Western Kentucky University
TopSCHOLAR®

DLSC Faculty Publications | Library Special Collections

10-1-2009

Looking Back: Letters of Persuasion: Posturing for a Carnegie Library in Middlesboro

Jonathan Jeffrey
Western Kentucky University, jonathan.jeffrey@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fac_pub

Part of the Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons, Library and Information Science Commons, and the Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons

Recommended Repository Citation
Jeffrey, Jonathan. (2009). Looking Back: Letters of Persuasion: Posturing for a Carnegie Library in Middlesboro. *Kentucky Libraries*, *73* (4), 28-32.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fac_pub/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in DLSC Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact connie.foster@wku.edu.

Kentucky Libraries, vol. 73, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 28-32.

Looking Back

Letters of Persuasion: Posturing for a Carnegie Library in Middlesboro

by Jonathan Jeffrey

Marshall McLuhan expostulated an important information theory that applies to most historical, quantitative, and analytical research: Data accumulation leads to pattern recognition. By collecting data, the researcher ascertains patterns related to the subject and can possibly determine the causes of those patterns. Historians often collect a large mass of information that is ultimately reduced down to a few pages and occasionally down to only a couple of sentences. In preparing an article for this column about the history of the Carnegie Library in Middlesboro, Kentucky, the author found himself eliminating vast amounts of data that was in itself interesting but of necessity had to be synthesized and minimized.

Part of this research data included the request letters sent to Andrew Carnegie and his staff requesting a library for Middlesboro. These letters exist for almost every Carnegie library ever built and include information about a city's population, the area's cultural and educational institutions, and local government dynamics. In addition, the writers often appeal to Carnegie's largesse, declare—no matter how tenuous—a link with Scottish heritage (Carnegie had immigrated to the United States from Scotland), demonstrate associations with important political and cultural leaders or movements, and reveal the community's ties to industries which interested Carnegie such as steel production or coal mining. These letters inevitably introduce a figure of regional or national importance—if not the letter writer himself—that supports the building of a library in a particular community. The following letters written by prominent

Middlesboro citizens are representative of the correspondence sent by community leaders across North American who sought libraries for their respective communities.

These letters are almost always written by prominent community leaders. A community might conceivably leveraged more support for its library campaign if it had supporting letters from those who might actually benefit from utilizing the facility such as a child, a coal miner, a recent immigrant, or a struggling clerk. The self-made "King of Steel" could have empathized with the writer of such a letter. Carnegie chose the public library as the venue to distribute his fortune, because he believed that this institution afforded the best opportunity to impact lives for the better. He described the library as a great equalizer, a place where those less fortunate had equal opportunity to educate themselves and to subsequently improve their position in society. "They [libraries] only help those," Carnegie asserted, "that help themselves. They never pauperize. They reach the aspiring, and open to these the chief treasures of the world—those stored in books. A taste for reading drives out lower tastes" (Jeffries 22).

The following five letters are presented, because they are typical of the solicitation letters received by Andrew Carnegie and his secretary James Bertram. They are unedited; the author has not corrected spelling, grammar, or punctuation. The letters come directly from the archives of the Carnegie Corporation held by Columbia University.

Joe F. Bosworth (1866-1941) was the author of the first letter to Mr. Carnegie in support of the Middlesboro library cause. At the time Bosworth was the new state Senator from the Bell County area, having been elected after a term in the Kentucky House of Representatives. Bosworth later served two terms in the State Senate and four

terms in the House and in 1920 was elected as the first Republican Speaker of the House. A Progressive politician, Bosworth is best known for his support of the "Good Roads" movement in Kentucky, but in this letter he throws his support to a library for Middlesboro. By identifying himself as "Chairman of Committee," Bosworth indicates that this was a concerted effort and not a unilateral appeal.

Middlesborough, Ky.
March 30, 1908

Mr. Andrew Carnegie
New York City, N.Y.

Dear Sir:

The citizens of Middlesborough are very anxious to take advantage of your generous and magnanimous proposition to the public in general and get you to establish a Carnegie Library in Middlesborough. No place on earth needs one more than they do in that City. Being a City of about 7,000, away in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky and out of touch with the advantages of places of her size. Would be glad for you to give us the terms upon which you would lend us your generosity in our direction.

Yours very truly,

Joe F. Bosworth
Chairman of Committee (Bosworth to Carnegie 30 March 1908)

Bosworth asked Charles I Dawson (1881-1969), a lawyer with the Middlesboro firm of Rhorer, Ainsworth & Dawson and a member of the local school board, to write James Bertram, Mr. Carnegie's secretary, relative to details about the community. No doubt the Carnegie organization had answered Bosworth's short letter with questions about Middlesboro. These reply letters sent by Bertram universally ask for population

statistics, as the amount of the grant often depended on the community's size. It was not uncommon for Bertram to ask questions about the community's racial makeup and if the library would provide service to African Americans. It was also not uncommon for community members to exaggerate their community's size which is revealed in these Middlesboro letters. Dawson served as Bell County Attorney from 1910 to 1920 when he was elected Kentucky's Attorney General. He eventually moved to Louisville and was the unsuccessful Republican gubernatorial candidate in 1923. From 1925 to 1935 he served as a federal judge and was later the unsuccessful Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate in 1950. He began his public life on the municipal level, serving on the school board and as a capable member of "the committee."

Middlesboro, Ky.
May 23rd, 1908

James Bertram, Secretary
New York City

Dear Sir:

As a member of the Board of Education of the City of Middlesborough, Kentucky, I have been asked by Mr. Bosworth to write you a letter relative to his appeal for assistance from Mr. Carnegie in building a library in this city.

In order that Mr. Carnegie may fully understand the facts relative to this appeal, I will briefly state the facts about our little city, and the class of people a free library in this city would reach.

We are in the center of a coal mining district, and the city is just new in its youth, being only about 10 years old. We have a great many citizens of education in our city, but the majority of the older citizens are of the same class found throughout the Kentucky

mountains, rather illiterate, but desiring the best that can be had for their children. We have a population of about 5500 in the corporate limits, and out of that 5500, we have over 1900 school children. The city administration is taking a very active interest in education, giving us all the funds we have need for, and encouraging us in every way. We have a splendid school building for the white children, erected last year at a cost of $20,000, and we are now erecting a $15,000 school building for the colored children of the town.

We can furnish a site equal to any in our city for the erection of the library. This site will be on one of the principle streets of the city, and is centrally located, and fee simple title will be made to same to any one that Mr. Carnegie may designate, or if he desires, it will be deeded to a Board of Librarians.

While we can not just yet make this assurance, we believe that we can get the city to give us each year not less than $2500 to pay all necessary expenses incident to keeping up the library.

If Mr. Carnegie will indicate to us what his intentions are in the matter, we will immediately canvass this subject and report to him.

We wish to further state that while there are no wealthy people in our city, all of them being small businessmen, and laborers, we think it possible from time to time to get considerable revenue for the use of the library from private subscriptions, but we hope Mr. Carnegie will not require a certain amount in advance, for we doubt if it can be secured.

I wish to state in conclusion that I do not know of any place in all of Eastern Kentucky where a library is more needed than in our little city, and it is my sincere belief

that in assisting us to secure one, Mr. Carnegie will be adding another worthy charity to the long list which now grace his name.

Very truly yours,

Charles I. Dawson (Dawson to Bertram 23 May 1908)

William E. Gunn (1864-1938), Superintendent of Railroads and Mines for the Hignite Coal Mining Company, authored the next letter sent to Carnegie. It is the only handwritten letter from Middlesboro. Like so many other letters sent to Carnegie, Gunn appealed to his interests in the coal and iron industries for support. The Hignite Coal Mining Company (later the Chenoa-Hignite Coal Mining Company) operated a large mine at Hignite in Bell County complete with a company camp, but its principal office was actually located in Covington, Kentucky.

July 28, 1908

Mr. Andrew Carnegie
New York City

Dear Sir:

I would respectfully petition you in your munificent distribution of Public Libraries to consider the needs and merits of the City or Middlesborough, Ky.

This City has about 6,000 population and is the center for an additional mining population of 6000 more, living on the spur railroad of the L&N R.R. from the this point, which develops 20 coal mines with an output of nearly 2,000,000 tons a year, all of the outlying population being within 6 miles and accessible to no other town.

I am intimately acquainted with Mayor Emil S. Helburn and other authorities of the City and can aid in securing the fulfillment of the conditions attending such a gift.

That the existing prosperity of this City and its future success is identified with the coal and iron industries should appeal to you for favorable consideration.

Yours truly,

W.E. Gunn (Gunn to Carnegie 28 July 1908)

The last two letters, sent three years after the library campaign in Middlesboro had started, are more detailed in their history of the coal town and more sentimental in their attachment to the community. These letters were written by older gentlemen who are seeking greater prosperity for an area that they had grown to love. They were both associated with the extractive industries that proliferated in that section. John Ralston was the president of the Ralston Coal Company and the Stony Fork Coal Company. In his letter, he associates himself with Carnegie as a fellow Scot, an immigrant to the United States, a tireless worker in the coal and steel industry, and as a man interested in the future of his family. The letter from Alexander Arthur (1846-1912) is the most telling of all, brimming with historical information about the settlement of the region and Middlesboro's unique heritage as a planned city. Indeed, Arthur is considered the father of Middlesboro and his home now serves as the community's visitor center. He died shortly after he wrote this appeal letter to Carnegie. It was not uncommon for the Carnegie grant process to take several years. Many library committees became easily frustrated with Bertram's requests for information or could not secure sustained municipal appropriations for library maintenance, one of Carnegie's grant stipulations. The movement was often re-initiated later by woman's clubs.

April 17, 1911

Mr. Andrew Carnegie
New York City

My Dear Sir:

I am deeply interested in the establishment of a Public Library in this city, and I am hoping that the gift for such a purpose may come from your beneficent hand. My reasons for this is two-fold: first, I am now in the evening of life, and my family of children, grandchildren and great grandchildren number thirty-six, and I would feel exceedingly happy to know, before I die, that they shall have the blessings of a first class public library for themselves and their posterity. Second, I was born near Glasgow, Scotland in 1831, and it would give my heart great delight to know that the donor of so generous and splendid a gift is from my own Dear Scotland.

I emigrated to this country with my father James Ralston in 1837 and located n Pennsylvania. My father was the first to make iron with anthracite coal at the Pioneer Furnace at Pottsville, Pa., and afterwards built the Danville Twin Furnace and ran them for a number of years and then built the Irondale Furnace at Bloomsburg, Pa., and ran them until his death.

After my father's death I built the Rolling Mills at Tamaqua, Pa., and ran them for some twenty five years, then ran the Montour Mills at Danville and then had charge of the Lochiel Rolling Mills at Harrisburg, Pa., and from there came to this place opened the first mine and shipped the first coal from this part of Kentucky, and have been in the coal business here ever since, and also have five sons in the coal business here.

Many of our countrymen live here, in fact the city was founded by Scottish and English Capitalists, and our population is largely made up of Scotch, Irish and English.

We shall, therefore, have great personal pride in a library donated by one of our countrymen—a man whose fame is universal as the greatest business genius and the greatest benefactor the world has ever produced—Andrew Carnegie.

Our city government and our citizens are all anxious not only to have a "Carnegie Library", but to have one whose architecture, within and without, shall be the pride of every citizen, be he Scotch, Irish, English or native American, and which shall be a lasting monument to the donor, and a worth tribute to his memory.

Trusting that when I lay me down to pass over the river, I may have the pleasure of knowing that my posterity will perpetuate in sweet memory the love and admiration I have always borne for my native land, by pointing with pride to this magnificent Library, and telling their children and their children's children, whose benevolent gift it was, and with the kindest regards of an ardent admirer and fellow countryman, I beg to remain,

Most sincerely yours,

John Ralston
President, Ralston Coal Company (Ralston to Carnegie 17 April 1911)

April 18, 1911

Mr. Andrew Carnegie
New York City

My Dear Mr. Carnegie,

I have been requested to write a letter to you, stating the reasons why I think one of your world-renowned and world-benefitting Libraries should be located in this city. I take great pleasure in complying with this request for many reasons. Principally, that I had the privilege of being the instrument, in God's hands, to start the development of Railroads, Coal, Iron, Timber and its numerous industries, in this District, which

culminated in the birth of The City of Middlesborough—for unlike most places, it was born a "City."

Some Twenty-five years ago, when prospecting in this vicinity with some Scotchmen, with whom I was associated in a lumber development in North Carolina. I discovered the Coal and iron in this neighborhood. The District was quite isolated, and with no railroad connection, although it is of historical knowledge, that even as far back as Lincoln's time, he had expressed the opinion to his Cabinet that through Cumberland Gap was the logical and most direct connection between the North and the South. However, for fully Twenty-five years after his prophetic statement, no action was taken to produce the much needed opening by rail through these Mountains. As the grand possibilities and opportunities for a wonderful development burst upon my consciousness, I conceived the idea of going to England and interesting Capital to take up the matter. As a result, experts were sent over here, and such world-renowned men as Jeremiah Head, and Jacob Higson gave most favorable reports of the quality and quantity of the Iron, Coal and Timber contained in these Mountains. The result was the formation of The American Association of Great Britain, of which I had the honor of having charge of the American Management; this Company being the parent company of many subsidiary companies, including the Middlesborough Town Company.

The growth of the City from the beginning was phenomenal, and everything was most promising, and pointed to permanency, until the Baring Brothers' failure in London, which caused a collapse here, as all of the capital was coming from G.B. [Great Britain] At that time, I lost all of my interests here, and shortly after was obliged to leave this part of the Country to endeavor to retrieve my lost fortune.

During the days of prosperity here, this place was visited by such men as Lowthian Bell, Sir James Kitson, The Late Duke of Marlborough and many others of equal importance from various parts of the world. It was largely through the reports of such men, that their friends made investments here. For some years the City suffered a serious reversal of its first wonderful prosperity, and many of the once prominent citizens were obliged to seek their livelihood elsewhere, as I was. But there were many who nobly stuck to the almost lifeless City, and did the best they could to encourage each other and uphold the honor of Middlesborough. To these loyal ones all honor is due for their faithfulness and courage. While the City was for a while practically prostrated, still the work of mining coal went on and is still going on and in greater quantities, and never has the quality or abundance of those minerals been questioned, or fallen from the high standard that was given them by the original experts.

After an absence of nearly Fifteen years, with only one or two visits of a few days each, I returned last November to this City seeking a restoration of health. I was amazed and delighted to find the wonderful changes that had taken place during my absence. The City, which was originally laid out with much care, and on the highest and most scientific lines for city building, I found with many well paved streets, churches of nearly every denomination, a fine Masonic Temple, a handsome Elks' Home, and other benevolent organizations, numerous and artistic homes, and most important of all, fine schools for both white and colored students. The present school building for white children accommodates over One Thousand children and will be added to this summer to double its capacity. The City Government is most progressive and up-to-date, and two really live news papers help in every way possible to benefit the City. The latest departure is "The

Womans' Club of Middlesborough", which has recently been formed with the prize object of acting as a "City Beautiful League", and has gone actively to work to bring out the very cleanest and most beautiful city in Kentucky.

This City is the center of a very rich and comparatively virgin country, and is drawing settlers in from all directions, and has all the natural resources to make it a large city, and a most important educational center. It already has a reputation for its high standard of schools and it is in the greatest need of a large "Public Library", and I feel that no place in The United States is more needing and more deserving of your marvelous generosity and public spirited philanthropy, in the donating of one of your beautiful libraries, than the "Magic City" of Middlesborough, Kentucky.

Trusting that you will give the matter of this donation careful consideration, and with kindest regards personally, I have the honor to remain,

Very Sincerely Yours,

Alexander Alan Arthur (Arthur to Carnegie 18 April 1911)

WORKS CITED

Arthur, Alexander Alan Letter to Andrew Carnegie. 18 April 1911. Carnegie Corporation of New York Collection. Columbia University, New York. (Hereafter referred to as Carnegie Collection.)

Bosworth, Joe F. Letter to Andrew Carnegie. 30 March 1908. Carnegie Collection.

Dawson, Charles I. Letter to James Bertram. 23 May 1908. Carnegie Collection.

Gunn, W. E. Letter to Andrew Carnegie. 28 July 1908. Carnegie Collection.

Jefferies, Zanne. "Instant Landmarks," *Kentucky Humanities* (April 2006): 21-27.

Ralston, John Letter to Andrew Carnegie. 17 April 1911. Carnegie Collection.