

History and Development of the Fitchburg Public Library

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The Fitchburg Public Library came into being as a municipal institution on April 11th, 1859 when it was voted at the town meeting “To appropriate the sum of \$1,831 for the establishment of a Free Town Library.” At the same meeting a board of trustees was chosen for the governance of the newly created library. This board consisted of the following nine representative citizens: Goldsmith F. Bailey, J.W. Mansur, James R. Wellman, Jabez Fisher, Thomas R. Boutelle, Thornton K. Ware, Hanson L. Read, Moses G. Lyon, and John J. Piper. Service to the public was begun on December 1st, 1859, and has continued without interruption, except for brief periods when the library was closed for repair or reorganization, to the present time.

Such were the beginnings of the Fitchburg Public Library as we know it today—a public institution receiving its support through taxation and offering service without charge to all citizens of the city. The transition in 1859, however, was not one from no library whatsoever in Fitchburg to one initiated and supported by the Town. Rather, the institution and the service evolved over a period of years during which several experiments were undertaken, tried for varying lengths of time, and either came to an end or were absorbed by new institutions.

Probably the most important early instance in which anything more than a purely personal private library functioned in Fitchburg occurred in 1828 or 1829, the date is disputed, with the organization of the Fitchburg Philosophical Society for the purpose of promoting lectures and debates. In February 1830 this Society consisted of 106 members, all of whom were men, it being before the days when women led the parade in search of culture. The groups seem to have met weekly, originally in a yellow school house which stood at the corner of Main and Mechanic Streets, and late in the Academy on Academy Street between Davis and High Streets. The catholicity of their interests and their versatility is shown by the subjects of the “Lectures, Dissertations, Declamations and Debates” held in 1830. Samuel Bevens, for example, lectured on the “Atmosphere” on February 4th, and on March 11th delivered a dissertation on “Mohammedanism.” On March 25th disputants J. Downe and M. Newton devoted themselves to the question “Would it be for the good of society to dispense with mourning apparel, on the decease of friends?” Which of these gentlemen upheld the negative and which the affirmative is not revealed by history. November 18th found I.P. Putnam discussing the “Fate of Genius.” The good work was continued in 1831 with no diminution, apparently, for on February 3rd Oliver Everett lectured on “Improvement of the Mind” and a week later, on February 10th wits were sharpened over a debate on the question “Was Washington a greater man than LaFayette?”

Books, however, were by no means ignored. The library of the Philosophical Society, consisting by 1835 of some 150 volumes, was housed in the office of Dr. Jonas A. Marshall. The most important single item in the collection was Rees’ Cyclopaedia consisting of forty-seven

quarto volumes. This set of books was later owned by both the Fitchburg Library Association and the Fitchburg Athenaeum, and is still in the Fitchburg Public Library.

Presumably this collection of books was for the exclusive use of members of the Society. Fitchburg residents who did not belong were not entirely without printed resources, however. The Fitchburg Direction of 1835 lists, in addition to the library of the Philosophical Society, the following:

“Juvenile (Sabbath School) Library of the 1st Parish. No. of volumes, 300. Francis Perkins, Librarian.

“Sabbath School Library of the 2nd Parish. No. of volumes, 400. John T. Farwell, Librarian.

“Sabbath School Society of the Baptist Society. No. of volumes, 250. Lorin Davis, Librarian.

“There is a small Library attached to the Female Reading Society; also with the Maternal Association.

“Fitchburg Circulating Library. No. of volumes, 200. Wm. S. Wilder, Librarian.”

The last of these at least was open to the general public, assuming that they could afford the service which cost \$3.00 per year, since it was a commercial enterprise maintained by Whitcomb and Cook in connection with their bookstore and bindery.

Because of the lack of records of the Philosophical Society it is impossible to say exactly what happened to it though it probably suffered a gradual decline, as frequently occurs with such organizations. In any event its library was transferred in 1838 to the Fitchburg Library Association, of which even less is known than of its predecessor. This organization existed from 1838 until 1852 at which time it was disbanded and the then members and their library absorbed the Fitchburg Athenaeum. During a part, at least, of its active years the books of the Fitchburg Library Association were housed in the store of Mr. Phineas A. Crocker in a building on the site now occupied by the Stiles building on Main Street.

In his address at the dedicatory exercises of the present Wallace Library building in 1885 the Hon. George E. Towne referred to the collection of the Library Association with the following words:

“Two stained pine book cases first claim my attention, standing in the front room of a low, one-story, wooden building, at the corner of Main Street and Cottage Square, on the site now occupied, I believe, by the Stiles building. It had large projecting windows, so pretentious and out of all architectural harmony with the rest of structure, that I fear I ought rather to have spoken of it as a pair of windows with a one-story building projecting in the rear. This was the stationary store and book bindery of Mr. Phineas A. Crocker; ...

“The two book cases of which I have spoken, contained the two or three hundred volumes comprising the library of the Fitchburg Athenaeum, which at that time constituted almost the entire public dependence of Fitchburg for the mental pabulum of its citizens, ...

“Mr. Crocker was the librarian of the Fitchburg Athenaeum, and the care bestowed by him of the few volumes, the satisfaction with which he aided applicants in their selections, and the pride he felt in having been selected as worthy to bear such tremendous responsibility, were something marvelous to see.”

Aside from the fact that the library thus described by Mr. Towne had nothing to do with the Fitchburg Athenaeum except to be absorbed by that organization in 1852 when the Athenaeum was organized, Mr. Towne no doubt gives us a reasonably accurate picture, though one which is perhaps colored by the sentimentality of early days remembered late in life.

In any event the Fitchburg Library Association held a meeting on December 27th, 1851 at which it was voted to transfer their library to the proposed new association provided that their members should each be entitled to one share in the new organization, that the shares be transferable, and that all of the privileges of new subscribers be accorded to them. At this the Association had thirty-three members and a library of about 500 books, some of which were missing and some in bad condition.

The date of the actual organization of the Fitchburg Athenaeum is September 1852. The first documentary evidence that the establishment of a new library organization was being considered is to be found in the record of a meeting held on December 6, 1851 at which a Chairman and Secretary were elected and several committees appointed. These were for the various purposes of securing possible subscribers and to take measures toward the acquisition for the new group of the library of the old Philosophical Society, then owned by the Fitchburg Library Association, and another library concerning which nothing is known except that it existed “at the South part of the town.” Another meeting was scheduled for December 11th at which the various committees were to make their reports. It is quite likely that this gathering was never held since no mention of it is to be found.

On March 4th, 1852, however, a meeting was held at the old Town Hall at the corner of Main and Circle Streets at which it was reported that 125 persons had agreed to take stock in the organization and that the Fitchburg Library Association had taken the action described above. Other business discussed included plans of organization, courses of lectures, obtaining additional subscribers, and finding suitable quarters. A committee was appointed for the purpose of perfecting the plan of organization, securing members, and to try to obtain rooms in the new town hall which was to be erected in the summer of 1852.

The efforts of this committee appear to have been successful in at least one direction since at the annual town meeting held on April 5, 1852 it was voted “that the building committee be authorized to procure or provide a room for the Library Association in the new Town House.” Things seem to have progressed smoothly and relatively quickly from that point on. The library of the old Library Association was acquired and the members of that group admitted into the new one without charge, by-laws were adopted and on Tuesday, October 19, 1852 the Fitchburg Athenaeum was launched with exactly 100 members. A room in the town house was provided, the library of the old association brought in and a collection of new books ordered from a New York Bookseller. For some reason which is not clear from the record these books never arrived

and it was not until the summer of 1853 that books purchased from a Boston firm were added to the library.

Despite the early concern of the organization over the library phase of their activity it seems likely that the lecture program was at least as important, if not more so. Speakers who appeared before the group make an imposing collection of names, and number among them such historically significant persons as Mark Hopkins, Josiah Quincy, Horace Greeley, Richard H. Dana, Theodore Parker, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Wendell Phillips, Henry Ward Beecher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bayard, Taylor, and Henry David Thoreau.

Unfortunately, the promise of its salad days was not kept in the maturity of the organization. The total membership during its six and one-half years of existence was only 215 and we find that with the passage of time they found it more and more difficult to finance their activities, particularly the lectures. There was a tendency on the part of the citizenry, all too frequently noted in connection with the pursuit of knowledge in most cities, to attend the free lectures but to stay away from those for which a charge was made. Paid speakers appeared with less and less frequency and local speakers served without recompense more often until in the winter of 1858-1859 the program of lectures was entirely abandoned. On March 24th, 1859 a special meeting of the membership of the Athenaeum was held to discuss the desirability of giving their library to the Town, provided that the coming town meeting voted the establishment of a free town library. The question was thoroughly discussed both pro and con and finally decided in the negative by a vote of 25 to 14.

And this brings us back to the point from which this paper started, that is, to the Town Meeting of April 11th, 1859 at which the citizens voted to appropriate the maximum legal sum, \$1831.00 for the establishment of a free town library. On May 10th, 1859 the annual meeting of the Athenaeum was held, the principle business apparently being to reach a decision as to the Disposition of their library. It was decided, and so voted, to instruct the officers to sell all the property of the organization, except its cash treasury balance, to the town for \$400.00 Apparently the Fitchburg Athenaeum disbanded shortly thereafter without further activity.

Actually, though it had flourished briefly and been a useful organization during its entire existence, the Athenaeum was doomed from its inception. Enabling legislation providing that towns and cities had the legal right to establish free public libraries had been passed by the Legislature in 1851. Even at the time of the organization of the Athenaeum some of the persons involved in the deliberations were of the opinion that it would be better to establish a free town library under the act of 1851 than attempt to promote another library association.

Times had changed. The inevitable march of progress had decreed that the day of the free public library, municipally supported, had arrived, and that of the private association, especially in places no larger than Fitchburg, a thing of the past.

In addition to the 1600 volumes acquired by the Town from the Athenaeum some 200 were obtained by purchase from the Agricultural Library, an organization concerning which virtually nothing is known. On December 1st, 1859 the new library opened for service during the

following hours: “from 2 to 5 and 7 to 8 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and from 2 to 5 and 7 to 9 on Saturdays, holidays excepted.”

At the outset the entire resources of the Library consisted of its small collection of books and the shelves which held them. It was not at all a library in the modern sense of the word since no reading room, no reference facilities, no special place for children’s work, and no periodicals were provided. It was simply a collection of books, cataloged by author and title in a printed catalog, which could be withdrawn for home use.

Even these meagre resources were hedged about with regulations which would discourage a modern public library user and probably drive him to the drugstore rental library for all of his reading. Only one book could be taken at a time, for example, and rules stated that it could be used only by members of the card owner’s family. No one under the age of sixteen was permitted to hold a library card. “The only mode,” say the Library Regulations of 1859, “of obtaining a book will be by the presentation of (the patron’s library) card, upon which has been written the number of the books wanted, in the order of their preference, and the first book indicated which may be in, will be delivered.”

Very little is known of the early librarians beyond their names and the years in which they held their positions. They were not librarians at all in the present day sense since they had no particular educational qualifications or any professional training or experience whatsoever. Daniel Stearns, the first librarian, was appointed in November 1859 and apparently served until April 1861. The only data concerning him that appears anywhere in print is that he was Secretary of the Fitchburg Athenaeum during 1857 and 1858. As such he may have been in charge of the Athenaeum library and hence considered competent to carry out the duties of the new Town Library. Following Mr. Stearns the Librarians and their dates of service to 1873 were as follows: B.P. Todd, appointed April, 1861, J.M. Graham, appointed April, 1862, C.N. Fessenden, appointed 1865, Henry Jackson, appointed 1866, and serving until January, 1873. It seems very likely that all of these men, with the possible exception of Mr. Stearns, were the Town Clerks primarily and performed the duties of librarian on a part time basis. This conclusion is supported to some extent by the fact that Henry Jackson was Town Clerk for some years after he had relinquished the position of Librarian in 1873. Further support for this contention is to be found in the customary date of appointment of the various men. In the case of three of them the appointments were made in April, the month in which the annual Town Meetings were held and the government officials for the following year selected.

When one considers the duties performed by the Librarians and the services offered by the Library it does not appear surprising that so little attention was given to the qualifications of the men employed. They were really clerks who did little beyond the routine duties of giving out and receiving books. Almost anyone who could read and write could function thus with reasonable success. The Board of Trustees, in those days composed of nine members and meeting once monthly, ran the Library and did all the thinking.

In contrast to the present when professionally trained and highly educated persons select the books, there was for many years a special committee of the Board whose duty it was “to make all selections and purchases of books and periodicals.” The *Rules and Regulations* also stated that

“the Committee on the Library shall have charge and direction of the rooms, furniture and fixtures, provide for the lighting and heating, attend to the binding of books and their preparation for use, provide all necessary books and blanks for the use of the Librarian, and have the general superintendence of the Library.” Restrictions were particularly stringent in money matters as the following rule shows: “The Standing Committee shall conform to all directions of the Board, and shall not order any outlay exceeding five dollars, without such directions, and may draw on the Treasurer for the amount of all bills thus contracted by them.” The duties of the Librarian are set forth thus: “The Librarian shall have the custody of all property in the Library Rooms, and shall be accountable to the Trustees for the same. It shall be his duty, under the direction of the Trustees, to prepare catalogues, keep the books in order for circulation, make all necessary records and do all things which may be necessary for the preservation of the property and the convenience of visitors and takers of books.” In other words, he was the custodian rather than the administrator of the institution and the selector and interpreter of the books.

Even in these days of infancy and relative inadequacy, however, there was evidence of a ferment of new ideas and a desire for a better library which found occasional expression in the annual reports of the Trustees to the Town. As early as 1868 the Board indicated rather forcefully that it realized some of the Library’s shortcomings and was thinking of remedying them. The report for this year contains the following statement regarding the physical equipment of the Library. “The Trustees recommend the Town to take immediate steps to secure a proper building for the Library. The rooms now occupied by it, in the Town Hall, are inadequate to its wants. Much inconvenience has resulted from this cause already, and the yearly growth of the Library and of the population of the Town will rapidly increase it. The institution may now be considered a permanent one, and the Library should be placed in a suitable building.”

By 1871, three years later, the situation had become relatively desperate and we find the Board taking a somewhat stronger tone. The report for this year says, “The Trustees would again remind the town of the inadequate accommodation for the Library. The space for books is already fully occupied. There is no further room for shelves or cases. There must be additional accommodations, or the annual addition to the Library must be stopped for want of space in which to put volumes.”

In 1873, the year of Fitchburg’s incorporation as a city, complaint is also voiced, but in somewhat different and more tactful terms and with the emphasis on a new service rather than merely for space to shelve more books. In fact, it might be said that this is the first direct evidence of a change in philosophy from that of merely providing books to be taken out and read to the modern conception of the public library. The report for this year, after congratulating the city “...on the possession of a large, well selected....Library, placed in an apartment commodious and compatible” says: “We trust, however, the day is not far distant, when provision may be made for a Reading room and Library united, and open daily during the customary hours.”

Taken by and large, despite the occasional evidences of a desire for improvement, the period from 1859 to 1873 was not remarkable for the progress made by the Library. It was a period in which the services offered remained static, the Librarian’s part-time workers with no special fitness for their positions, and the public appropriations extremely meager. The ever recurring

cry during these early years, as it has been until very recent times, was for more adequate financial support for the expansion of the budding institution.

Even the incorporation of Fitchburg in 1873 and the appointment of Mr. Prescott C. Rice as Librarian on what appears to have been a full-time basis seemed to have little immediate effect on the growth or improvement of the institution. Unfortunately, records available in the Library give no information about Mr. Rice nor are his annual reports to the Trustees in any way indicative of his ideas or plans for the future. Perhaps the most nearly personal touch, and it is a somewhat amusing one, is to be found in his report to the Board for 1875. After reporting circulation statistics and other figures for the year Mr. Rice says, rather plaintively:

An examination of the foregoing statistics in regard to condition, accessions and circulation will show at a glance the amount of patient and oftentimes monotonous labor which must be accomplished, in order to keep the library up to its proper standard of efficiency and excellence. I have so often been met by the question, What can you find to do in the library? that it may be well to rehearse some of the more important duties devolving upon the Librarian and his assistants. The delivery and consequent return of 71,727 volumes, which, with the books of reference, involves the handling of nearly 90,000 volumes; the careful registration of each day's doing; the covering and labelling new volumes; the care of all books out of repair and subjects for the binder. Add to these labors, that consequent upon the average accession of one hundred volumes per month, and the product will give a possible insight into what we find to do in regard to the one item of books; and I am confident that every candid mind will acknowledge that there can be but few idle moments for the Librarian and his assistants during Library hours.

What is perhaps even more revealing of this librarian's concept of the development of the Library and of his position in this statement which follows shortly the apologia given above in the same annual report. Says Mr. Rice: "If we had a Reading Room connected with the Library, (which is often called for), it would seem as if nothing had been left undone which could further the interests, usefulness or success of the Library." One dislikes criticizing his predecessors but in this instance I believe, in view of the subsequent development of the Library as well as its many and obvious shortcomings and weaknesses at the time he made this statement, that we are justified in saying that the Librarian was, to put our criticism in as charitable terms as possible, very easily satisfied.

Some changes and improvements began to occur, however, even in these relatively uneventful years. In 1879, for example, mention is made of the installation of a new kind of system of charging out books which was thought to be more efficient than the method previously employed. Since neither the new nor the old techniques are anywhere described or discussed it is impossible to pass judgment on them. In 1880 the long wished for and discussed reading room finally become a reality and with it the usefulness of the Library was considerably increased. Not only was it now possible for persons to consult books in the Library and thus have more than a single volume available at a time for use but a direct result which was almost revolutionary in character shortly took place. This step was the addition of thirty-five periodicals which were subscribed for in 1881. With provision of the Reading Room and the periodicals a considerable

step forward had been made into the concept and development of a more well-rounded and complete service.

And then, on March 25, 1884, occurred the most momentous event in the history of the Fitchburg Public Library. On the evening of that day the city council met in a special session, whose purpose was not revealed, at the call of Mayor Davis. The meeting was called to order by the Mayor who announced at once that Judge T.K. Ware, Chairman of the Trustees of the Library, had a communication for them. Judge Ware took the floor and said that he appeared at the request of the Hon. Rodney Wallace who, on leaving the city, had left the following which he was happy to present at that time:

To his Honor the Mayor, and the City Council of the City of Fitchburg:

Gentlemen:--The subscriber has felt for a long time that a building with proper appurtenances for our Public Library here in Fitchburg was much needed, and makes the following proposition, viz:

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, with the advice and approval of the Trustees of the Public Library, within the next two years, a sum not less than forty thousand dollars (\$40,000) in erecting a building on said lot; said building to be under the care and management of the Board of Trustees of the Public Library for the time being, and to be used for a Free Public Library, Reading Rooms and Art Gallery, and for no other purpose. And it is understood that the city government, accepting these donations for the above purposes, shall assume and bear the current expenses of said building, grounds and appurtenances, after the Library Building shall have been completed and furnished.

If the above proposition is accepted, I shall proceed to carry out the same as soon as it can conveniently be done.

Fitchburg, March 17, 1884

Rodney Wallace

To say that this announcement came merely as a surprise to the Council and to the people of the city is to be guilty of a considerable understatement. It was almost a bombshell. The Council immediately adopted an order introduced by the Mayor accepting the gift and placing "...on record its profound appreciation of the public spirit and munificence of the donor, and its recognition of the incalculable benefits which will result to his fellow-citizens and their descendants and successors for all time from this noble gift."

The *Fitchburg Sentinel* for the next day had this to say:

The best surprise ever made in this city was at the common council room last evening. The secret was well kept. The call for the special meeting of the city council was issued, Tuesday morning. To all inquiries in relation to the business to be transacted, Mayor Davis returned the mysterious reply, "I am not at liberty to state."

Never before was there such a mystery attending a meeting of the city council, and never was a mystery explained more satisfactorily. Every member of the city council was silent for some time after Judge Ware had finished reading the proposition of Mr. Wallace.

The generous gift made by Hon. Rodney Wallace to the city causes general rejoicing in this community. Citizens are accustomed to expect liberal things from this large-hearted donor, but the munificence of the gift surprises everyone. The warmest expressions of gratitude are heard alike from the oldest citizen and the youngest person who patronize the public library. It is agreed that Mr. Wallace's generosity could not have found a more appropriate form of expression, or one which could be so thoroughly appreciated by all classes.

The above is by no means all of the Sentinel article but it is enough to indicate the general tone of the whole and to show also the surprise and gratification of the citizenry. Neither was the Board of Trustees of the Library slow in expressing its satisfaction. At a meeting held on April 7 the resolution given below was adopted and a committee appointed to present a copy to Mr. Wallace:

Resolved, That we have heard with great satisfaction of the proposed gift by the Hon. Rodney Wallace of land and a building for the use of the Public Library, thus providing for a want long felt by the trustees, viz: facilities for making the Library fully available to the people of the city which it never could attain in its present confined quarters.

That we will fully co-operate with the generous donor in any manner desired by him in carrying out the details of his proposed undertaking, and that we desire here to place upon our records our keen appreciation of the generous spirit which has moved him to tender this munificent gift.

Planning must have undertaken immediately for work on the foundation of the new building began on June 10, 1884. Little more than a year later the dedication took place on July 1, 1885. In the words of the report of these services:

The exercises were held in the main library room, Mayor Davis presiding. There were present the members of the City Council, Board of Trustees of the Public Library, other municipal bodies, invited guests from abroad, and many citizens of Fitchburg.

Several addresses by prominent persons both local and from out of the city were delivered. Musical selections were played by what one supposes to have been a local orchestra. In the afternoon many persons called on Mr. Wallace to pay him their respects. In the afternoon also the Fitchburg Band played concerts on both the upper and lower commons. It was a gala day for Fitchburg.

Since all of you are no doubt familiar with the building itself there seems little point in entering into a complete description of it here. Basically there has been little change in it since its erection. There has, however, been a considerable rearrangement so that it may be well to tell briefly what the Library proper, in contrast to the space used for the Art Gallery, consisted of.

The delivery desk so-called, from which persons took books for home use, was located near the present center desk, but further to the rear of the building. At that time the general collection of the Library was not open to the public so the delivery desk extended across the center of the building forming not only a counter but a barrier to the stacks as well. The room now occupied by the Reference Department was a magazine reading room, and the space at present housing the fiction stack was the Reference Room. The present newspaper reading room in the basement was used for that purpose at the outset. Other basement space was used for storage since there was no Children's Department in 1885. The staff consisted of Librarian Prescott C. Rice, and Assistant Librarian Carolyn I. Works. Presumably part-time page help was employed as needed.

As a result of the stimulus of a new building and greatly improved facilities generally there seems to have occurred something of a renaissance in the Library. An outside expert, Mr. G.W. Cole, was brought in to recatalog and reclassify the books according to the Dewey Decimal scheme, which incidentally, is still used today though with many changes.

In 1891 the first foreign language books were added to the Library. The experiment was evidently a success for this policy was continued the next year with the addition of thirty German and sixty-eight books in French. In 1893 the rather revolutionary step of preparing a card catalog for the use of the public was completed with between fifty and sixty thousand cards covering 27,000 books. In 1894 a second reading room was opened in what is now the Children's Department containing Patent Office Reports, government documents, and bound volumes of newspapers and magazines. In the same year the publication of the weekly "Bulletin" was begun in the Sentinel and the first request for the installation of electric light was voiced. In 1895 the Board considered the establishment of a system of branch libraries but decided upon consideration that the demand for such service at that time was insufficient. The same question was raised the following year in both the Librarian's and the Board's reports. At this time the Librarian suggested the desirability of establishing delivery stations in West and South Fitchburg.

Extension needs are mentioned in passing again in 1897 but in 1898 the idea appears to have been abandoned because, as the Librarian states, "The call for delivery agencies for books mentioned in the former reports has decreased, the various lines of electric cars having brought our people within easy reach of the library building, and in a way satisfied the wants of our scattered population." In 1898 reference work in the Library was given a considerable impetus and recognition by the employment for such work of Miss Helen B. Bangs. 1899 witnessed the addition of a collection of musical scores and circulating photographs of art masterpieces. In the same year additional steel book stacks were added through the generosity of Rodney Wallace who donated a total of \$10,000 at this time. The Reference Room also acquired some new equipment.

Of even greater importance, however, was the establishment of a room for the use of children, a departure which was apparently not considered especially significant at the time but which probably embodied the greatest single step forward in broadening service made since the establishment of the Library.

In 1900 the talk of extension facilities culminated in the establishment of a delivery station and reading room in West Fitchburg. Because of lack of patronage the reading room had only a short duration and was discontinued the following year. Delivery service was kept up until 1904 and then discontinued without explanation.

A year later another important service which continues to the present was begun. This embodies the sending of classroom collections of books to the various schools of the city when such service was requested.

In 1902 Prescott C. Rice, after twenty-nine years as Librarian died and was succeeded by Mr. George Nutting who had been first assistant in the Library for some time. Two of the outstanding items covered in Mr. Nutting's first annual report in 1902 are his recommendation that the age limit for ownership of library cards be completely abolished, and his suggestion that the Children's Room be moved to the basement in the quarters then occupied by the second reading room.

Both of these recommendations are indicative of a rapid change in point of view. The lower age limit for holding library cards was then twelve years and had been eighteen until 1900, and the idea of a separate children's department had only been tried since 1899. Further indication of change came in 1904 with the introduction of a small "openshelf" collection which was easily accessible to the public. The annual report that year gives conclusive evidence of the success of this experiment and it is difficult to understand, looking back as we do today, why the idea was not extended to virtually the entire collection as at present. In the following years numerous other improvements were made. These included more steel stacks, another reduction in children's age limits to ten years, and the establishment of a deposit station in the Ashburnham Street School. Sometime during 1908 telephone service was installed and the convenience resulting to patrons remarked upon in the report for that year. In 1909 the long discussed now Children's Room became a reality and was installed in the basement where it still functions. The space previously occupied by the children's books on the first floor was converted into what was called the "Industrial Room" which contained material on local industries, the Patent Office Reports, and various technical periodicals.

In 1911 another innovation made its appearance and has been continued to the present, that is the holding of "Story Hours" for children. At the outset most of the story telling was done by members of the Woman's Club Library Extension Committee with the Cooperation of members of the Library staff. Instruction of school children in the use of the Library, another practice still followed, was also introduced at this time.

While there were minor changes and minor incidents during the next twenty-five years in the History of the Library, that is from 1911 through 1936, they were of little basic importance and the period as a whole might well be characterized as one of relative inertia. The income of the

Library was low, much too low to provide anything even approaching adequate book purchase or service. There were staff changes which would be calculated to bring new ideas and new blood to the institution. New concepts of service and organization which had been introduced in progressive libraries made no impress on Fitchburg. Why this should have been true is difficult to discover. Certainly a large part of the responsibility must be attributed to the failure, somewhere, by someone, to see that the Library obtained an adequate budget.

Nevertheless, the reports of both the Trustees and of the Librarian frequently indicated an awareness of the inadequacy of the Library and a desire for improvement. In 1928, for example, Miss E. Louise Jones of the State Library Commission was called in to make a survey of the Library and to recommend needed changes. The chief result was the renovation of the Juvenile Department with an immediate increase in circulation from that agency. The cost of this renovation was borne, not by the city, but by an anonymous friend of the Library.

After this brief interlude, however, nothing further was done until 1936 at which the Librarian and Reference Librarian became eligible for retirement. On January 2nd, 1937, following the retirement of Mr. George Nutting, Mr. Emerson Greenaway assumed the Librarianship and there began a complete reorganization of the Library in which not merely change but revolution was the order of the day. The most significant single step taken was the increase of the appropriation without which little could have been done to bring about the changes essential to the revamping of the institution. The second important move involved the creation of a departmental organization and the appointment of several new persons to the staff. All of these people were professionally trained librarians and included four new department heads, that is, Reference, Juvenile, Circulation, and Catalog, and another trained assistant.

The building was renovated and its interior arrangements changed radically. Instead of an open shelf collection consisting only of fiction and a few reference books, virtually all of the resources of the Library were made accessible to the public. The charging desk was removed from its former position as a barrier to the book stacks and modern horseshoe shaped desk purchased and installed nearer the entrance to the building. A new method of book charging, involving the use of machines was instituted and all of the routines of issuance and return of books modernized and made more efficient. The reregistering of all card holders was undertaken as an essential step in learning how many persons were actually using the library. Prior to this reregistration the files of borrowers had not been gone over in years and were cluttered with the names of persons who were in many instances no longer even residents of the city of and others who had been dead for years.

The Catalog Department, which had been located where the Librarian's office now is, was moved to the second floor. The Reference Department, at that time occupying the space now devoted to the fiction stacks was moved to more capacious quarters on the opposite side of the Library. New lighting equipment was installed, and much painting, plumbing, varnishing, and general refurbishing done to make the building not only more efficient but more inviting.

The entire book collection was gone over carefully and obviously useless and obsolete or wornout materials discarded in large quantities. Because the cataloging and classification of the books had not been done according to modern standards it was necessary to begin the complete

re-cataloging of all the material in the Library. A W.P.A. project was set up for this purpose under the direction of the head of the Cataloging Department. Another project was set up for mending and binding. While the work of re-cataloging is still in process and will be for some years, as the task is a tremendous one, much progress has been made and the collection is not only more readily accessible for public use but is also better appearing and, because of the discarding which has been done, more generally useful. In short, from an institution which had been functioning with little change for a period of about fifty years with obsolete methods and objectives, the Fitchburg Public Library was transformed, despite its old and in some respects ill adapted building, into a modern educational and recreational agency.

That these changes were not only badly needed but appreciated by the people of Fitchburg is evidenced by the increased use of the Library which almost immediately followed the reorganization. Unfortunately, because of the manner in which statistics of use were kept prior to the reorganization, it is impossible to tell the whole story or to show the really tremendous response of the people. Nevertheless, 1937, the period of most intensive change and transition in which it was impossible to serve the public adequately, showed an increase in circulation of 3,298 volumes over the preceding year. The statistics of circulation from 1936 to the present are as follows:

1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941
160,296	163,594	198,927	216,360	237,436	215,881

In other words, each succeeding year until the last has shown a substantial increase over the preceding one. The decrease in 1941 is explained by the war and the national defense effort and is being felt by libraries all over the country. In a recent survey made by the American Library Association of eighty-five libraries in all sections of the country and of all sizes, all of them reported losses. Such losses are apt to continue as long as abnormal times continue. Libraries flourish best in periods of economic depression and worst in periods of prosperity or war.

So much for the reorganization of the Fitchburg Public Library and its results in terms of public response. The Library is in good condition as far as its staff and book collection are concerned. It is in only fair condition as to building and to the extent of its services. Our most crying needs at the present time are more space for our increasing collection of books and more adequate space and equipment for our Reference Department, as well as some form of extension facilities. Because of the construction of the building it will be difficult to provide adequate space for either the shelving of more books or for housing the Reference Department. We must, however, make the best use of the facilities available since there seems little likelihood for some years to come of our being able to either remodel the present structure or acquire a new one. Under these circumstances about the only thing we can do is to move the Reference Department to the second floor of the Library to the room previously used as an Art Gallery. This will by no means provide an ideal solution to our problems since in libraries of this size it is not particularly desirable to expand vertically but rather on a horizontal plane. It is hoped that the fairly near future will make possible a municipal appropriation to cover the cost of making the transfer.

The provision of extension facilities, the other great need mentioned above, has long been a topic of discussion in the annual reports of the Library. Fitchburg is one of the very few cities of

its size in the country that does not provide branches or bookmobile service to outlying areas. Because of the large area of Fitchburg and the distances which must be travelled by many residents to reach the Library our need is especially acute. It is my hope, and the hope of all members of the staff, that we can acquire a bookmobile in the near future. This type of service is less expensive to provide and more generally satisfactory under the conditions prevailing in Fitchburg than the branch library. Until we have such extension service our facilities will never be complete.