



NOTE: This is the second in a series of articles that were released monthly throughout 2017 as part of the celebration of the NH State Library's 300th anniversary. The State Library was founded in Jan. 25, 2017 and is the first state library in America.

A New Hampshire Tradition: Library Access in Every Community

February 21, 2017: When you travel around New Hampshire, do you ever take a moment to notice our public libraries? You should – they are an important part of our communities and big part of how we think of ourselves as a state.

New Hampshire's tradition of a library in every town or city began with social libraries of the early 19th century. To borrow books from a social library, you had to pay a membership fee, usually one to join and then monthly or annual fees after that. From 1790 to 1839, more than 200 social libraries were founded in New Hampshire. Sometimes there would be more than one in a community, or one would dissolve and another would take its place. They might have been located in a room in someone's home or at the town hall, or in their own small building in town.

In 1833, Peterborough Town Library became the first public library in the United States, as it was funded by public taxes approved at town meeting. This started a new era for libraries in New Hampshire: with the rise of the public library, taxpayers had direct input about not only the amount of town funds designated to support their library, but also about the type of building that would be the library itself.

Here in New Hampshire, the variety of library buildings you can visit is as unique as the communities in which they are located. Some are more than 100 years old and are still located in their original historical buildings; they may be humble clap-board Greek Revival, ornate brick and stone Classical Revival or something in between. Beginning in the 1890s, New Hampshire philanthropists donated funds and sometimes existing buildings to make homes for public libraries in more than a dozen of our communities. Andrew Carnegie, a strong backer of education, awarded grants to build 10 Carnegie libraries in New Hampshire; all still serve their communities as libraries, with the exception of Hamilton Smith Hall at UNH, which served as both the college and town library.

Today, the combination of donations, taxes and funding through bonds are still major driving forces in how New Hampshire pays for its building projects.

Many New Hampshire library buildings pop right off of vintage postcards, while Durham, Gilford, Hudson, Portsmouth, Sunapee and West Lebanon have all built brand-new library buildings in the past 10 years. Some of these new libraries have the classic New Hampshire library look and feel, while others are open-concept spaces and LEED certified ("LEED" is popular worldwide "green building" certification program; it's an acronym for "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design"). As needs change, many communities choose to construct additions to their existing library, or to renovate their space so that they can offer up-to-date services like computer banks with free internet access. Others have added elevators, increasing accessibility for their patrons.

New Hampshire's long history of libraries – from those in our tiny villages to our large cities, in times of both prosperity and belt-tightening – proves that New Hampshire appreciates our libraries as cornerstones of our communities. They are one of the many smart, functional traditions in a state that thrives on such traditions, and are a key facet of what makes us who we are.

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