

# HISTORY OF THE LONG BRANCH FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY



## The Beginning

The first “library” in Long Branch, the East Long Branch Reading Room and Library Association, opened on November 16, 1878 on the second floor of Washington Hall, located at 206 Broadway. The library was founded by a group of women and, at the time, accepted only women as members. The first officers were: Mrs. H. J. Hastings, President; Mrs. Thomas W. Cooper, Vice President; Mrs. Margaret Lane, Secretary, and Mrs. Jennie L. Morris, Treasurer.

The library at that time consisted of a reading room, which was donated by Mrs. Jordan Woolley, and books that were contributed by wealthy residents. Shortly after, the library association rented the adjoining room, for use as a circulating library. In May 1880, the library, referred to as Library Hall, had a new home. The authors of Entertaining a Nation state that it was built in 1880, but Long Branch Daily Record says that the library was located in a former store on the left side of the building, with the rear used as a reading room. The association operated a stationery store downstairs to raise money for operating expenses.

On March 1, 1916, the library moved its 5,000-volume collection to a building on the Slocum Homestead. The association deeded the building and land to the City of Long Branch, with the qualification that it would be used for library purposes. From that time on, the maintenance of the library was included in the city’s budget. The association sold Library Hall at a profit, for \$16,000, on March 4, 1916.

## Carnegie Building

In 1919, the City of Long Branch received a grant of \$30,000 from the Carnegie Foundation for a new library building to be located next to City Hall, on property variously described as “on the tree-covered lawn of the old Woolley home” and as “the Slocum Homestead.” Long Branch was the last city in the United States to receive a Carnegie grant. Due to an embargo on unessential building during the war, the Carnegie Foundation extended the time period in which the new library must be built. Architects Edward L. Tilton and A. M. Githens submitted the plans to the Library Board in the summer of 1919.

The new building was a red-brick building, with limestone trim, in a Colonial Renaissance style. The building plans included a loggia of the front façade supported by six columns and an eight and a half foot octagonal skylight. The frontage was two stories in height. The interior included a main floor and a basement. The vestibule had mezzanine flooring.

## Early Librarians

The first librarian was James S. Brower, who served from 1879 to 1884. From 1884 until the late 1980’s, all of his successors were women. They included Miss A. Thompson, Miss Libbie Chasey, Miss Nora Lane in 1889, Mrs. Andrew Nelson, Mrs. Edith Woolley, and Mrs. Ada Campbell. In 1914, Miss Mary (Mamie) Clarkson was selected as librarian. Clarkson’s tenure as librarian was successful, and one which she held for approximately 25 years.

Around that time, the Long Branch Free Public Library was cooperating with the war effort. The Long Branch Daily Record, in an article entitled “War Training at Library,” reported that “Defense Information Bureaus have been set up in libraries, ready to supply technical information to defense workers.” The Long Branch Public Library offered a variety of pamphlets for civilians interested in defense work, as well as providing a quiet place for soldiers. The library staff found that mathematics and radio were among the most popular subjects. To make things easier for military families, students attending schools at Ft. Monmouth, Ft. Hancock, or Ft. Evans were not required to give their address when applying for a card. Library staff would look up the student’s address on a map.

## The Library Grows

On August 1, 1949, Marjorie Layton became the library director. She was the library’s first professional librarian. Her length of tenure may rival Clarkson’s, as she served as director until mid-1974.

The library blossomed under Layton’s guidance. She was instrumental in the growth of the library, making it a magnet for the community, with circulation almost tripling during her first ten years of service. Some of Layton’s accomplishment included adding a young adult section (Teen Age Korner), a children’s department (Eliza S.

Topping Room), weekly story hour for children, a new large print collection, and a new wing added to the library.

During this time two additions were added to the library. In February of 1962, the library held a ground-breaking ceremony for the new library wing, with construction scheduled to begin in the spring. The year 1963 also brought other innovations to the library. In July, air conditioning was installed in the main library. In September, the South Branch Library opened at the West End School with more than 1000 books. A smaller branch at the Lenna W. Conrow School had opened previously with only 300 books. These short-lived branches of the library are no longer in existence.

In 1974, Marjorie Layton left the post of director of the Long Branch Free Public Library.

## Period of Change

Ann Hewitt was hired to replace Layton. Hewitt's administration, lasted from 1974 to 1987. The 1980s was a period of strife between the library and the city. Library funding by the city came under pressure during a period in which the city experienced a loss of businesses and tax rates. The library formed a Union to fight for library employees. The Library Union later dissolved, but not before the unionization spread to the City. There were marches to Save our Library. The library budget was reduced, with a resultant loss in library hours of operation and staffing reductions. The administration of library personnel was turned over to the City. After Ann Hewitt's departure, the library had at least seven, and possibly as many as twelve directors.

Finally in February 1990, Stephen Russo was hired as library director. He served as director until 1997. More changes took place during these years. Aware of the problems that beset his predecessors, Russo shifted the library's focus to popular reading materials. The Fine Arts Department on the second floor was closed and the art books were integrated into the rest of the collection. The library successfully applied for several grant opportunities. These included an Internet grant, New Jersey Natural Gas Company Grant for public computers, and New Jersey State Library Collection Development Grants for Multicultural Books, for Portuguese and Spanish books and materials and Adult New Readers collection. The library continued to serve a large population of Italian and Irish descent, a Jewish community, an African American community, and an increasing number of Spanish and Portuguese speakers. The library collection became more diversified.

In 1992, the Elberon Library Association agreed to sell the Elberon Library to the city for the nominal sum of \$1.00. The Elberon Library was originally a private subscription library, for the residents of the Elberon section. Upon completion of the contract, the Elberon Library became a branch of the Long Branch Free Public Library. Russo appointed Dennis Stranz to manage the Elberon Branch. The branch flourished and attendance grew. Storytimes were added and hours of operation expanded. The branch eventually opened for five service days.

Russo resigned in 1997 serious lack of funding. Because of Beckerman's dedication and expertise, the future of the library became optimistic, now that the groundwork was built. Beckerman's short, but fruitful term as interim director ended in February 1998, when a new director was found.

### **Friends of the Library**

The first Friends of the Library remained active through the 1960s and dissolved prior to the Russo years. Steve Russo assisted Library Trustee Mary George to establish a new Friends of the Library group in 1994. Friends of the Library continued to grow through 2003. In addition to various fundraising activities, the Friends hold monthly book discussion groups, special programs, and monthly meetings. Some of the program highlights include a storytelling program by Gwendoln Jones, Remembering Woolworth's : a nostalgic history of the world's most famous five-and-dime by Karen Plunkett-Powell, an evening of poetry "Readings for the Millenium", Tea and an Evening with Jane Austen by Austen scholar and librarian Connie Paul, guest author Ida Libby Dengrove, who spoke about her book My Days in Court, guest speaker Mr. Tom Laverty, Curator Twin Lights Historic Site, who presented "New Jersey Lighthouses", Twelve days of terror : a definitive investigation of the 1916 New Jersey shark attacks by Dr. Richard G. Fernicola, and a program about Long Branch, "The Way We Were at the Jersey Shore", by Monmouth County historian and author George Moss, Jr.

### **Modernizing the Library**

In 1998, the Library Board hired Edwin Beckerman as Interim Director. The Library Board kept Beckerman on as library consultant, and he developed a plan to bring the library into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He identified major library needs – the library budget was not adequate; there were serious building facility problems and the library was understaffed. Beckerman immediately began the challenging task of planning to automate the library's collection and upgrading technology available to the public. He accomplished this by applying for several grants, which included an online catalog grant for \$98,925, a Bond Technology Fund grant for \$6,000, an application for government-subsidized 80% discounts for services and technology, and a NJ State Library approved technology plan. Beckerman also researched funding comparisons for libraries statewide, which the subsequent director and the Library Board later used to educate city officials about the library's funding needs. Beckerman stated that he took the position as interim director because he wanted to see if it was possible to turn around a library with

### **Library Automation**

Ingrid Bruck became the director of the Long Branch Free Public Library in February of 1998. Bruck's goal was to implement the grants initiated by Ed Beckerman and to focus library resources to the three problem areas identified as increasing the library budget to an average level, increasing staffing level to average, and resolving library facility maintenance and renovation problems. To this end, she continued with

the multi-stage grant applications Beckerman had begun. In 1998, the library received an Online Catalog Grant for \$98,925 and the first in a series of Bond Technology Fund Grants administered by New Jersey State Library.

In 1998, NJSL awarded LSTA funds to the Long Branch Public Library to implement an automated circulation and online catalog system for \$100,000. The City of Long Branch passed a bond for \$13,000 to automate Elberon Branch Library. At the point that the LSTA grant award was made, the library's budget was \$50,000 in the red. The independent library in the City of Long Branch was in serious danger of closing. During the one year period of online catalog implementation, a ripple effect of support for the library and library services improvements began. The speed of the turn-around reflects the speed of change made possible with technology.

The Library began to receive favorable publicity, increased use, increased funding and community recognition. As library services began to be delivered in a credible manner using new technologies and automation, library service output measures showed increases; and, at the same time, financial support for the library increased. The library developed a healthy and effective library service and a state of the art technology infrastructure. The library continued the leverage on success from modernizing the library. The library has received increased funding support from federal, state, corporate, and local sources. We are received several small and some of significant grants. Bell Atlantic fiber optic cabled the library & installed free T-1 equipment. New Jersey Natural Gas adopted the library as one in five Libraries Online sites in the state to provide high speed internet connectivity to the community. NJNG hired a technology consultant to establish and maintain a LAN and to apply for E-Rate discounts for our library. The Gas company also supplied funds to purchase public internet access PCs, equipment, and furniture. E-Rate discounts for dedicated lines, POTS and other services were awarded and received in Years 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6. The number of library computers increased from 7 to 63. Public computers with high speed internet access increased from 2 workstations to 18. Internet access speed increased from 56K to T-1 with 968 Circuit. Department of State Historical Commission awarded the Library a grant in the amount of \$3,100 for Historic Scrapbook Microfilming. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant for \$49,285 for public computers, content server, and to establish a regional public computer lab. Long Branch has one of the ten regional Gates labs in New Jersey. New Jersey 2003 Council of the Humanities NJ Authors Book Collection Grant. Long Branch is one of 5 libraries in the state to receive the NJCH grant.

The library has been the beneficiary of several collection development grants for New Jersey State Library. State Library awarded a grant of \$10,000 for Special Collection Development of Spanish & Portuguese materials; a State Library grant of \$15,000 for Local History Microfilming; State Library Toys R Us Antitrust Settlement grant in the amount of \$1,400 for children's audiovisual purchases; State Library grant of \$15,000 for Local History Microfilming; State Library grant of \$3,000 for purchase of DVDs; and State Library awarded a grant of \$6,062 to purchase of English as a Second Language Materials for Portuguese and Spanish speaking residents. Technology Bond

Funds administered by State Library were awarded for technology equipment in the amount \$23,500.

Library relations with the city improved, with the result that City Council is now treating the library as any other department of city services. The funding and staffing level of the library in comparison to other poor Abbotts District libraries moved from the lowest quartile (25%) to average (50%) in 2003. Mayor and Council agreed to increase library funding to provide an average budget. The library operating budget increased \$150,000 over a three year period. The library used the increased budget to hire 2.5/FTE staff, restoring staffing to average level and partially restoring the Books & Materials Budget to its 1997 Level. From 1998-2003, the Library Budget increased from \$512,000 to \$896,000. The operating budget has remained flat over this period, with salary and benefits increases considered outside the cap at the city rate of increase by City Council agreement. Retaining salary and benefits increases outside the cap is the main reason the library remains fiscally stable. Salaries and benefits increases have ceased to erode the library operating budget.

The last hurdle to overcome is to fix the two aging library buildings which are in serious need of repair. The Library Trustees hired a Library Consultant, Ed Beckerman and Architect, Faridy Veisz Fraytak to assist in the building project with a price tag of 2.4 Million. Main Library renovation project (21,800 sq. ft.) and addition project (800 sq. ft.) will begin on November 13, 2003 and is due to be completed by December 2004. Main Library is upgrading all mechanical systems, relocating service desks to the center of each floor for better public service, and adding a new front entry, a community meeting room, and a public computer lab. Elberon Branch Library construction began on May 4, 2003 and is scheduled for completion in November 2003. The Elberon project includes renovation (1,800 sq. ft.) and addition (1,000 sq. ft.). Elberon Branch is upgrading all mechanical systems, doubling seating capacity, and adding a new children's program room and a community meeting room.

Major funding for the library building work comes from the City of Long Branch. Long Branch City Council approved capital improvement bond ordinances for \$185,000, \$55,000, 1.2 Million and \$200,000 to repair and maintain the library. Long Branch Public Library received \$383,000 out of the \$45 Million New Jersey Library Construction Bond Funds. An indication of the value the community places on its Library is that \$100,000 was raised from donations by Nathaniel Fishman and Elberon Branch Library supporters. Elberon Branch Library received a \$10,000 New Jersey Legislative Grant sponsored by Senator Joseph Palaia.

In 2004, the Centennial Year of the City, the library is positioned to be part of City of Long Branch Redevelopment. The library has in place a state of the art technology infrastructure, belongs to LMxAC library consortium that provides our circulation system and helps us to keep up with changing technology, is experiencing increased library usage by the community – especially of public computers and the Gates

Computer Lab – and is in the process of restoring the library buildings so that the library can continue are to provide great service to area residents in the future.

Three term Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky spent his childhood at the library – he is the honorary holder of the library’s first automated library card! The library was Pinsky’s second home, providing him with a reading bridge to the world of knowledge. The public library in Long Branch at Main Library and Elberon Branch continues to provide a friendly community meeting place, filled with books, materials and electronic access to information to readers of all ages, in two newly renovated, modernized buildings. With the help of our city officials, we hope to continue to provide good library services and a modern library building for “another” Robert Pinsky in our midst.

By Janet Birkhead & Ingrid Bruck  
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