

Fairmont's Carnegie Library

The Fairmont Public Library, built in 1903 and completed in 1904, was known as the Carnegie Library. It was one of 65 public libraries built in Minnesota with funds from Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie Corporation. Between 1899 and 1917, Carnegie, a wealthy industrialist and philanthropist, contributed close to one million dollars towards library construction in Minnesota. This made Minnesota the eighth largest recipient of Carnegie Library grants in the United States.¹

Carnegie's decision to support the construction of libraries was a result of his personal experiences. He was born in Scotland in 1835, and during his youth he listened to men read aloud and discuss books borrowed from a library that his father helped to create. However, the rapid industrialization of the textile trade, the industry in which his father worked, forced his family to emigrate from Scotland to America settling in Allegheny, a suburb of Pittsburgh. As a result of his early experiences with libraries, Carnegie felt that they opened the windows through which the light of knowledge streamed and resolved that should he ever become wealthy, he would make opportunities available for everyone, including the poor.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century Carnegie, who worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad, invested in railroad locomotives, oil, and iron and steel. In 1901 he sold the business he had created, Carnegie Steel, for \$250 million and devoted the remainder of his life to philanthropy. Carnegie was particularly interested in libraries, providing funding initially for construction and later for staff and training. When he died in 1919 at age 84, gifts to various charities totaled nearly \$350 million, almost 90% of his fortune.²

Although the Carnegie Grant was used to construct the library in Fairmont, the local community had to provide a suitable site and tax themselves at ten per-cent of the grant amount. This requirement imposed by Carnegie ensured a long-term commitment for

¹ http://www.placeography.org/index.php/Carnegie_Libraries_Tour

² <http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/50carnegie/50facts1.htm>

the purchase of books, staff costs, and maintenance of the building. Local residents supported the library and land was donated for the site of the building.³

Fairmont's Carnegie Library, referred to as the Fairmont Public Library and located at 118 N. Park St., celebrated its 50th anniversary on April 26, 1954. The Martin County Library was at that time located at 114 W. 2nd Street in Fairmont. Although the Carnegie Library in Fairmont was opened in 1904, Fairmont's City Council had previously established a library in 1879, opening in 1880 as the second tax supported library approved by the state of Minnesota. Because the library was forced to move to many different locations for a variety of reasons during its early existence, funding was sought from Carnegie in 1903, apparently to establish a more permanent site. Land for the building was donated by A. C. Frey, O. C. Gould, L. H. Brosemer, and William Viesselman. Consequently the Carnegie Library became a reality, construction began in 1903 and it opened its doors in 1904. The librarian for the new facility was Miss Minnie Bird. When she started, her salary was \$100.00 annually payable in four quarterly payments of \$25.00. Her salary was later raised to \$25.00 per month.

However, after many years of service, Fairmont's Carnegie Library was eventually doomed and faced demolition in May of 1968 in order to build a new county library. The cornerstone was opened by then Street Commissioner Hugh Heinrich and Irv Haertel, whose father had made the cornerstone. The cornerstone, weighing approximately sixty-five pounds, held a metal box containing a 1903 legislative manual, a picture of the new state capitol, and five local newspapers.⁴ The four granite pillars and cornerstone from the Carnegie Library are now located at the front entrance of the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

Construction of Fairmont's new \$440,000 county library began in 1968. The Martin County Library opened in October of 1969.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

³ <http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/50carnegie/50carnegie.htm>

⁴ Fairmont Daily Sentinel, May 28, 1968.

1961: Martin Co. Lib 114 W. 2nd St., Fmt Pub Lib 118 N. Park St., 110 N. Park in 2011.



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