

THE BUILDING OF THE GRAND VALLEY CARNEGIE LIBRARY (1)

During the fall months of the year 1908, James Reith, at that time Reeve of Grand Valley in the County of Dufferin , was carrying on a weekly correspondence with a certain James Bertram, private secretary to Andrew Carnegie of East 91st Street , New York City . Like many Ontario towns, Grand Valley wanted to take advantage of the wealthy steel magnate's generous philanthropic project, which was providing the necessary funding to build public libraries in cities across the United States and Canada . (2) Of the other Carnegie Libraries in Dufferin County Orangeville's Library was completed in 1906 and Shelburne's was to follow in 1912. Up until 1911 all grants were approved by Carnegie's office in New York and James Bertram dealt with each request personally.

James Reith's initial request to Carnegie in July 1908 for \$15,000 was obviously unrealistic. He soon discovered that there were numerous forms and schedules to be completed for the New York office before any agreement could be reached. In his early letters to Reith, Bertram comes across as a rather feisty and impatient character, not overly tolerant of Reith's more casual responses to his requests for information. "I send the schedule for the third and last time, to have question 9 answered as it is asked". Apparently question 9 asked for a financial commitment from the town council which would guarantee an annual amount they would be prepared to spend on the maintenance of such a library should a grant be made..."you have not given the amount, by which it is perfectly plain, a specific sum annually should be entered". Finally, on February 13th, 1909 a tentative agreement was proposed. "If the city agrees...to maintain a free Public Library at a cost of not less than \$750 a year, and provides a suitable site for the building, Mr. Carnegie will be glad to give \$7,500 to erect a Free Public Library building for Grand Valley".

One might wonder if James Reith realized what he had gotten himself into. Although he was a successful business man and active in local politics (3), he was probably not quite prepared to deal with the overbearing and precise demands from the Carnegie Foundation. And, as Margaret Beckman points out in her history of the Carnegie libraries in Ontario , he was not alone. Bertram's correspondence with Reith's counterparts across the province was irritatingly demanding every step of the way. Every phase in the planning process had to be approved by New York . First of all Carnegie's office submitted guidelines for the planning of such a library building. These appear to have been written in Bertram's usual derisive style – "Architects are liable, unconsciously no doubt, to aim at architectural features and subordinate useful accommodation" and "Another cause of waste space...is when parties attempt to get a Greek temple...and all they want is an entrance..." The final aim of a good plan should be "convenient in arrangement, economical in construction, and into the exterior appearance of which a large variety may be

introduced”.

Soon after the amount of the grant was decided, letters to and from Carnegie’s office came fast and furious. From the outset progress was not smooth. After receiving a set of proposed plans from Reith, Bertram replied bluntly, “The plans will not do... “ground floor is badly arranged”...The second floor is entirely unnecessary”. Apparently the town had asked for the space for a large lecture hall, ideally on a second storey. Bertram’s response to this was in his inimitable style. “A hall 70 ft. by 40 ft. is substantially a ‘town hall’ which will accommodate more than your whole adult population and is not a lecture hall”. (Note: The population of Grand Valley in 1911 was 775.) This attempt to get money for more than a library is summarily dismissed in Bertrams’ letter of April 5th, 1909 . “The plans are not acceptable, inasmuch they give to a music hall as much as all the library accommodation put together”.

After this letter there appears to have been a hiatus in any further planning for about two years, during which time James Reith finished his term as Reeve, eventually becoming the Chairman of the Library Board. And some evidence has come to light that, during that period, the proposals for a new Carnegie Library had met with some opposition. Things were to come to a head soon after negotiations began again - in January 1911. Unaware of rumblings in the little community, Bertram continued to write meticulously about the early plans. “Please do not bild (sic) until you get plans approved “(Feb. 2, 11),”...too much space wasted in lobby and landing, lavatories, toilets...”. Bertram appears to have had little patience with architects – “...there does not appear to be a need for two entrances, which fact of itself shows economy was not considered. What experience has your proposed architect had for bilding (sic) libraries?”

Then on March 13th 1911, a disturbing letter, along with a petition signed by fifteen residents of Grand Valley, was sent to James Bertram in New York, stating that, “this proposed library has been a source of contention in this little village, the majority of the people are opposed to its being built”. The letter also clarified the reason why everything had been put on hold. Two years earlier “they had wanted a library with a Hall overhead and in fact it was for this purpose the grant was really asked for” (just what Bertram had suspected in rejecting the original plan). Other problems were outlined in the letter. The Town Council had not only been unsuccessful in allotting enough money for the cost of annual library maintenance but had failed to purchase a suitable site. A note at the bottom of the petition indicated that the Reeve and the Council were also opposed to receiving the Carnegie grant but were not asked to sign the petition.

Bertram wasted no time in informing Reith of the contents of the letter and the petition and the latter responded promptly with a counterattack. By the end of March he had gathered 132 signatures from the town’s residents along with assurances from the Reeve and Council, who were all ”heartily in a accord with the proposed Free Library to be erected in Grand Valley under the terms of (Carnegie’s) generous grant”. This document was sent directly to Andrew Carnegie with an accompanying letter to Bertram, deploring the uncalled for manner in which “the opponents” voiced their opinions and pointing out

that in several cases their reasons for opposing the grant were personal (e.g. the owner of the property at present occupied by the existing library would lose \$100 in rent). Reith assured Bertram that the whole town Council was working with the Library Board in getting the plans prepared. Furthermore, “the Council has always supported the library liberally in financial matters and are prepared to honour all engagements entered into”. He also stated that the site for the new library had been settled – just north of the business section – and that suitable material would be salvaged from the brick building on the site at the time. This appears to have satisfied the Carnegie Foundation and once again the weekly correspondence with James Bertram in New York resumed.

Detailed planning now began in earnest. First of all Bertram was critical of the proposed site. The location chosen for the new library was to be on the north-east corner of Main and Amaranth Streets. It was, then occupied by the Davy building, constructed of brick some years earlier. It was proposed that the building be torn down and the bricks reused. But Bertram was not at all pleased with this location, literally on the side of a hill. He pointed out that, because of the deep slope of the property, additional money would be needed for adequate foundations.

The next step was to submit the architect’s drawings for Bertram’s scrutiny. George Gray of Harriston had been appointed the architect for the Grand Valley Library. (He had also designed the Carnegie libraries for Mount Forest and Walkerton.) For the design of the Grand Valley building, Bertram had recommended that the Fergus Library be used as a model. He felt that Walter Mahoney, who was the architect for fourteen libraries, including the one in Fergus, would do the “best that can be done with a square building”. The response to Gray’s first submission came back quickly. “You responded that the plans were identical with the Fergus plans which causes the criticism” (April 7th 1911). In this instance Bertram didn’t like the proposed long thoroughfare from the entrance to the delivery desk. He made his case by pointing out that the wasted space resulted in “a bilding (sic) 53 feet deep, whereas the Fergus Library is 41 feet deep”...”If you had exercised the slitist (sic) care in comparing the Fergus plan with yours...you would not have quoted the Fergus plan as a justification”.

Apart from the sarcastic tone of this criticism, Reith, who couldn’t be faulted in spelling, or grammar, must have been mystified by Bertram’s irregular spelling. It is most likely that he was unaware that the simplified spelling of certain words was, in fact, deliberate. Melvin Dewey, a good friend of Carnegie’s, and who was later to become well known for the development of the Dewey Decimal Classification – a cataloguing system adopted by most American and Canadian libraries (and still in use today), - had also, along with Bertram, proposed “to make the English language the common language of the world”. This scheme for a simplified style of spelling held great appeal for Andrew Carnegie and he promoted its use.

In any case, James Reith’s replies to Bertram’s criticism were eminently tactful, but no less resolute in their justification of a larger building. He spent some time in the new Fergus library, talking to staff who were already complaining about the cramped space. He

argued that the Grand Valley proposal was actually only 5 feet longer, as the seven steps inside the front door, which existed in the Fergus plan, were cut out of the Grand Valley plan. Furthermore he pointed out that, like the Orangeville Carnegie Library which also had a long interior thoroughfare, they would be installing heavy matting to cut down on the traffic noise.

Bertram pursued his objection to a long and narrow building by also registering concern about waste space in passageways and stairways. But Reith held firm. After further trips to Fergus, he noted, "...their stack room is so narrow...they can hardly get around the end of the rack", and, "...they were much too cramped". He also argues that a narrow but longer building would suit the lot best; that "a few feet does not add much to the cost, and it makes it a great deal more comfortable inside". Unable to accept Reith's adamant refusal to make changes, Bertram finally submitted the plans to an "architect expert in library planning" and sent back not only the resulting criticism, but, a brand new suggestion for rearranging entirely the accommodation.

In early May Reith took the new plan to his committee and, with gracious thanks, returned to Bertram his own version of the plan with some modifications which included details that he felt would improve the appearance of the interior space. By now Bertram was at the end of this tether. "You must be aware that while preserving an appearance of taking advice, you are rejecting all." ... "...you adhere to your own set ideas in spite of experienced advice."... "...you like appearance...better..."than "economical arrangement and effective (sic) working". Reith offered little in the way of compromise, however, insisting, contrary to Bertram's advice, that the two Reading Rooms be in the front. But he did agree to allow an alternative plan also to be considered and both were submitted to Bertram's office.

On May 31st. a Mr. R.A. Franks, President of the Home Trust Company in Hoboken , New Jersey , and Mr. Carnegie's financial agent, began corresponding with James Reith. It seems that he and Bertram worked in concert in approving the library grants. From this initial letter it appears that Franks was still pushing for Bertram's proposed plan. Whether Franks was more persuasive than Bertram, or whether Reith and his committee were more willing to make compromises, remains unclear. In January 1912 Reith sent a sketch of plans, drawn by the architect, George Gray. This sketch was based on the plan that Franks (and previously Bertram) had found preferable. It showed a building 40 ft. x 50 ft., as Reith wanted, but the entrance was located in the middle of the long side of the building, rather than on the narrow side, thus reducing the length of the thoroughfare from the door to the delivery desk. Then, at long last, in a letter dated from Franks on January 25th, 1912 , the revised plans from Grand Valley were deemed satisfactory. In retrospect one cannot help but think that in choosing a man like Bertram with his rigorous, if irksome, insistence that each library adhere to the strict guidelines set down, Carnegie had been extremely astute. And carrying it through from an office many miles away in New York was no mean feat. The Carnegie libraries, which still can be immediately recognized in town after town across Ontario remain a solid testament not only to Carnegie's vision but to his

secretary's perseverance.

Reith's response to the plan's approval indicated that they wanted to build immediately. By February he was able to anticipate the operating costs of the new library by obtaining figures from the Fergus Library for the year 1911. Heating had cost \$170, electric light \$24.85, the librarian \$200, and the caretaker \$60. Local tenders to tear down and salvage material from the Davey Block were received in late February. George Gray estimated the cost of the construction of the building (\$5,354) early in February and drew up blueprints by early March. Bricks and cement were promised for May from Milton and Toronto respectively and iron beams were ordered from the Canada Foundry Company in Toronto. Tenders for the millwork were received in late March from companies in Orangeville, Hillsburgh and Harriston, as well as Grand Valley. By late spring the necessary roofing supplies (from John Manville in Toronto) and hardware (Hobb's Hardware in London) had all been ordered. Offers to install the hot water system, evestroughing and plumbing were received in June.

With the delivery of supplies of brick, cement, beams and lumber, work on the building began in the summer and continued in to the fall. It appears that the building was all but complete by the end of the year with window and door hardware being installed by November. Not everything proceeded smoothly, however. On February 3rd, 1913, the architect, George Gray, registered his dissatisfaction with the defective floor ("many open joints") and window and door casings. He also noted that plastering in the stairwells had not been completed. At the end of February, because the floors had continued to shrink badly (due to lack of proper kiln drying), he recommended to Reith that the whole of the Reading Room floor be removed and relaid. This was not good news for the Library Building Committee, as it seems it was at this point that the village ran out of money. A further request, for an additional \$1,500, was made to the Carnegie Foundation. At first there was no response, but finally, after repeated requests, Bertram replied in his usual dismissive manner "... (there was an) explicit understanding, stated in letter of Feb. 16th, 1912, that the library was to cost not more than \$7,500 promised...we consider (that) amply sufficient". He found it hard to resist mentioning the "...excessive amount of trouble you have given Mr. Franks and myself in connection with plans...overspent \$1,500 is a striking commentary on the management". That last comment was a low blow. Being hard pressed, James Reith and his committee mounted an active fund raising campaign with concerts and benefits, and the building was completed. In April chairs arrived from Dundas, and a drop curtain for the stage (in the lower hall). Coco matting and window shades were provided by Toronto firms. At the end of May George Gray submitted his final bill charging a total of \$198 for his services.

The new Carnegie Library opened on May 1st, 1913. James McKinley, who had served as librarian while the library was housed in George Tough's building, continued in this role until his death in 1915. Over the succeeding years the office of librarian was filled by William McKinley, Arthur Blair, Marion Hodgson, Mrs. Alex Platt, Mrs. Wilfred Churnside, Mrs. Barb Cox and the present librarian, Shann Leighton.

During the early years, books could be exchanged on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. As the collection expanded, and use increased, the new building served the community well. It remained an object of considerable civic pride, which must have been very gratifying for James Reith. By 1955 after the building was modernized, there were 4,500 volumes in the library and an annual circulation of 2,100.

Use of the building for non-library purposes changed over the years. In its capacity as a community centre many events took place in the space below the library (built in lieu of the second storey lecture hall as originally requested) and became known as “Carnegie Hall”. Seats could be reserved for the many plays and concerts held there and which were accommodated by the large curtained stage. Dances, presentations, the monthly meetings of the Junior Farmers and the Junior Women’s Institute were also regular events. For many years the East Luther Council and Grand Valley Council held their meetings in the large east room of the library. In 1940 Andrew Carnegie registered his objections to this arrangement by pointing out that this was contrary to the original understanding as stated in the provision of the building grant. In fact, after 1947, two small rooms were used by the Health Unit and the Read Cross, and it was many years before all these areas reverted to library use.

Periodically the library was painted inside and out, and in the 1960s new chairs were bought and the large clock repaired. By 1970 circulation had increased to 10,000 volumes a year. A new fan was bought and new lights installed. Books with large print and non-glare pages were purchased for the senior citizen clientele and a 16 mm film service became available. In 1980, after the East Luther Council moved out and the Grand Valley Council moved downstairs, the large east room was converted into a children’s library. This inviting venue was made possible through local donations, several fund-raising activities and a Wintario grant. Further improvements resulted in the opening of a new Resource Centre in 1982, again partly paid for by another Wintario grant. All the old shelving was replaced and the floor refurbished. This centre incorporated new encyclopedias, other reference works, a magazine section and a fine literature section. Two years later more shelving was added in both the children’s and adult section and in that same year the Grand Valley Library became part of the Saugeen Regional Library System which had its headquarters in Kitchener . This opened opportunities for shared resources and staff expertise.

Over the years the Carnegie Library of Grand Valley had seen much change and growth in its valuable service to the community. It was extremely well cared for through the various efforts of its library boards and librarians, and generous local citizens. A solid landmark, no one was prepared for its demise. But on May 31st, 1985 disaster struck. A vicious tornado swept through the town, demolishing many buildings in its path. At 4:27 p.m. (as recorded by the old library clock, which was salvaged, and now resides in the newly constructed library) it struck the library, completely destroying the sturdy brick and stone building. The Carnegie era had come to an end.

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NOTES

1. In 2001, while going through some old papers, Marilyn Stuckey, a long time Grand Valley resident, discovered a pile of old letters and other material, all relating to the planning and building of the Grand Valley Carnegie Library from 1908-1913. These papers provide the basis for this “behind the scenes” history of that undertaking.
2. Andrew Carnegie, a Scottish immigrant, raised in poverty and who went out to work at the age of twelve, came to Pittsburgh in the mid 1800s. Eventually he built up an industrial empire based on the manufacture of steel. It was estimated that by the time he retired he was worth \$400 million. A strong advocate of the concept of “meritocracy”, i.e. Anyone who was smart, through hard work, could be successful, Carnegie also believed that those who had acquired wealth had a moral obligation to give away their fortunes before they died in order to benefit society.

Of the \$333 million he did give away, ninety percent was distributed during his lifetime, much of it to build 2,509 public libraries in the English-speaking world – the United States, UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. He favoured the support of libraries for two reasons, first, that anyone with the right inclination and desire, could educate himself; and, second, that immigrants needed to acquire a cultural knowledge of “America” (i.e. their own country) and this could be done in a library. As quoted in the New York Times in 1903 – “In a public library men could at least share cultural opportunities on a basis of equality”.

In Canada between 1901 and 1971, grants were made to 125 communities for building libraries, 111 in Ontario . These grants totaled \$2,556,660. The “Carnegie formula” stated that all towns who received a gift were to subsidize their library by an annual amount that equaled ten percent of the building’s costs. Many of the Carnegie libraries still stand today, albeit with substantial renovations, and continue to serve their communities well. There is no question that Carnegie, regarded as the “patron saint of libraries” left a valuable legacy across the towns and cities of Ontario .

3. James J. Reith, son of a Scottish immigrant (like Andrew Carnegie) and well known Grand Valley resident, assumed his father’s successful hardware, dry goods and grocery business in 1905, and continued in this vocation until his death in 1925. He was active in local politics, served as Reeve in 1909 and 1910, when he was also the County’s Warden. After his stint as Reeve, he, along with George Tough, chose a site for the new library, and then Mr. Reith undertook the supervision of the planning and building of the library, as chairman of the Library Board. During

his active public life his numerous endeavours included the building of an Agricultural Hall and establishment of a bowling club.

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