

Let There Be Light

Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie built the first Carnegie library in his hometown of Dunfermline, Scotland, in 1883. Above the building's sandstone entrance were the carved words, "Let There Be Light."

From 1899 to 1914, Carnegie's charitable foundations and trusts shined that light, along with \$896,800, to build twenty-three public libraries in fifteen Kentucky counties and four additional libraries on college campuses. Today that amount is equivalent to \$28.9 million.

There will not be another Andrew Carnegie to lead the way in fostering public library growth in Kentucky. He did, however, leave a blueprint of sorts for public library advocates to follow.

Carnegie came from a laboring family and fighting for working men's rights was in their genes. With the invention of power looms, the Carnegie family was forced to migrate to America to find work. They settled in Pittsburgh, where twelve-year-old Andrew went to work as a bobbin boy in a cotton factory. Using books lent him by a friend, Andrew Carnegie began educating himself—spending every waking hour he was not

working reading borrowed books. Two years later, he became secretary to a superintendent in the Pennsylvania Railway Company. He soon replaced his boss and began accumulating stock in the Pullman Sleeping Car Company, Keystone Bridge Company, Union Iron Mills, Superior Rail Mill and Blast Furnace and the Pennsylvania Locomotive Works.

He founded the Carnegie Steel Company in 1872. Eight years later, largely due to Carnegie's efforts, American steel production exceeded that of Britain for the first time. In 1900, his shares of Carnegie Steel stock exceeded \$25 million. A year later, he sold his newly formed US Steel Company to J. P. Morgan for \$480 million.

Carnegie never forgot the man who lent him books to further his education. Between 1883 and 1929, Carnegie funded 2,509 libraries: 1,689 in the United States; 600 in Britain and Ireland; 156 in Canada, and others in Australia, New Zealand, Serbia, the Caribbean and Fiji.

Carnegie believed in helping those who helped themselves and developed a formula for building public libraries. Each town/city that received a Carnegie library grant had to contribute ten percent of their library's

annual funding, supply the building site and provide free service to the public.

The buildings were constructed from a template developed by Carnegie associates and their interiors were light and airy. Varying in size, most Carnegie libraries were easily identified by their architecture and were built to last.

Public library patrons became so attached to their Carnegie libraries that, even when the original buildings were unable to meet the public need, city and towns found other uses for their beloved structures. Some are history and arts centers, a police station, food pantry, community centers and a literacy foundation. Carnegie Libraries were, for the most part, located in urban areas leaving Kentucky's smaller counties without desperately needed service. In 1896, the Kentucky Federation of Woman's Clubs initiated the Pack Horse Librarian program to reach those isolated in rural areas. Each horse carried two wooden cases containing sixty books each. By 1911, Pack Horse Librarians traveled into eighty-two Kentucky counties reaching a population of 1.2 million.

Berea College began sending horse-drawn book wagons into eastern Kentucky in 1916, reaching seventy-five families and six schools with a circulation of 1,100. In 1936, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) revived the Pack Horse Librarian program. In 1943, when the program ended, 1,000 Pack Horse Librarians were reaching 1.5 million patrons in forty-eight counties.

Andrew Carnegie's light was still shining but just barely. Despite all efforts, eighty percent of rural Kentuckians lacked library service. In 1952, Kentucky author Jesse Stuart challenged Friends of Kentucky Libraries to supply each county with a bookmobile. Two years later, Friends purchased 100 bookmobiles, each with its own collection; raised local support for their maintenance; assisted in obtaining the first state support for libraries, and 2.5 million books were circulated during the bookmobiles' first year of operation. Kentucky's public libraries' future looked promising.

In 2018, according to the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives (KDLA), 2.56 Kentuckians, 57.52 percent of the commonwealth's

population, used their local public library. Total book circulation reached 29,039,906. Patrons accessed their libraries' computers in 6,019,607 sessions. Attendance at Children's programs was 1,257,346. Program attendance of young adults and adults reached 651,942.

In 2020. Kentucky desperately needs civic leaders and organizations to shine Carnegie's light on the irreplaceable community services and educational opportunities offered by the commonwealth's 119 public libraries. Aside from supplying patrons with books, Kentucky's public libraries provide computers and instructions of how to use them, electronic books, music and movies, directional education, public forums and lectures, special programs for children and seniors and the dissemination of a variety of needed information found no place else.

The doors Andrew Carnegie opened and the light of learning he fostered continues to draw patrons to their local public libraries.

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With the legislature cutting 2020 state funding for public libraries, a number of small libraries in rural counties will have to close their doors to patrons who's only Internet access and lending facilities are their public libraries. Ballard and Carlisle counties operate a joint library and their 2018 per capita expenditure, for each of their citizens, was \$1.60. Carter County's per capita budget was \$3.14; Elliott, \$3.87, Knott, \$4.61, and Hickman, \$6.34.

Given the commonwealth's current financial crisis, restoring Kentucky public libraries' state funding is in question. Friends of Kentucky Libraries, other advocates and private individuals encounter an even more serious challenge than that issued by Jesse Stuart in 1952.

The door is open for Friends of Kentucky Libraries, the nucleus of Carnegie's plan, to gather their supporters, march forward and

advancement efforts to keep the commonwealth's public libraries viable, thriving institutions that provide much needed services.

“Let There Be Light.”

Betty B. Ellison

(Mrs. Ellison for a former Friends of Kentucky Libraries board member.)