

## The Westport Library

The Westport Library began as the dream of a local schoolteacher, May Howard.

In the mid-1880s, Howard proposed that Westport establish a circulating library, an idea that quickly gained support from her faculty colleagues at the town's high school. Students held fundraising events at the Westport Armory and quickly garnered fifty dollars to cover the cost of the first books.

By early 1886, a total of 238 volumes had been purchased or donated. The Westport Circulating Library opened that summer in the home of a local merchant, Amos Prescott, whose daughter Louise served as the first librarian. A Board of Trustees for the library was established, with Howard serving as President and local physician Frank Delano named Vice President.

The next year, 1887, Howard, Delano and others enlisted one of the town's wealthiest residents, Alice Lee, to lead a campaign to build a permanent home for the library. Lee obtained a charter from the State of New York to form the Westport Library Association and served as President of its Board for a number of years. The Board included representatives from each of the three local churches – Baptist, Catholic, and Methodist – as well as one from the town's school board. It also featured other prominent residents.

Lee raised \$1,000 from residents of the town – worth roughly \$25,000 today – and secured another \$1,400 from friends elsewhere. The latter included her cousin Henry Lee Higginson, the founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who like Lee spent the summers at a nearby Westport estate, and William Sumner Appleton, a Boston philanthropist. Seeking to remain independent, the library accepted no taxpayer funds. Lee also secured donations of books from other Boston friends and acquaintances. These included businessman Samuel Torrey Morse and historian Francis Parkman, who contributed a nine-volume set of his works that is still in the library's collection.

The Association purchased a vacant lot in the center of Westport that had been home to a hotel destroyed by fire in 1876. Residents of the town cleared away the rubble, and Lee engaged two prominent Boston architects, Robert Day Andrews and Herbert Jaques, to design a permanent home for the library. Andrews and Jaques, who were responsible for numerous commercial and residential buildings across the country now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, envisioned a rectangular 1,500 square foot structure at the top of the gently sloping lawn facing Lake Champlain. Intended to house several thousand volumes, the building also could host gatherings of up to a hundred people. Construction was overseen by Westport businessman David Clark. Other townspeople performed a considerable amount of the work.

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The Westport Library opened on July 26, 1888. The occasion was marked by an event held that evening on its front lawn, with Library Association Vice President Frank Delano serving as master of ceremonies. So many people wanted to be present that the organizers ran out of

chairs, forcing many attendees to stand during a series of speeches, at least one of which probably lasted 20 to 30 minutes. Among those who addressed the assembled throng were each of the town's three clergymen and the local New York State Senator, Rowland Kellogg. The high school's Glee Club provided musical entertainment, leading the crowd in singing "America". So did local soloist Mary Hitchcock, who offered "The Old Oaken Bucket," a popular nineteenth-century tune with lyrics infused with nostalgia for the supposedly idyllic era of unspoiled rural life that existed before the Industrial Revolution.

The opening ceremony's keynote address was delivered by Richard Lockhart Hand, a prominent attorney from neighboring Elizabethtown who later served as President of the New York State Bar Association. Anticipating that more than a few in attendance might raise an eyebrow at the amount of money spent on a library, Hand argued they would find it a welcome place of refuge from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Just as important, he thought, was what the new library said about Westport's values. "To every stranger who will pass through this village," he proclaimed, "this will give unmistakable evidence of your love of letters and care for the cultivation of your minds, while to yourselves it will be a never-failing source of profit and pleasure."

In its early years the library served as the Westport Town Hall, the rent from which offset some of its costs. It also hosted a series of events for the community, including lectures, concerts, and the occasional play. Promotional literature for Alice Lee's Westport Inn featured the library as part of its efforts to attract guests for the summer season. Musical groups came that included one from Philadelphia that gave one of the earliest performances at the facility. Local ensembles such as a quartet from nearby Port Henry also offered concerts.

Travelogues, including a "magic lantern" slide show on California in 1891, brought faraway places to local residents. Other events showcased the latest developments in technology. One of the more noteworthy was an 1893 "Grand Electrical Entertainment." A number of recent inventions were demonstrated for the audience, including a phonograph that played a recording of inventor Thomas Edison's voice. Tickets for such events were sold at a nearby store owned by Frank Eddy, whose wife Sarah played a prominent role in the library's activities. Prices typically ranged between 25 and 50 cents, with discounts for children and a premium charged for reserved seating.

During its first few years, the library required all patrons to pay an annual fee of a dollar per year to borrow its books and magazines. By 1893, having settled the final debts from the building's construction, the Board of Directors sought the state's permission to operate as Free Library so that it could offer its services to year-round residents at no charge. (Summer visitors, it seems, still paid a seasonal fee.) A representative from the Board of Regents who visited found the library's collection most impressive, and the necessary charter was granted.

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By the early 1900s, the library that had opened with just over 200 books two decades earlier had amassed a collection approaching 4,000 volumes and was rapidly running out of shelves for them. Accordingly, in the summer of 1907, the Board of Trustees voted to enlarge

the original building by adding a new wing that would roughly double the size of the facility. Lee again turned to Boston architects Andrews and Jaques to design the expansion. The Library Association donated \$1,200 toward the project, with both year-round and summer residents of Westport contributing additional funds.

The cornerstone of the new wing was laid on September 9, 1907. The afternoon ceremony was preceded by a lunch hosted by Lee at her Westport Inn. The guests then assembled on the lawn in front of the library for her opening remarks. Lee was followed by Caroline Halstead Royce, who recently had published a book recording the history of the town. A number of objects were placed as a time capsule in a sealed copper box that was cemented into the cornerstone before it was laid. These included documents and memorabilia from Westport, as well as a small number of contemporary coins and stamps. Also placed in the box was a card from the library stamped with the ceremony's date.

Another speaker was John Tyler Cutting, who had been born in Westport in 1844 and decades later became a successful businessman in New York and California. Cutting electrified the audience assembled on the lawn in front of the library when he announced that in memory of his mother, who had died when he was a child, he was donating the funds necessary to complete construction of the new wing. Lee had spoken with Cutting about his gift before the ceremony and, once the cheering had subsided, proclaimed that the addition would be called the John Tyler Cutting Memorial Hall. After Lee concluded her remarks, several prominent local jurists spoke. One was Augustus Hand, son of Richard Hand who had delivered the keynote address at the 1888 ceremony marking the opening of the original building. The younger Hand praised those assembled for "establishing a foundation to perpetuate the spirit of freedom which is the priceless heritage of us all."

The new wing opened the next year, 1908. Lee and Cutting again were on hand for the dedication ceremony that summer. Lee pointed out the clock tower that had been added in memory of local resident Almira Richards. The enlarged collection, now fully cataloged, had been further enhanced by a trove of books on the region donated by Samuel Avery. (The Avery Collection is at the center of a larger corpus of Adirondackiana at the library today.) These works, along with maps and photographs, would be displayed on the library's main floor and offer visitors a sense for the village's history. Speaking after Lee, Cutting expressed his hope that "the lectures, the concerts, the entertainments, the speeches for reform and progress, the social good times, which the people of Westport are to have in this hall, will always bind them more closely together in neighborly fellowship, and make them feel that life the better worth living."

Cutting would not be disappointed. The new wing was luxurious and large enough that it enticed leading musicians of the day from New York City to make the trip north and perform for local residents. One was Fernando Tanara, former conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, who in 1915 led a "grand vocal concert" by his students. One performer was soprano Vida Milholland, sister of leading suffragist Inez Milholland. A few years earlier, in 1910, the renowned New York baritone Morton Adkins gave a benefit recital at the library. Adkins spirits

apparently had not been dampened when, a few days before the event, the boat he was sailing in on the lake capsized, knocking him briefly unconscious.

The library reached a major milestone in 1912, when the Association purchased a projector and began showing silent films every Wednesday and Saturday. One early offering was *The Battle Cry of Peace*, described by one local newspaper as “the greatest war drama ever filmed...[with] 30,000 soldiers and 5,000 horses” and featuring footage showing military technologies that many of the town’s residents may have never seen, including airplanes, submarines, and machine guns. Music accompanying the film was played by an orchestra from nearby Camp Dudley. What the viewing audience made of the film’s plot – in which foreign enemies use otherwise well-meaning American pacifists to undermine and then take over the United States – was not recorded in press accounts of the evening.

Two of the most notable films first shown at the library were ones that starred Mary Pickford, arguably the most famous actress of the silent era, in “The Little Princess,” and John Barrymore in “Here Comes the Bride.” In 1920, New Year’s Eve featured “The Mark of Zorro” with Douglas Fairbanks, followed by dancing that lasted past midnight. Before long, the number of evenings per week when movies were shown had grown from two to three. On at least one occasion, renowned New York conductor Walter Damrosch, who summered in Westport, conducted the orchestra accompanying the films. Another summer resident, the playwright Robert Sherwood, wrote several plays for performance at the library. Sherwood would later win two Pulitzer Prizes for his work.

The Library was the venue for other events serving the community. In the 1920s, doctors from the New York Department of Public Health held clinics where Westport residents obtained free tuberculosis screening, including a chest x-ray. State health experts also offered talks on maternal and child health for current and expecting mothers. The same decade, both national and state agriculture officials regularly stopped by the library to provide advice to farmers and loggers in the area.

The most memorable event during the library’s early decades, however, probably was one that involved former President Theodore Roosevelt, who on October 15, 1914, spoke to a large crowd on its front lawn. Roosevelt drove into Westport with Frederick Davenport, then campaigning for Governor as the nominee of Roosevelt’s Progressive Party. Davenport would lose badly in the election a few weeks later, but few in Roosevelt’s audience that day would soon forget his short speech attacking the corrupt elites that he claimed were continuing to dominate state politics in Albany.

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The library’s development continued throughout the 1920s. Movie screenings remained a regular feature, as did concerts. Community groups used Cutting Hall often for their events. In 1922, two years after women gained the right to vote, the Essex County chapter of the newly formed League of Women Voters held its annual convention in the Hall. Consistent with its non-partisan charter, the group sought to assemble “the better elements of both Republican and Democratic parties” around the theme of child welfare, with Alice Lee as a featured speaker.

The library's front lawn remained an important venue. One tradition there was the annual holiday tree, where donated presents were opened and carols sung on Christmas Day.

The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 weighed no less heavily on Westport than it did on communities throughout the nation. The library played its part in relief efforts, serving as a collection point for donations of goods and money. Boxes of food contributed by the town's residents were packed in Cutting Hall during the winter and distributed to the growing number of their neighbors who were in need. People needed entertainment as a distraction from the difficulties of daily life. Film screenings continued. In 1931, several donors purchased an audio system so that the new "talking pictures" could be shown. The latest releases made their way to Westport quickly. Dorothy, the Wicked Witch, and the rest of the characters from *The Wizard of Oz* appeared on the library's screen in September 1939, just a few weeks after the film premiered in Los Angeles.

America's entry into World War II brought still more challenges. Within a month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in early December 1941, the library was hosting talks aimed at educating the local population about the global conflict. Once the rationing of supplies critical to the war effort began, it was where local farmers could go to apply for gasoline to fuel their tractors. The draft came to Westport, with the town's young men registering for military service at the library. Movies were suspended for over a year, resuming in 1943 with films such as *Holiday Inn*, starring Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire. Some screenings were tied to the war. Proceeds from one featuring conductor Fred Waring and his orchestra, the Pennsylvanians, were donated to the National War Fund in support of the USO, which provided entertainment to the men and women in uniform, and other charitable organizations.

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When the war ended in 1945, Westport's library contained over 5,000 books. It was one of the largest in Essex County. Only Saranac Lake's, Port Henry's, and Lake Placid's – the area's largest, with 15,000 volumes – were bigger. In terms of the number of books available per resident, the Westport Library served its community well.

By the late 1940s, however, the library was facing major challenges. The greatest of these was money. Needed maintenance had been deferred for almost two decades during the Depression and World War II. By 1948, it could be postponed no longer. The library's annual income of around \$1,250 (about \$20,000 today), however, just barely covered day-to-day operating expenses, including the librarian's salary, utilities, and new books. Donations were drying up as many summer residents, a number of whom had supported the library for years, moved away or passed on. The library's Board of Trustees took the only option it had: borrowing the money needed to pay for a new roof, the replacement of the main entrance on Harris Lane, and the repair of two others that were used during film screenings. This only added to the library's already significant debts.

A solution to the library's perennial indebtedness came in 1954, when it joined with sixteen other libraries in Essex and neighboring Clinton County to form a regional consortium. Known as the Clinton-Essex County Library Service System, and later expanded to include

libraries in nearby Franklin County, the organization helped member institutions control costs by obtaining books at a discount through a centralized purchasing system. Professional assistance was available from a central office in Plattsburgh. Cards issued by each library in the system were valid at all others. Books could be exchanged between libraries through an interlibrary loan program. A bookmobile made regular visits.

While membership in this regional system also meant that the Westport library received a small grant from the State of New York each year, this did not eliminate the continuing need to raise funds to maintain a building approaching its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Accordingly, at the end of the 1950s, a campaign was mounted that brought in \$25,000 for another round of renovations.

During the construction that followed, and to save on future costs, a large part of Cutting Memorial Hall thought to be no longer needed was demolished. The town had vacated rented office space on its ground floor years earlier, and, perhaps due to declining audiences as commercial theaters opened in the area, the library had stopped showing movies. The sole sections of Cutting Hall that remain today are a room just off the main entrance that, like its larger predecessor, is used for community events, as well as part of its original ground floor. The iconic clock tower, which like Cutting Hall was built as part of the 1908 expansion, still stands, as does the oldest section of the library from the 1880s. All underwent a further restoration in the early 1990s, preserving the library for future generations.

*David Sherman*