

A BENEFACTOR'S LEGACY

Victorian-era libraries continue in digital age

By Frank Juliano and Julia Gorman

NORWALK — Even as libraries move away from their original mission and see the number of staff and patrons drop, an industrialist's gift more than a century ago continues to benefit area communities, including Norwalk.

Andrew Carnegie, a Scottish immigrant who made his fortune in mining and steel, grew up a poor messenger boy in Pittsburgh with a passion for reading. He was too poor to afford books as a child, so when he obtained his fortune, he felt the best gift a community could have was a free library.

Carnegie began giving money away for library buildings in 1883 in Pennsylvania and Scotland, the two places he had spent the majority of his childhood.

Norwalk Public Library got wind of Carnegie's charity work and applied for a grant for a new library building. In 1901, Carnegie granted Norwalk \$20,000, which would create the first Carnegie library in Connecticut.

The library was built in 1902 in an Elizabethan style, just in time for the 250th anniversary of Norwalk's founding.

As South Norwalk began to establish itself as a community in its own right, it requested its own grant and received \$20,000 from Carnegie in 1908. The construction began on the corner of Washington and Franklin streets.

When Carnegie died in 1919, he had provided funds for 1,689 libraries to be built worldwide. Eleven were constructed in Connecticut, and still operate.

As of now, Norwalk still has two Carnegie libraries in use, the front portion of the main library on Belden Avenue and the front portion of the South Norwalk library.

The main library was renovated in 1982, and Library Director Chris Bradley said the renovation was not kind to the character of the building, with the central staircase being removed and walls put up for individual rooms.

The South Norwalk renovation in 2006 was very different.

"They were much more respectful to the old building," Bradley said.

Since the main library's renovation, the director's office has been redone as the Carnegie Room. Friends of the Norwalk Library, a nonprofit, volunteer organization that sponsors library activities, insisted the room honor Carnegie. A portrait of the benefactor hangs on the wall, and windows overlook the heart of downtown.

Bradley said it would be nice to restore some of the old grandeur that was sacrificed during the renovation and would like to see the Carnegie Room become a public reading area.

"Wouldn't it be a lovely area for a reading room or a music program?" asked Bradley. "We don't have any nice spaces in our library. A little elegance wouldn't be such a bad thing."

Library cardholders can learn more about the history of Norwalk's Carnegie Libraries in the book "Norwalk's Carnegie Libraries: The History of Two Public Libraries, Two Cities, and

One Connecticut Town," by Isabel Bullen.

Carnegie also provided \$3,400 to the Derby Neck Library in 1907 that allowed it to have its own building, and \$50,000 to both the original East Branch and North Branch libraries in Bridgeport in 1914. Neither structure is still in use as a library.

Earlier this month, the plight of many libraries in the digital age was underscored in Bridgeport, where Mayor Joe Ganim sought to cut seven positions from city libraries, a move some said would endanger the city's entire public library system. The pink slips were motivated by budget constraints, a Ganim spokesman said. After an outcry, the library layoffs were rescinded.

But the Derby Neck Library is above the political fray, funded almost entirely by endowments, Director Ian Parsells said. The Derby Public Library, a mile away, is funded mostly through taxes.

"We're one of the last Carnegie libraries to have a fireplace," Parsells said. "It's a nice feature, but they went to boilers right after that."

South Norwalk's Carnegie library also has a fireplace, but it is decommissioned.

For all his generosity, Carnegie had a bit of a checkered past, being blamed for one of the most violent labor strikes, in 1892 at the Homestead steel mill he owned in Pennsylvania.

Parsells said Derby Neck staff will discuss Carnegie's disdain for unions and the sometimes violent means he used to oppose them — but only if they are asked.



Alex von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media

Norwalk Public Library Director Chris Bradley holds a portrait of Andrew Carnegie that hangs in the Carnegie room at the library.

"Out of respect, we don't bring up his past ourselves," the director said.

Carnegie also had a lot to do with the way the American library system developed differently than ones in Europe, which often required membership fees.

"It was a bit elitist there, but in America, libraries are open to everyone," the Derby Neck director said. "And you can use your library card anywhere in Connecticut."



The main branch of the Norwalk Public Library at 1 Belden Ave.



The South Norwalk branch library at 10 Washington Street.