisting of a shelf of books of travels and stories, existed in a blacksmith's shop located on Back Road, a road between Prichard and Blossom Streets. Several subscription libraries developed between 1828 and 1859. The first of these was the Fitchburg Philosophical Society, organized for the purpose of promoting lectures and debates. Its collection consisted of 150 volumes available to members only. In 1838 that library was transferred to the Fitchburg Library Association. Isaac Cushing had a small library that was closed out at public auction in 1833.

The 200-volume collection of the Fitchburg Circulating Library was a commercial enterprise maintained by Whitcomb and Cook in connection with their bookstore and bindery. The service cost \$3.00 per year. In 1852 the circulating library and the Fitchburg Library Association were disbanded and the collections were absorbed by the Fitchburg Athenaeum founded "to furnish facilities for intellectual, moral and social improvement by the establishment and maintenance of a library, reading room and lectures." The Athenaeum began in March, 1852, when 125 persons agreed to take stock in it. The collection was housed in part at the store of Phineas A. Crocker (Alvah's brother) on the site of the Stiles building on Main Street. The members grew to 215 men. The fee was \$5.00 per person, or rather, per man as it was not open to women or children. Speakers such as Horace Greeley, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Ward Beecher, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau appeared before the group.

In 1851 Legislation providing that towns and cities had the legal right to establish free public libraries passed. A year later at the April 5, 1852, annual town meeting it was voted "that the building committee be authorized to procure or provide a room for the Library Association in the new Town` House." The Fitchburg Athenaeum moved in.

Rodney Wallace owned a bookshop at #3 Central Block across from Town Hall in 1855. He, along with other members of the community, was bothered by the fact that there was no free library in Fitchburg. "Every man, woman and child should have the chance to read free of charge. If only there could be a public library in town—free to all residents and maintained by public funds."

Early in April, 1859, Article 25 appeared on the town warrant: "To see if the town will appropriate the amount allowed by law for the establishment of a free town library, or act anything thereon." The Fitchburg Sentinel commented on the article:

The free public library is the crowning institution of our educational system, affording privileges to the student, the mechanic, the farmer, the professional and the business man. A good free library would possess a charm to win from the streets many of the young men and boys who are not being schooled in the haunts of dissipation and vice. Now that the public attention is awake to this subject, we trust that it will meet with the favorable consideration of the voters.”

On April 11, 1859, “a stormy and unfavorable day,” the town voted to appropriate the sum of \$1,831 for the establishment of a Free Town Library. A Board of Trustees was chosen for the governance of the library. The town purchased the Athenaeum’s 1,600 books for \$250 and acquired 200 volumes from the Agricultural Library about which virtually nothing is known.

The new library was housed in the rooms the Athenaeum had occupied in Town Hall. The space was enlarged by an adjoining room. December 1, 1859, service to the public began. The library was simply a collection of books, catalogued by author and title in a printed volume. There was no reading room, no reference facilities, no special place for children’s work, no books for children and no periodicals. Only one book could be taken at a time. You had to be 16 years old to have a library card. Over the next 20 years, the Trustees annual reports stressed the inadequate accommodations for the library. In 1872, Librarian Prescott Rice “wistfully hoped for a reading room.”

During these twenty years, Fitchburg was incorporated as a city—April 8, 1872—and Rodney Wallace prospered. In 1865 along with a partner, he branched out of his book store into the manufacture of paper. In 1869 Wallace became the sole owner of Fitchburg Paper Company. He began to take part in public affairs. He was a Selectman of the town, represented Fitchburg in the General Court, served on the Governor’s Council, and was a US Congressman in Washington. He was a Trustee of Smith College, Trustee of Fitchburg Savings Bank, Director of the Fitchburg Mutual Fire Ins. Co., and President and Director of Fitchburg Gas Light Company. Wallace took part in the development of Fitchburg Woolen, Parkhill Mfg., Putnam Machine Works, and Fitchburg Railroad.

Wallace’s goal was more than money—“True success involves the man himself, what he is and what he had done for others.” Mr. Wallace began to think about the library. He wondered “that Fitchburg has grown from town to city and business is humming....Are those crowded unattractive rooms in city hall worthy of a prosperous city?”

A special meeting of the city council was called on March 25, 1884. The reason for the meeting had not been announced. At the meeting Mayor Alonzo Davis asked Judge Thornton K. Ware, Chairman of the Library Board of Trustees, to read.

I propose to convey by proper deed to the city of Fitchburg my lot of land situated at the corner of Main Street and Newton Place and to expend a sum to erect a building on said lot to be used for a free library, reading rooms & art gallery and for no other purpose.”

There was stunned surprise and it was unanimously adopted. Work on the four-foot wide foundation for the H.M. Francis designed building began on June 10, 1884. The building included an elevator, run by city water, that was considered “a great convenience to lame and infirm visitors.”

The dedication of the Wallace Library and Art Building on July 1, 1885, was attended by 600 people. Rodney Wallace gave a brief history of the construction of the \$84,500 building and put the library into the hands of the city government in “confidence that it will be well cared for.” In closing he said: “With pleasure and the most earnest wish that to many of our people these rooms may prove to be a place of rest and profit, and help make the journey of life more pleasant and useful, I now present to you the deed of this property and keys of this building.”

In the early years of the Wallace Library and Art Building, the general collection was not open to the public. The books were delivered to the circulation desk when requested. When the library opened it was open 14 hours a week, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Less than a year later the hours had increased to 76 per week. The library was open 9-9 Monday through Saturday for book delivery and the reading room was open on Sundays from 2-6.

The card catalogue for the use of the public was created in 1893. There were 60,000 cards covering 27,000 books. Rodney Wallace donated \$10,000 to install steel book stacks when the general collection was open to the public. One of the first children’s rooms in the country was established in 1899. In 1911 story hours began as well as instruction of school children in the use of the library.

In 1922 George R. Wallace, Sr. donated the land behind the Wallace Library and Art Building for future expansion. He also funded the renovation of the children’s room in 1929, but children’s services continued to grow and soon outgrew the room in the basement.

Mrs. George R. Wallace, Jr., Chairman of the Board of Trustees, mobilized children to raise funds for a children's library in the late 1940s. Students in the city's 27 public and parochial schools earned over one million pennies. Some did chores for two cents while others held fashion shows and concerts, and sold arts and crafts and fish worms. One group, The Fitchburg Youth Library Speakers' Bureau, consisted of 18 young people from fourth grade to high school. They carried their appeal to adult organizations. The children's enthusiasm, dedication and crusade inspired adults in the community. Together they made possible the dedication of the Fitchburg Youth Library on September 27, 1950. This was the first children's library building in the country. National and international newspapers and magazines reported on its unique construction and funding.

Bookmobile service began in 1953 after George R. Wallace, Jr. donated a bookmobile. This outreach program continued until funding and staffing became an issue in 2006. During those 40+ years the Helen E. Vickery fund purchased two new bookmobiles, one in 1967 and one in 1993. The newest truck was sold to the Worcester Public Library in 2006.

The Wallace's generosity continued when from 1964 to 1967 George R. Wallace, Jr., donated \$700,000 to match a federal grant for construction of the current Wallace Library. His grandfather's building was torn down, in his words, "to build a new, larger and modern facility to serve the needs of this and future generations." The city purchased and tore down the First Baptist Church next door to make room for the new building designed by the same firm that had designed the youth library, Carl Koch Associates. It was dedicated in September, 1967.

Elements from the first Wallace Library were included in this building. If you look into the Wallace Library garden from the new book room, you can see a corner of the first Wallace Library's granite foundation. In the garden are also several plaques from the first building. In the east end of the clerestory above the stairs is the glass five-foot city seal from the window over the main entrance and on the second story wall in the fiction room behind the circulation desk is Rodney Wallace's portrait.

To the average user the library does not appear to have changed very much in its 151 years. That is not the case, although in some ways there have been more changes in the last fifty years than in the previous hundred. When you walk in the front door, you still see books on the shelves and staff behind the circulation and information desks but you also see new material formats—16 mm films, slides and filmstrips were replaced by VHS videos followed by DVDs; 33 1/3 long playing

records were replaced by compact discs. Books weren't replaced, but are now offered in multiple formats—hardcover, paperback, large type, and narrated on tape and compact disc.

Library records were moved to computers after George R. Wallace, III, through the Wallace Foundation, made a grant to the library in the early 1980s to refurbish the Youth Library and assist with the development of the computerized circulation and catalog system. It was inaugurated on January 21, 1985. In 1996 the Internet for both the staff and the public was introduced.

In 1970 interest from the Henry A. Willis Fund made possible the purchase of art prints and small sculptures for loan. Over the next four decades many original pieces of art have been purchased and loaned to the public. What hasn't changed, and is needed more than ever, is the assistance of professionally trained librarians to help library users find materials and information, and to evaluate resources.

The library is a dynamic, vital part of our community. Over the years programming for many different interests and ages has been offered—gardening, films, history, concerts, and more. Story hours began in 1911 and continue twice weekly. Literacy Volunteers of the Montachusett Area have been training tutors and working with adult students for many years. The Library Book Club has been meeting monthly since 2000. The knitting and crocheting group meets on Thursday afternoons as they have for several decades. Other programming for adults, teens, and children are offered through the year to provide entertainment and learning for the community. The local history room is full of materials for people to research their family histories.

As we near our 160 year anniversary, we look forward to new and exciting changes to provide a 21st Century library to the residents of Fitchburg.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annual Report of the Public Library of the City of Fitchburg, 1968. Board of Trustees, 1969.

Bullock, Lizzie E., "Library." Fitchburg Evening Mail, 19 April 1896, Women's Edition.

Crocker, Barbara C. and Doris Kirkpatrick, The Bookseller Sets the Clock Ahead: A Dramatic Reading, 1859.

Dedicatory Exercises Wallace Library Art Building, 1885.

Emerson, William Andrews. Fitchburg, Massachusetts, Past and Present. Press of Blanchard & Brown, 1987.

Kirkpatrick, Doris and Barbara C. Crocker, The City and the River. Fitchburg Historical Society, 1971.

Kissner, Arthur, "100th Anniversary of the Wallace Library and Art Building," Fitchburg Sentinel and Enterprise Supplement. 1985.

Smith, Stewart W., History and Development of the Fitchburg Public Library, 1942.

Willis, Henry A., History of the Fitchburg Public Library read to the Massachusetts Library Club at its meeting in Fitchburg, Oct. 26th, 1899, 1899.