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A History of the Montgomery County Public Library
By Jonathan Jeffrey

Known as the “Gateway to the Mountains”, Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, is a lovely town that has done an admirable job of restoring its downtown buildings and preserving its architectural heritage. Its dead citizens have a strategic vantage point looking straight down Main Street from their manicured lawns in Machpelah Cemetery atop a significant promontory. History envelops you in Mt. Sterling; its library also boasts a long and distinguished heritage.

In 1814 the Kentucky General Assembly granted a charter to the Mt. Sterling Library Company, Incorporated. The charter allowed an elected board “to appoint a librarian...to procure a suitable place for keeping the library; to appoint the times for keeping the library open, and taking out and returning books...[and] to levy and collect fines.” The charter also provided details about the board of directors, when the annual report should be made, when elections would be held and how meetings were to be advertised. The legislature granted charters for libraries in a number of Kentucky communities in the ante-bellum period, but few developed beyond the organizational stage. A library was known to exist in Mt. Sterling in the 1860s, but its history was never recorded. The library was known as the Mt. Sterling Athenaeum Library, which was undoubtedly associated with the popular Lyceum movement of the ante-bellum period.¹

Another effort to establish a permanent library for Mt. Sterling occurred by happenstance in 1871 when D.B. Garrison, a Mt. Sterling city judge and journalist, visited Louisville on business and noticed that one of the city’s subscription libraries was selling a collection of books for \$100.² Imagining the use these books might receive in Mt. Sterling and knowing that this was a bargain, Garrison asked that the books be held in

reserve until he could raise the funds to purchase them. He returned to Mt. Sterling and persuaded nine other individuals to join him in purchasing the collection.

The books were shipped to Mt. Sterling, and Richard Apperson, an attorney, offered a room in his office for use as a library. Some of the other young men in the office served as librarians. One of them jocularly noted of the group: “They were a set of young lawyers without any briefs.” (This statement could be taken completely out of context today.) Within a short period the books were moved to the Old Masonic Temple.³ A local lumberman donated the tables and chairs necessary to furnish the room. The library trustees employed Virginia Hanson, the widow of Roger Weightman Hanson a renowned Confederate general, as the collection’s first librarian. When Mrs. Hanson became state librarian, the library was managed by Mary E. Turner.⁴

On 9 April 1878, the Mt. Sterling Library Association was incorporated by the General Assembly.⁵ The collection and number of users grew steadily. This library was basically a subscription library, and we know little about it except for information gleaned from some of the accession stickers that workers placed in books. The earliest stickers indicate that patrons were allowed to check out one book per week, with a penalty of five cents per day accessed after that time. It also required, “Any person injuring or losing a book must replace the same or pay the value thereof.” A later sticker indicates that a “membership ticket” cost \$5.00 and was renewable annually for the same amount. Reading room privileges were a nickel a day, and books were rented for the following time periods and amounts: 25 cents per week, 75 cents per month, and \$2 per quarter. Patrons were allowed to rent only one volume at a time and were required to deposit the price of the book before “renting” it. A later sticker found in one book

indicated the rates for membership had been lowered to \$1.50 per year and that the reading room fee had been abolished.⁶ Patrons were still only allowed to check out one book at a time. Some clever users simply purchased additional subscriptions in order to have the privilege of taking home more than one book. Library hours of operation were erratic at best. Even as late as 1962 the library was open from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. on Monday and Friday; the library was closed on Sunday.

In 1897 Mt. Sterling erected a new city hall, and the library was moved to a room over the fire engine garage. At that time the city appropriated \$200 a year for library operations. Fifty years later, the city increased the amount to \$300 which indicates that the library was not properly funded. In 1906 a significant step was taken in the library's history, when the Mt. Sterling Woman's Club agreed to take over library operations.⁷ This fulfilled a nationwide initiative of the national federation of woman's clubs to foster the development of public libraries as cultural and educational institutions. The library trustees immediately changed from three men to six women.⁸ The Woman's Club yearbooks did not list the library committee as a standing committee until 1910.⁹

Over the next year the ladies busied themselves preparing a catalog of the library's holdings, which numbered over 4000 volumes.¹⁰ The catalog was arranged alphabetically by author. It contained the following categories: Reference, Documents, Essays, Biography, Juvenile, Travel, Bound Magazines, History and Children's. The catalog also listed the library's hours: "From November to April, 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.; From April until November, 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. All the year from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m." The catalog noted that new books could be kept for "ONE WEEK ONLY" and older books "may be

kept two weeks and renewed for one extra week.”¹¹ Non-subscribers could rent books for ten cents, and no books could be exchanged outside the library. Magazines could be taken out only overnight and had to be returned when the library opened the next day. The ladies were proud to list the latest edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* in the catalog. They paid for this title by asking each board member to donate \$4.05 per month for thirteen months. The club also used all excess funds in their coffers at the end of each year to purchase new titles.

In 1930 the city renovated the old city jail and jailer’s residence for the library’s use. The newly remodeled facility was officially opened with a silver tea in June 1931.¹² After the event, a bronze plaque was unveiled which honored the library’s original incorporators from 1878.¹³ The spacious facility included a large room that was used by various civic groups for meetings, for piano recitals and even for small plays and dramatic readings. Patrons did complain about the small bathroom that “you had to back in and out of” and about the deafening siren that sounded when a fire engine left the building. In 1937 a professional librarian cataloged the collection of 9000 volumes.

Over the next few decades the library collection grew, circulation increased, and the facility was used extensively by the community. Despite the flourish of activity at the library, its budget remained static. The library’s regular business was pleasantly interrupted in early 1962, when the community was notified that Mary (Mayme) T. Kennedy, who had died in December 1961, had left her house on West High Street for use as a library. She also left some furniture to be used in the library and some stock in the local Traders National Bank for the library’s benefit. Mrs. Kennedy’s will stipulated that the transition from a house to a library must take place within three years and that the

building must house the library for a minimum of ten years. The library board lost no time. In January they toured the home and began planning the library's move.

Immediately they saw that certain renovations had to be made including the installation of a new lighting system, painting, constructing shelves, renovating an attic area for a club room, improving the driveway and providing parking. At this initial meeting the board also discussed the necessary fundraising drive. The women seemed pleased to announce that this was the first time that fundraising had been required for the library.

Approximately \$25,000 was necessary to transform the attractive early Victorian brick house at 107 West High Street into a respectable library and cover the cost of moving the 17,000 volume collection. The house was a well-built masonry building with large windows and an attractive Colonial Revival porch complete with Ionic columns and a lovely balustrade. In June 1962 the ladies began the fundraising effort by holding an open house at both the old and new library facilities. Local citizens were told that all fundraising would take place locally and that contributions were tax deductible. The board also announced that they would not enter into any contract for renovations until the funds were collected.

Contributions to the effort were appropriately noted in the local newspaper. The total rose slowly as both individuals and groups pondered the importance of the library to the community. The local Rebekah Lodge was one of the first major contributors, promising \$50 every six months until their pledge of \$200 was reached. By August 1962 the board announced that half of the funds had been raised. Less than a month later the board decided to undertake a house-to-house canvas for contributions. By October local

contractor, Homer Kemplin, was tearing out walls and adding others for shelving, eliminating certain windows, and planning the new lighting system.

The library officially opened on 9 May 1963. Knowing that expectations were high for the new facility and its outreach programs, the city increased its share of the library funding from \$600 to \$1600 annually. The board thought they were in heaven, but inflation quickly eroded this windfall. Book and subscription prices gradually increased and rose precipitously in the 1970s. By 1979 it was apparent that Mt. Sterling couldn't expect an outstanding or even adequate library without more funding. On 20 July 1979 the library board discussed a meeting held with the county judge, the mayor, Ellen Hellard from the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives (KDLA) and the regional librarian from Flemingsburg. The board expressed some concern about establishing a taxing district, the most common method for funding public libraries in the state.

The group finally agreed to accept a demonstration project grant, which utilized federal money administered by KDLA. Grant monies would be used to demonstrate the types of library services that could be made available and sustained if a taxing district was established. The professional services and expertise provided, which included a bookmobile, persuaded local citizens and leaders that a taxing district was the least burdensome way to provide library services to the greatest number of people. The district was established in 1981, assessing a property tax of .03 cents per \$100 on real property. By this time, leaders were already looking towards a new building. The property on West High Street had been a blessing when given, but it had not been designed specifically for library use.

The new services offered through the library had significantly increased patron statistics and indicated the need for a new facility and more staff. In 1980 only 600 people were regular library patrons; by 1983 the number was near 5,000. In the same period circulation increased from 6,000 to 100,000 items annually. The collection had also grown to 20,000 volumes. In 1983 it was announced that the city had received a \$350,000 matching grant from KDLA that was funded by the Library Services and Construction Act. To facilitate the construction of a new building, the Montgomery County Library District Construction Corporation was established. A suitable piece of property, consisting of three lots between West Main and West Locust streets was deemed adequate and convenient for a library. The $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre piece of property also allowed for the possibility of some future expansion. Mt. Sterling's Board of Zoning Adjustments approved the plan with no public objections. Six buildings had to be razed, including a log house.¹⁴

The corporation hired Chrisman, Miller, Woodford, Incorporated of Lexington as the architect, and Chenault Woodford did the design work. Walker Construction won the bid to serve as the project's general contractor. The new 7,000 square foot building included a reading room, rest rooms, processing and office space, a kitchen, storage space, and a community room. The building's dedication occurred on 30 September 1984 at 2:00 p.m. with Larry Hopkins, United States Representative for the 6th District, serving as guest speaker. The Mt. Sterling Woman's Club graciously provided a reception afterwards. The event also served as an unofficial changing of the guard. After 75 years, the Woman's Club was no longer responsible for the library's operation.

The Montgomery County Public Library has remained at its present location since 1984. It has continued to upgrade its collection, automate the catalog, expand its special collections, host numerous community groups, increase programming for children, youth and adults, participate in literacy efforts, and serve as an education and cultural resource for the community. In a historical article about the library that was published in 1962, the writer who was a long-time library board member, noted: “We hope to live up to the confidence reposed in us by those pioneers of long ago.” She was referring to those men who initially established the library in 1871, those Woman’s Club members who had steadfastly supported and boosted the collection since 1906, and to city fathers who had financially supported the effort. Undoubtedly their confidence had not been misplaced.¹⁵

¹ *Kentucky Act*, 1814 (Frankfort: Gerard & Berry, 1815): 285-288. The original incorporators were Thomas Moseley, David Barrow, George Howard, Micajah Harrison and William Hayden. For an excellent article on Kentucky’s ante-bellum community libraries see Haynes McMullen’s “Social Libraries in Ante-Bellum Kentucky,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, vol. 58, no. 2 (April 1960): 97-128.

² Garrison was a leader in Mt. Sterling’s Christian Church and served for a number of years as the editor of Mt. Sterling’s *Sentinel-Democrat*.

³ The Masonic Lodge was eventually purchased by the Odd Fellows.

⁴ Roger Weightman Hanson, a native of Clark County, was mortally wounded at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, on 2 January 1863 and died on 4 January 1863. His body was moved from Nashville to Lexington in 1866. *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Kentucky* (Cincinnati: J.M. Armstrong & Co., 1878): 557-558. Orphan Brigade Kinfolk Records, Kentucky Library, WKU.

⁵ *Acts of Kentucky*, 1877-1878, vol. 2 (Frankfort: S.I.M. Major, 1878): 474-475.

⁶ This information was gleaned from various stickers found in special collections books owned by the Montgomery County Public Library.

⁷ The Mt. Sterling Woman's Club was organized with fourteen charter members in 1895 and joined the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs in 1897. The women wrote a tough set of bylaws. Although this information goes beyond the scope of this article, I've included Article IV for the amusement of everyone who has set in meetings that were poorly conducted. Wouldn't that be all of us? "No regular meeting shall exceed 2 ¼ hours in length. No paper shall consume more than 15 minutes in the reading without the permission of the Club; and, in the discussion that follows a paper, no member shall speak more than 3 minutes at a time without the permission of the club. Any member more than 10 minutes late shall be fined five cents, unless excused for good cause by the President." Article VI reminded members: "Any member who does not perform the duty assigned her shall be fined (unless excused by the President) fifty cents for the first offense, one dollar for the second, and shall lose her membership for the third."

⁸ The six female trustees were Mrs. Charles H. Bryan, Chairman, Mrs. Howard R. French, Mrs. James Kennedy, Miss Mary E. Turner, Miss Elizabeth W. Apperson, and Mrs. Thomas B. Rodman. Mrs. Bryan served as chairman for twenty years, and Mrs. Rodman served as Treasurer until her death, a total of forty-four years.

⁹ The Montgomery County Public Library owns a significant collection of the Mt. Sterling Woman's Club yearbooks and minutes of their meetings.

¹⁰ The Montgomery County Public Library owns one copy of this tattered but valuable historical document.

¹¹ Older books were considered to be six years old or older.

¹² Silver teas were once popular fundraising events. Silver tea services and trays were used for the receptions, but the name was also derived from a small basket or tray that was placed at the end of the table where people could deposit "silver" or folding money.

¹³ The plaque read: "Erected in honor of Lewis Apperson, county judge; W.H. Bain, merchant; H.R. French, city judge; D.B. Garrison, city judge; James D. Hazelrigg, judge, Court of Appeals; E.B. Richardson, physician; W.T. Tibbs minister, Christian Church, and A.B. White, lawyer."

¹⁴ *Montgomery News*, 22 December 1982.

¹⁵ *Mt. Sterling Advocate*, 7 March 1962.