

# History of the Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library

with text by Andrew Armitage

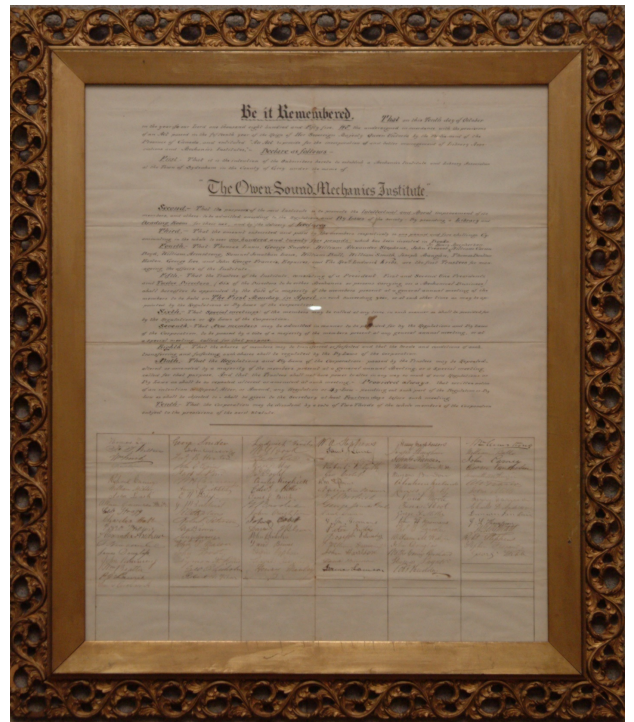
## Owen Sound Mechanics' Institute: 1855

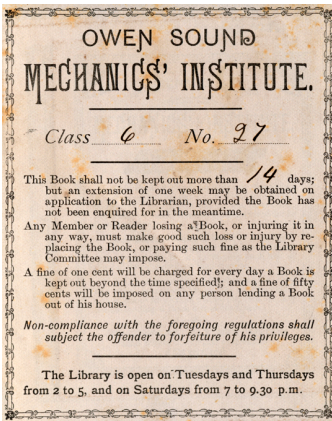
On October 10, 1855, one hundred and two citizens signed a Charter “to establish a Mechanics’ Institute and Library Association at the Town of Sydenham (which officially became Owen Sound in 1857), in the County of Grey, under the name of “The Owen Sound Mechanics’ Institute”. The Institute would later become the library we know today.

Mechanics’ Institutes, forerunners of the free public library movement, were founded to “promote the Intellectual and Moral improvement of its members and others ... By providing a Library and Reading Room for their use, and by the delivery of Lectures.”

The 102 men who signed the incorporation charter for the Owen Sound Mechanics’ Institute represented the leading citizens and working men - mechanics, artisans, and manufacturers - of the frontier port community.

Each of the original subscribers paid one pound and five shillings - equivalent to about \$150 today - to finance the purchase of books for the library. An annual subscription fee supported the ongoing efforts of the Institute. The all-male membership continued to grow over the next decade; women were finally permitted to join in the 1870’s.





The Mechanics' Institute library and its reading room was first located in a one-storey building on 8th Street East between Second and Third Avenues, then in the Market Building, and later in the old City Hall.

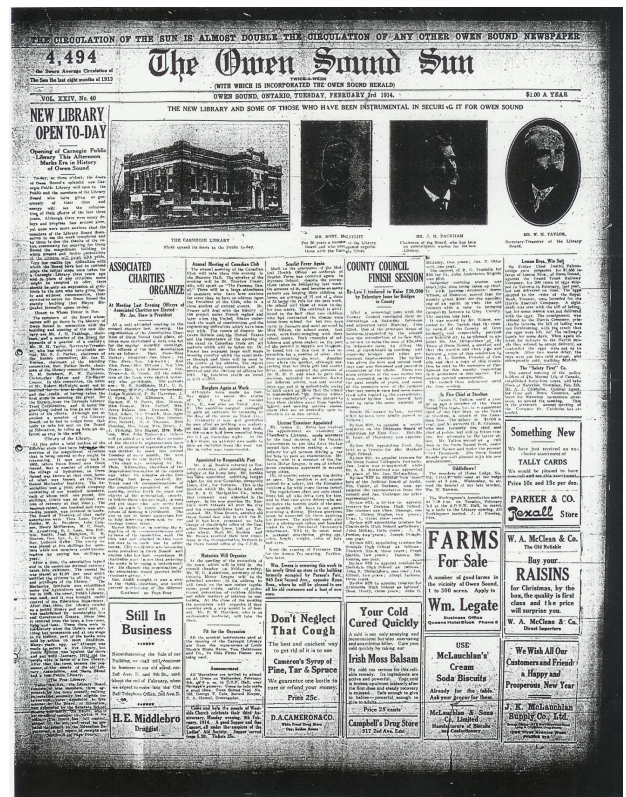
Following the passing of the Free Public Libraries Act of 1882, a local board was established to provide library leadership.

## Carnegie Library: 1914

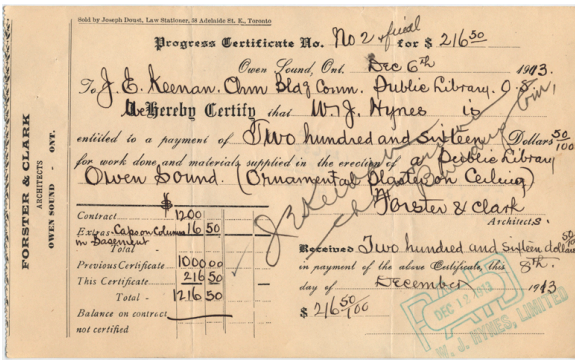
Owen Sound's Carnegie Public Library, located on First Avenue West, officially opened to the public on February 3, 1914. On that date, the headline in The Owen Sound Sun announced "NEW LIBRARY OPEN TO-DAY: Opening of Carnegie Public Library This Afternoon Marks Era in History of Owen Sound". The article notes that "Today, the town comes formally into possession of its \$26,000 library without a dollar of expenditure, but from today the town is bound, under the agreement with the Carnegie Trust, to maintain it."

Owen Sound had been granted Carnegie Foundation funds to build a public library in 1904, but City Council debate over local support delayed the beginning of its construction until 1912. A by-law introducing free library service and creating the Owen Sound Public Library was finally approved in 1911.

Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish immigrant boy who went on to make a fortune in the steel industry, donated over fifty million dollars worldwide for the construction







of free public libraries. Of the 2,500 public library buildings erected with Carnegie funds, 111 of them were in Ontario.

“What is the best gift which can be given to a community? ... a free public library occupies the first place...” - Andrew Carnegie, 1889

## Architectural Highlights of the Carnegie Library



Owen Sound’s Carnegie Public Library, designed by Forster & Clark Architects of Owen Sound, is a prime example of the classical design favoured by the Carnegie Foundation. It features an arched ceiling decorated with intricate plaster moulding executed by Toronto’s W.J. Hynes Ltd. The library’s main hall was originally illuminated with opalescent bowls that a contemporary reporter declared “cast a soft glow over the

reading tables, lighting the entire room evenly and making reading a pleasure.” For decades, library patrons made their way up a single flight of stone stairs, after passing a pair of Ionic capped columns, topped by electric globes. They entered the library through massive oak doors; the librarian’s desk was straight ahead. A fireplace on the north end gave a cosy appearance. A separate entrance, off 8th Street West, led to the well-appointed Carnegie Lecture Hall, complete with oak chairs for the audience and a speaker’s platform at the far end.



Built just before the outbreak of World War I, Owen Sound's 7500-square-foot Carnegie Public Library was crowded and outdated by the beginning of World War II. In 1955, one hundred years after the beginning of library service in Owen Sound, the children's section, which had been located by the main level fireplace, was moved to the basement where the Carnegie Lecture Hall had originally been located.

Post-war public library service stagnated until fresh funds through provincial government funding were available in the 1960s. Renovations in 1972 modernized the original Carnegie library building and an addition was constructed.



In the spring of 2003, the "great hall" was sensitively restored to its original grandeur, with design work by G.M. Diemert, Architect. This \$130,000 restoration and renovation project was successfully undertaken by Dwight Burley Construction. The walls and ceiling were painted in several shades of Georgian Bay blue and sand; these classic colours, along with new light fixtures, highlight the grid of original plaster ribbing and decorative medallions on the room's tall, gently vaulted ceiling and upper walls. The chief librarian's office was moved to the east side of the Carnegie Library, where the main entrance to the building had originally been located. Off the west wall, in the former office of the chief librarian, the Ioleen A. Hawken Local History Collection is now housed.

Comfortable leather chairs by the fireplace (the original wood-burning fireplace was converted to gas) make this a very pleasant place to read, year-round. The mission-style quarter-cut oak study chairs at the reading tables throughout the library were donated by members of the community in the very successful "Book a Seat" campaign, from 2003 to 2005.



The provincial Heritage Community Recognition Program, in 2004, commended the Library Board for the careful restoration of Owen Sound's Carnegie Public Library.

## **Library Expansion: 1973**



After a decade-long campaign, the Library Board was successful in persuading City Council of the necessity of renovating the Carnegie building and constructing a 15,000-square-foot addition. Designed by Toronto's Brook, Carruthers, Grierson and Shaw Architects, the addition complements the Carnegie Library's historical integrity.

This major construction and renovation project began in 1971 by Mial Developments of Brampton. Work was interrupted and eventually completed in the fall of 1973 by James Kemp Ltd. of Hamilton. In the end, the total project cost just over half a million dollars. The formal opening of the new 22,500-square-foot Owen Sound Public Library was held on October 22 1973. In the month following the opening, the new facility was toured by nearly 1000 people and library membership doubled! Now, more than 30 years later, the Library records an average of 5000 visits each week and has a membership count of about 15,000.



## **Union Public Library: 1994 -**

After years of attempting to secure broad-based municipal support for public library service in the northern portion of Grey County, the largest union public library board in the Province -- The Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library Board -- was established, effective January 1, 1994 to serve a population of 41,000.



After municipal amalgamations, the Union Public Library continued to serve the same geographic area but with some new names -- the Township of Chatsworth, the Township of Georgian Bluffs, the former Sydenham portion of the Municipality of Meaford and the City of Owen Sound.

Today the Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library contract with the Meaford Public Library Board has expanded to include all residents of Meaford, and is no longer restricted to only those living in the former Sydenham Township.

## 150th Anniversary



On October 15th 2005, a century and a half after the signing of the original Owen Sound Mechanics' Institute Charter, community members gathered to celebrate 150 years of library service and to "renew the charter" as follows:

We commemorate the founders and celebrate the future of the Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library.

Even as we look back to 1855 and acknowledge a century and a half of library service, the Library is our passport to the future.

Within this spirit, the Library provides a place where imaginations are free to soar, inquisitive minds can follow their own paths, and all may gather and discover a wider world.

The Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library is a unique and vital resource in our lives.

## Children & Youth Services - 2009 Revitalization



With few changes having been made over the years since the 1973 expansion, in 2009 the Children & Youth Services Department, located on the upper level, underwent an extensive cosmetic renovation. The project, entitled “Library Makeover: Kids’ Edition” set out to create a revitalized space that would be more welcoming for young people and caregivers.

The Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library worked with G. M. Diemert Architects and Dwight Burley Construction in order to complete the \$300,000 project. Municipal and provincial government funding and generous donations from community members, local businesses and a variety of other organizations ensured that this project had the financial support required to be carried out. Their generosity will be recognized on a donor wall of “book” tiles created by local ceramics artist Kate McLaren to be erected in 2010.

The Grand Re-Opening on June 6, 2009 was well attended by the Library’s community, who were welcomed back to a wonderfully colourful and vibrant Children & Youth Services department that had successfully achieved the goal of appealing to kids of all ages and their grown-ups.

