

Forgotten? Ayr's Carnegie Library

The Spell-binding Story Of a Great Man and His Influence In Ayr

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The Ayr Library now stands vacant amid the bustle of Stanley Street, once it was filled with numerous books and collections that now are held in the new elegant library that is situated further down the street. After moving from shoe-making shops, tailor shops to a Masonic Lodge, the library finally found her own resting place at 92 Stanley Street, one of the oldest streets in Ayr, only due to a man named Andrew Carnegie.

Andrew Carnegie immigrated to the United States as a young boy, his family poor and in fear of starvation borrowed money for the voyage. Once they arrived they found that they were living in one of the poorest areas, Allegheny, Pennsylvania. At a young age, Andrew worked twelve hours a day, six days a week at a bobbin factory.

Two years later he got a job as a telegraph messenger which entitled him to free admission to the theatre where he became fascinated by Shakespeare. He began borrowing books from Colonel James Anderson's personal library which was opened to workers every Saturday. This gave working young men like Andrew an opportunity to learn and educate themselves.

Soon he was well adjusted to his job and making every effort to learn about telegraph operations and promptly he became an operator. He was promoted in the company as he became well liked and well knowledgeable in his field leading him to several financial successes as he continued on in the railway and steel industry.

Nearing his retirement, Mr. Carnegie had a strong interest in philanthropy and education and so he founded the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Andrew's transformation from his poor life as a child to a wealthy man made him appreciate success for any who worked hard. And so he believed in giving in such cases. As was noted by Carnegie the "industrious and ambitious; not those who need everything done for them, but those who, being most anxious and able to help themselves, deserve and will be benefited by help from others".

Between the years 1883 and 1929 he had funded 2,509 libraries, 125 in total in Canada. It was very rare for a grant to be denied and so Carnegie grants were well-known. He became a man of great fame and wealth in the realm of philanthropy and was kind enough to offer grants to create financial assistance to the construction of public libraries in North America, the United Kingdom and other countries. Hundreds of libraries were built;

however, there were some specific design and architectural standards that had to be upheld.

In 1901 the Ayr Library, which at the time was housed in the lower level of the Masonic Lodge which is currently the Green Garden restaurant, joined newly formed Ontario Library Association. After quarrels with the Masonic Lodge about rent the library decided to look for help. In desperate hopes to establish a separate facility in Ayr they followed the same path that was advised by Rev. Mr. Bradley of the Berlin Library Board which had completed their library with a Carnegie grant in 1904.

Inspired by Rev. Mr. Bradley's accomplishments and with hopeful spirits an application was sent off to Andrew Carnegie in hopes of receiving funds for a new library. In 1909, a letter arrived from Mr. Carnegie. There was much anticipation to discover whether or not the application would be approved. As the letter was read it was clear that Carnegie was interested in funding the Ayr Public Library. He offered five thousand dollars on condition that five hundred dollars was presented by the village for the maintenance of the facility. In 1910, with an architectural design by architect Mr. Binning of Listowel in hand and an approval from Andrew Carnegie construction began. Its central staircase, pillars standing at either side of the doorway and other such architectural speculations reflect the classical influences that were integrated in Carnegie's architectural designs.

A contract was given to William Hallman of Plattsville who began to build the library. Construction began and with the hard work of the workers and the encouragement of local societies on October 16, 1911 the old library was closed down and on October 31st, 1911 the new library was welcomed. Mr. Fairgrieve, librarian of the past library, became the first librarian in the Carnegie inspired library. The Women's Institute contributed various pieces of furniture even including a piano in 1914.

In 1919, Carnegie died of bronchial pneumonia giving approximately \$4.3 billion dollars away. He graciously gave allowing small towns such as Ayr to provide literature and education to the community. He is now buried at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in New York.

In December of 1994, the Ayr Public Library was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act due to its historical and architectural significance to the community. Carnegie's style is a featured display of his accomplishments towards philanthropy. He was inspired by the Beaux Arts style, which was a period that replicated that of classical ornamentation however used modern materials such as concrete. The exterior and its classical decoration and pediment with brackets under the eaves and square shape are a reflection of the style. The interior of the building's ceilings of twelve to fifteen feet high divide the space by majestic archways and columns. It truly was a marvel of the time.

Eventually in 2004, the old Carnegie library was closed and a new 7000 square foot library further down Stanley Street was opened due to the lack of space.

Today, as we pass the library we must remember that it is not simply just a place that once was part of our community, it shows the determina-



The Original Ayr Carnegie Library Built In 1911

tion we have, the efforts brought forth by our forebearers who strived to create a better community. Thanks to Andrew Carnegie for his funds, our community was provided with a place of education and interests for generations. Although, due to expanding collections of books and the arrival of our new beautiful library, it remains more of a standing memorial of the past it is still important to cherish and reflect upon the old Ayr Public Library as it stands triumphantly alongside its fellow buildings in downtown Ayr as it represents the international efforts of the community and the intellectual determination of the peoples of Ayr.



Ayr's New Library Built In 2004