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A Bumpy Ride: The Story of Opening Owensboro's Carnegie Library

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On 24 March 2006 a groundbreaking was held for the new Daviess County Public Library at 2020 Frederica Street, the city's busiest thoroughfare. As people recounted the valiant efforts over the past decade to adequately fund the library, they probably did not realize that their predecessors fought just as courageously nearly one hundred years ago to open Owensboro's Carnegie Library just a few blocks down Frederica. The opening of the Carnegie Library commenced a new era of library service in Owensboro, a city that, like many other Kentucky communities, had provided these services with varying degrees of success and with little longevity.

Owensboro's library development was not unlike that experienced by many cities of similar size across the country. One of the first pieces of evidence related to library service in this Ohio River community is found in an 1879 Owensboro newspaper which applauded the recent establishment of a library "as a step in the right direction," but the journalist bemoaned the fact "that the reading people of Owensboro have so few facilities for gratifying their taste. The possession of good libraries by many of our citizens, by no means supplies the want. Hundreds of our people, who cannot afford the luxury of large libraries thirst after the knowledge they contain, and no one should withhold his energy in ministering to such a want." The writer concluded: "It is, therefore, in the interest of all that we should have an extensive, varied and well selected library in our midst. Nothing would more conduce to the happiness of the aesthetic, and nothing would do more to elevate the popular taste and educate the coming citizens." This subscription library was supported by "stockholders" and was accessible only to paid subscribers. The Kentucky

General Assembly granted charters to dozens of subscription libraries; a number of these were never even organized, and those that did had notoriously short lives. ("Library" 2)

Another mention of library services in Owensboro was found in an 1892 *Courier-Journal* article that applauded the efforts of local citizens in several communities related to the development of libraries. The journalist begrudgingly admitted the Commonwealth's lack of library services, when he wrote: "Like most Kentucky towns and cities, nearly all of them in fact, Owensboro is wholly unprovided for in this respect." ("Out" 4) Perhaps this nascent movement led to the organization of the Owensboro Library Association, which in 1901 published a catalog of its holdings. It too was a subscription library with an annual "reading membership" of $1 and a "stockholder's membership" of $2. The catalog listed approximately 700 titles which leads one to conclude that the Association had been in operation for at least a few years. Although little is know about the library's operation, the "Rules" listed in the catalog gave the librarian totalitarian authority. "Members of the Library," the "Rules" noted, "are not to pass within the space set apart for the librarian and her assistants." The "Rules" further stipulated that, "No person, save the librarian and her assistants, will be permitted to handle the books while they are being distributed." These rules also seem to indicate that the library had been in operation long enough for the librarian to identify certain troublesome issues and to hopefully preclude them. (Catalogue [1])

Just one year after the Owensboro Library Association published its catalog, W.G. Archer, the superintendent of Owensboro's Seven Hills Chautauqua and Secretary of the local Business Men's Association, wrote to Andrew Carnegie "in the interest of a public library for the city of Owensboro." Like most appeal letters to Carnegie, Archer's letter

contains pertinent and perfunctory information about the city as well as a glamorized listing of the community's amenities. Archer noted that Owensboro was "on the Ohio River…a manufacturing city…with a population of 18,000…having its own city park, and electric system, with perhaps the largest number of churches and banks of any city of equal population in the state." He asserted that Owensboro "is in every way, save upon the exception of [a] library, an up to date town." (Archer to Carnegie 4 April 1902)

A concerned cadre of Owensboro citizens also sent letters to substantiate Mr. Archer's request. The group had done their research, talking with library supporters in nearby Henderson and Paducah which both had Carnegie libraries already. Thus they were aware of Mr. Carnegie's requirements for communities who desired a library grant. First, the community had to furnish a suitable building lot which must be free from debt. Second, the municipality, or in some cases the local board of education, had to, by ordinance, guarantee to subvent the library's maintenance in the amount of 10% of the total funds donated. For example, if Carnegie gave a city $50,000 to build a library, the community had to provide a $5,000 annual appropriation for the maintenance and operation of the facility.

Andrew Carnegie, who made his fortune in the steel industry, was a planner. He wanted to make sure that the investment he made in hundreds of American communities was safe, thus he required towns to do more than pledge financial support; he wanted it enacted into city code. Through Carnegie's largesse, nearly 1700 libraries were erected in the United States. Only 27 Carnegie libraries were constructed in Kentucky using grants that totaled $896,800. The Commonwealth must hang its head in shame when officials from Indiana brag about possessing 96 Carnegie libraries. 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." (Jefferies 22)

For some unknown reason, Mr. Archer did not receive a reply from Carnegie after his initial letter, so he wrote again in August 1903 to inform the philanthropist that the city had appropriated "$3500 per year by ordinance" to support a library. Archer ended his letter by entreating: "May we not hear from you on this question as soon as possible." (Archer to Carnegie 24 August 1903) Right before Thanksgiving, Archer received a letter from James Bertram, Carnegie's secretary, suggesting that a grant application form be filled out. Archer graciously submitted an application and in his accompanying letter noted that Owensboro had "one or two first-class circulating libraries containing from 1500 to 2000 volumes housed in rented rooms that will be turned over to the city if Mr. Carnegie is kind enough to help us provide the Library building which we so much desire." (Archer to Bertram 14 November 1903)

A flurry of correspondence then ensued between Archer and Bertram clarifying the conditions required for a grant to be made. Bertram refused to accept the ordinance passed by the City Council in July 1903, because Mr. Carnegie's final offer was for $30,000 not $35,000 as stipulated in the ordinance. He also noted that the ordinance predated the offer, thus it was extralegal. The Owensboro library supporters had believed

that they could preclude much of the busy work necessary to obtain a grant, but they found out that granting agencies can be very exacting since they hold the purse strings. In utmost obsequious tones, Archer apologized "for having caused any unusual trouble in the matter" and arranged to have the City Council pass another ordinance stating "That the sum of $3000 stipulated by Mr. Carnegie…is hereby set aside annually forever…for the maintenance of the public library." The ordinance further stipulated that the city would provide a lot for the library and stated that the new library "shall be known as the Carnegie Public Library of Owensboro." (Ordinance 18 November 1903)

At this point state statute allowed Mayor Martin Yewell to appoint a Library Board of Trustees, but Mr. Archer was not selected. Archer, an early library advocate, was now out of the picture. In March 1904, George W. Triplett, an attorney and Secretary of the new Board of Trustees, wrote James Bertram asking for duplicate copies of all previous correspondence, as Mr. Archer had not turned that over to the new board. According to local sources the library soon became a mute issue, because the city did not appear willing to furnish a lot where the library could be built. (Triplett to Bertram 14 March 1904)

All appeared gloomy on the library front, until the city school superintendent, McHenry Rhoads, presented Mr. Carnegie with a new proposal to build the library as an annex to the new high school. Rhoads asked Carnegie to proffer $50,000 to which the school system would add $25,000 for "the purpose of erecting a High School and Library…to be known as the Carnegie High School and Library." (Rhoads to Carnegie 19 September 1905) This and subsequent requests made by the Superintendent were refused. In his last denial letter to Rhoads, Bertram clearly stated: "Mr. Carnegie is sorry but he

cannot make any alterations in what he agreed to do for Owensboro in the matter of a Library Building." Bertram, who acted for Carnegie, was not going to allow a substitution. In his mind the project was settled. (Bertram to D.M. Griffith 16 November 1905) Owensboro would have to follow through on its original commitment. Although the plan never was completely forgotten, no significant action was taken on the issue for three more years.

As with many public improvements, the impetus needed to put the library movement back into motion came from the women of the community. In March 1908 the Owensboro Woman's Club was organized, and it adopted as one of its chief goals the building of the new library. After finding out that the chief roadblock to the project was finding a suitable lot, the ladies set about raising the funds necessary to purchase a piece of land at the corner of Frederica and Ninth streets. With private donations and with receipts from "entertainments", the Woman's Club purchased the Frederica Street lot for $3,297.12 from the Trustees of the Walnut Street Baptist Church. This action on the part of the Woman's Club forced the new mayor, W.M. O'Bryan to appoint another library board, which interestingly include two women. George M. Triplett was the only member appointed that had served on the earlier board.

Triplett was directed in April 1908 to inform James Bertram that a lot had been secured for the library and to ask if Mr. Carnegie's offer was still valid after five years. Bertram confirmed that the offer still stood, but the city had to provide legal confirmation that the title to the building lot was clear, that the city had formally accepted the piece of property, and that once again the city would pledge $3000 annually for the library's operation and maintenance. The city council voted to accept the gift unanimously. One of

the councilmen attending that evening and voting in the affirmative was Stinson Lambert, a Democrat, who will soon become the library's chief adversary. A local paper noted: "The amount contributed is expected to pay all the running expenses of the library for several years, and the council is not expected to be compelled to increase their contribution for a number of years." ("Carnegie Library" 3)

Within three weeks after the city approved the project, a credit line for $25,000 was available to the library's board to initiate the project. In late January 1909 the board met to consider design plans for the facility. "There is a determination," noted the local paper, "on the part of the board to make no mistake in the matter of selecting good plans and those that will give such distinction to the building that it will advertise Owensboro most favorably and mark beautiful Frederica Street." The board's deliberations about the building's layout are not available, but the local paper did alert the public that members contemplated "that a lecture or entertainment hall will be provided…which can be rented on certain occasions so that a considerable revenue can be gotten in this way." ("To Consider" 2)

Secretary Triplett had already corresponded with James Bertram asking about designs and if the architect's fee could be taken out of the $30,000 grant. These were common questions, and the Carnegie organization had already issued a pamphlet entitled "Notes on the Erection of Library Buildings," which assisted community library boards and architects in the design process. The "Notes" insisted on an open plan which featured a centrally located check-out desk with reading rooms on either side. The Librarian was consequently able to occupy the preeminent spot in the library and thus oversee the needs of her workers and patrons. The open plan allowed patrons to browse the stacks and

retrieve their own books as opposed to the old notion of closed stacks; it also promoted equal treatment of women as they were not relegated to separate reading rooms. Children might have their own reading room, but the open plan allowed them to have free access to most of the library. Subscription libraries were particularly notorious for banning pre-adolescent children.

The Carnegie organization also had definite ideas about the style of architecture used for libraries. Although not restricted to the Classical Revival style that included elements from Greek and Roman architecture, the Carnegie organization certainly seemed to favor this style and many libraries benefiting from Carnegie's largesse resembled small temples of knowledge that symbolically opened its doors to conquer ignorance in each respective community. The Owensboro board need only travel one county over, to Henderson, to see that community's Greek Revival Carnegie Library which was built in 1904. "When building a Carnegie library, communities intended to construct a library of such distinction that it would become an instant landmark," asserted one author. (Jones 54) Indeed fourteen of the original twenty-seven Kentucky Carnegie libraries are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. (Jefferies 24)

The lot on which the Owensboro Carnegie Library was to be erected did present some issues for the architect. The lot size was 55x128 feet, with the short side fronting busy Frederica Street. Setbacks and other space limitations narrowed the façade even more. The architect had to deftly craft a building with great curb appeal with very little actual curb. The task was not insurmountable, and by March eight architects had submitted plans for the library board to consider. After careful contemplation of the documents and the reputations of the architects, the board selected the plans presented by

Albert Randolph Ross of New York City. Ross had designed thirty-eight Carnegie libraries, including those in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Georgia, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Later he would also design Denver, Colorado's public library. Ross began his career with the famed firm of McKim, Mead and White, which promulgated the Classical Revival style for both commercial and residential projects. Library boards often favored architects who had expertise in designing Carnegie buildings, because James Bertram was rather infamous for creating delays that resulted from re-designs he demanded. The Carnegie organization did not recommend architects, but it did have final approval privileges on plans presented for libraries that it funded. The board hoped that hiring Ross would preclude any further delay in the already dilatory process.

The library board hurried the bid process in hopes that once bids were opened and awarded in August 1909 the building could be started and under roof by winter. The winning bid went to a local contractor, R. P. Farnsworth, in the amount of $26,000. Albert Randolph Ross chose local architect A. Killian to supervise the project. As the building went up, the community beamed. One of the city's papers bragged "that Owensboro is to have in this building one of the prettiest and most substantial library buildings in the whole South…[and] would outclass many or all in the North that cost no more." The first floor of the library was chiefly public spaces, including a lecture hall to seat 250, a historical room, and an art society room, as well as a foyer and the necessary space for a substantial staircase and elevator to the second floor. The only non-public space on the first floor was for offices. The second floor would house reading rooms for children and adults and a stacks area capable of holding 60,000 volumes and wall cases capable of handling another 60,000 volumes. The check-out desk, reference area, and

card catalog were to be located at one end of the central hallway. The second floor also had space for the librarian's private office and a meeting room for the Board of Trustees. The basement was reserved for the heating and other mechanical systems. The building was to be of "fire proof" construction and was to be clad in masonry accented with Bowling Green limestone. (Both 5)

Despite what appeared to be an era of good feelings, political machinations were brewing in the burg on the Ohio River. After a bitter election in November 1909, Councilman S. Lambert, a local physician and a Democrat, was elected mayor of Owensboro. Local citizens had also elected Democrats to fill all the city council positions. "They will have no easy undertaking," noted the local paper. "They are confronted with a bad state of finances and inherit from their Republican predecessors enormous obligations, which they must arrange to meet." Indeed Owensboro had the highest tax rate of any major Kentucky city, and citizens were irate that they were not seeing more pubic improvements made for their money particularly in the matter of good streets and sewers. ("S. Lambert Elected" 1)

When the city council began to discuss the budget for the upcoming fiscal year in May 1911, Lambert unleashed a scathing salvo aimed at the $3,000 library appropriation which the city had promised to provide annually. One city councilman made a motion to remove the library appropriation from the budget, but the motion was defeated by a vote of 8 to 3. A subsequent motion to include the library appropriation passed 10 to 1 with Bell voting against it. At that time, the local paper said: "Mayor Lambert arose from his seat, and in a very excited manner, waving the gavel in the air said: Gentlemen, you can pass this ordinance, but I say to you now, never will I sign a warrant for $3,000 for the

support of the Carnegie library. It is an illegal structure, and I will fight the payment to the highest court in the United States." If this wasn't enough, Lambert added some snide editorial comments: "It is an illegal act forced upon this town, and it looks more like a morgue than a library. Nobody can make me believe that $25,000 or $30,000 has ever been put into that building. It is an imposition upon the people to have to face such an expenditure. It has been built where nobody can ever see it, and before I will sign a warrant for its maintenance, I will suffer my right arm to become paralyzed, unless made to do so by the highest court." ("Mayor Lambert" 4)

The following day, the mayor claimed that he would veto the budget if the library appropriation was not removed. Lambert sited support for his position stating that he had received "letters of congratulation from some of the best citizens in Owensboro" applauding his stand. The local paper countered: "It is known that the mayor has received some letters censuring his honor for the step he is taking in trying to destroy the effect of a beautiful building, and the efforts of those who have been instrumental in having erected a free educational library." The mayor noted that in his veto message he would "assign many and numerous reasons why the library should not be maintained by the city" including "the unsanitary condition of the building, and the reading of books by divers and sundry persons will breed germs, causing contagious diseases to be contracted." These words coming from a trusted physician might cause some to consider the validity of such claims.

Dr. Lambert may have been a fine physician, but he obviously had anger issues. Not every instance in a person's life makes newspaper headlines, even someone in a public position such as mayor. Permit the author to provide a few brief headlines that

indicate the draconian methods used by Lambert to browbeat his political foes and even his family. Here is one front page headline: "On Street With Gun; With Two Officers Holding Him, Mayor Lambert Causes Excitement; He Said Nothing Desperate Meant; His Daughter, Miss Zella, Elopes and Weds Chas. Pruitt, Cause of His Ire." ("On the Street" 1) Another front page headline reads: "Mayor Engages In An Altercation; With Street Commissioner Tom Davis; Result of Mayor Ordering Discharge of Bradley; There Were Many Witnesses." ("Mayor Engages" 1) Other stories tell of Lambert siding with foes to pass legislation in order to retaliate against councilmen who voted against him on issues. One of these narratives started: "The mayor's office was the storm of Owensboro Wednesday, and the blow that originated there will, it is said, develop into a cyclone by the time the council meets again." ("Mayor Deserts" 4) Although the journalists may have "yellowed" their stories, a trend of anger and retaliation is still hard to deny.

The ordinance did pass at the next city council meeting, but Mayor Lambert, just as he promised, vetoed it. In his veto message, Lambert made several valid points. He claimed that the deed for the property was given over to individuals, i.e. library board members, and not to the city of Owensboro. This was true, but the board had acted as Trustees for the Library and had been appointed by Mayor to act for the city. They were not in this effort for personal gain. The mayor then went on to site a Kentucky Court of Appeals decision related to the Shelbyville Public Library in which the court ruled that an appropriation for a library must be presented to the public in the form of a referendum before it could be considered legal. After presenting these arguments, the mayor concluded: "I deem it my duty…to see to it that this sum of money is not set apart for

this purpose, and I therefore veto this ordinance in toto, if necessary, for the purpose of defeating this appropriation." ("Mayor Lambert Vetoes" 1)

Two weeks later the city council overrode the mayor's veto and passed the budget ordinance. He then told the council in no uncertain terms that despite the ordinance's passage, he would no sign the warrant that released the funds. "I warn you gentlemen," Lambert fumed, "who voted for it to look out." One of the councilmen then "suggested that the mayor warn those who voted for the library at the time the matter first came before the city council and that he might listen to his own warning." Lambert, as a city councilman, had indeed voted to accept the library from Mr. Carnegie back in 1909. ("Ordinance Passes" 1)

As the politicians wrangled, the library on Frederica was soon to be completed. An open house was held in late July 1911, and "a great many people…availed themselves of the opportunity of inspecting the new building." ("Public Library" 2) It was no doubt a major embarrassment to have an attractive new building with no funding to operate it. It became a running joke in state newspapers from Paducah to Bowling Green to Louisville. The building that was meant to build civic pride had become an albatross due in large part to the machinations of Mayor Lambert. When the city council again passed an ordinance to support the library in the amount of $3000 in March 1912, Mayor Lambert again returned the warrant, writing across it: "I hereby decline to sign this warrant and order that payment be withheld on it." ("Mayor Lambert Declines" 2) Another warrant presented in August 1912 was denied in the same manner.

Undaunted by the political issues, the Owensboro Woman's Club decided to officially open the library. In mid-April 1912 the Woman's Club Library Committee held

a “book reception” at the new building on two separate days. The library was “artistically decorated” with dogwood boughs placed in the reception hall and purple lilacs adorning the capacious auditorium. Hundreds attended the event, and more than 600 bound volumes were presented to the library. The ladies spent the next several months collecting more volumes and making them ready for circulation. The Woman’s Club bore the library’s expenses for a little over a year, employing a janitor, soliciting books, and serving as librarians. The ladies were able to keep the library open one day per week. (“Formal Opening” 2)

Finally the Library Board of Trustees petitioned the Daviess Circuit Court to hear their case. The Court sustained the demand of the Trustees, but Mayor Lambert took the case to the Kentucky Court of Appeals. In a decision made in late January 1913, the Court sided with the Trustees. At this point Lambert had to sign a warrant for the $4,500 currently due to the library or face legal charges. The mayor seemed genuinely surprised at the Court’s ruling, but finally said “this would be the final step taken by him in the matter, if the citizens wanted it, and the courts said they were entitled to it, he would submit.” In public he still held he was right in his contention. (Mayor Gives Up 5) Thus ended what was surely one of the most vociferous fights regarding a library in Kentucky history. The Owensboro fight also showed how the majority can sometimes be bullied by a small minority.

Endnotes

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