

UNION CARNEGIE LIBRARY HISTORY By Jennie Holton Fant

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“I have known millionaires starving for lack of nutriment which alone can sustain all that is human in man, and I know workmen, and many so-called poor men, who revel in luxuries beyond the power of those millionaires to reach. It is the mind that makes the body rich.” – Andrew Carnegie

Steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie engineered the most influential philanthropic program in American history by donating \$60 million for the building of 2,811 libraries in the United States, Europe and the English-speaking world. Like many other communities, Union County benefited from his largess.

Carnegie, a self-made immigrant, succeeded in becoming the richest man in the world, with little education. He believed great wealth begets an obligation to provide for those of lesser fortune and he spent his money making books and information the shared property of all people, rich or poor. His free libraries were built to be a progressive hub of civic and cultural life for all citizens of a community. Fourteen towns in South Carolina benefited from the millionaire industrialist’s generosity between 1903 and 1920. He gave South Carolina \$124,700 for thirteen public libraries to be built, and aid to one private library -- the equivalent of over a million dollars today.

The Union Carnegie Library bears the distinction of having been the first Carnegie library built in South Carolina. Funded in 1903 according to what became known as the “Carnegie formula,” the millionaire required that communities receiving his grants contribute ten percent of his original donation amount every year thereafter, to provide for maintenance and operate the library as a public institution. Additionally, the community was asked to acquire a site for construction and to furnish all books and materials. Considered a brilliant business plan, this way Carnegie felt he was guaranteeing that a town’s investment was greater than his own, and that the libraries would be provided for in the future. For the City of Union to commit, a state law had to be enacted requiring local taxpayers to vote on acceptance of the gift -- and acceptance of its terms.

A private library known as the Union Library Society existed in Union (or Unionville) as early as 1803, the first significant organization to be developed in the town’s history. A private subscription, members-only collection, it was housed in an upper room of the courthouse downtown. At the time, much of village life centered around the courthouse, where townsfolk, as entertainment, would gather to listen to lawyers argue their cases in court. In addition to courtrooms, jury rooms and the library, a one-room school was in the courthouse, and since churches were not yet prevalent,

itinerant preachers were permitted to “hold forth” in the building. The library society was largely a club for well-off locals, who could afford to pay for the books and services provided. It was chartered in 1811.

Robert Mills, a native South Carolinian who was the nation’s first professionally-trained architect and designer of the Washington Monument, published *Statistics of South Carolina* in 1826. The book is a record of facts and observations he recorded while traveling through the state as acting commissioner, overseeing the building of public buildings. He noted: “Literature is making some progress in Union; but it is yet mostly confined to professional men. There is a library society established at the village, which has a respectable library [of books]. It is to be regretted that circulating libraries are not common in the district, and measures taken to excite a taste for reading among the people.” The town proper was still a mere village containing about 200 inhabitants, 20 houses, a school, a few churches, and a new courthouse and jailhouse -- both designed by Mills.

State historian D.D. Wallace later wrote that Union, Edgefield, and Camden surpassed their Upcountry neighbors in subscriptions to Mills’ book, and that this was “expressive of their cultured planter and lawyer classes.” To all accounts, many of Union’s settlers and their subsequent kin were well-read, reasonably cultured and successful. By 1848, there were 35 doctors living in town while the much larger town of Spartanburg had only three. There was an early opera house and a company that manufactured fine carriages. The 1850s were particularly prosperous. By 1852, there a “family grocery” in Union called Thomas McNally’s, advertising such luxury items as “Java, Venezuela, Cuba, and Brazil” coffees, imported nuts, figs, pie fruits, ten kinds of sugar, two grades of rice, “Canary, Malaga, Claret, Port” wines, brandies, liquors and fresh oysters and lobsters. However, there were many less affluent residents, and those who lived in remote rural areas in the county, who may have found exchanging books, shopping at McNally’s, or the cost of joining societies more difficult.

Lowcountry author William Gilmore Simms mentions the Union Library Society as still in existence in 1843, when he wrote *Geography of South Carolina*. However, the library society probably disbanded in the poverty-ridden times during and after the Civil War, when most Southerners’ energies were spent reading letters and newspaper accounts of the War, and merely surviving. If locals had an avocation then, it was religion. Before the War, the local economy had been dependent on the growing of cotton. As a result of **the War**, many men and boys had died, there was little labor in the fields, and cotton prices had declined. The entire South was without capital. Plantation and farm owners sold off large land-holdings for share-cropping. Worse, the red-clay soil of the Upcountry was eroding. The war had conflicted with the need to introduce the use of commercial fertilizers, and the topsoil was stripped from too many years of use and abuse in cultivating crops. Many locals left to seek their fortunes elsewhere, hoping to escape the particularly turbulent times of Reconstruction and temperance in South Carolina.

It was not until almost the end of the century that any renewed interest in libraries was recorded, when eleven prominent residents formed the Union Library Association around 1898. They applied to the Secretary of State for a charter, stating: “Our purpose is to establish and maintain a library. To encourage sociability, good fellowship, and stimulate and foster a taste for literature.” The library held collections inherited from the town’s defunct older library society. Housed in an upstairs room on Main Street, it was cared for by a local women’s club, a not uncommon situation in many towns as communities began to recover and women became involved in nurturing cultural life. Once again a members-only library, the collection in 1900 contained over 700 volumes, which circulated to large membership -- this time made up of both men and women.

By the turn of the century, there was much interest all over the country in the development of public library services and in libraries as public institutions, and Union was no exception. A club called “Every Tuesday” met once a week to promote the idea. The town was experiencing rare growth due to industrialization, its largest boom to date. It was a time when there were great hopes for the “Industrial South.” The coming of the mills in Union and the move from an agrarian to an industrial economy had brought about a shift from private to public schools in Union. Local mill magnates John A. Fant and Thomas C. Duncan, with a handful of interested town leaders, began to foster the concept of an up-to-date public library in town. Foremost among these interested townfolk was Allen Nicholson, editor and publisher of the local newspaper, the *Progress*, who first contacted Carnegie about the possibility of a library grant.

In January of 1903, Nicholson received word from Carnegie’s personal secretary that the town’s application had been accepted given the benefactor’s terms were met. It was up to the general public as to whether the town would proceed with the plan. A few months later, Union citizens convened in a town council and voted to proceed, obligating the community to provide public funds annually to support the library. A donation of \$10,000 was sent by Carnegie for construction, and citizens raised \$3,500 dollars for the purchase of a lot on the corner of South and Mountain streets. The library was built in 1905 at its present location, first called the Carnegie Free Library.

The building was designed by the architectural firm of Wheeler & Runge, who oversaw the construction of numerous public buildings throughout the Carolinas and Georgia early in the century. The Beaux Arts-style exterior features classical elements and ornamental red and yellow brick. Ornate features include paired Ionic entrance columns on the portico, triangular pediments adorned with scrollwork, stained glass, and a copper roof. Crowned with a dome, this was a defining feature of Wheeler & Runge. The firm’s designs were popular, and six of their Beaux-Arts Neo-Classical Revival buildings have survived.

The Union library became an imposing, handsome landmark in town, like many Carnegie libraries throughout the country. For a few decades after it was built, it was ample to serve the community. However, like many of its Carnegie sisters everywhere,

meeting the conditions of Andrew Carnegie's grant proved difficult in subsequent years. It is ironic that the millionaire's insistence that most of his libraries remain self-reliant would later turn out to be the very flaw in the plan that nearly closed the Union library down many times, and led to the demise of many Carnegies. Income, a fundamental problem for public libraries, always fell below the standard set for financial support. Getting the promised city funds on time became a problem that plagued the Union library for decades. With finances in short supply, the librarian was paid a paltry salary if at all, and upkeep and maintenance were often delayed indefinitely. Miss Neely Sartor became librarian in 1915 and she remained for 46 years, **at the end of** which she was making only 14 dollars a week.

In 1922, the library received its first increase in income, which provided additional shelving and extended library use to the county. However, the onset of the Great Depression that followed severely impacted the American economy and was particularly dreadful for the South – where libraries already ranked far below the national standard. When the Citizen's National Bank in Union failed during the Depression, the library lost six months of funding and was left penniless. In 1935, the Rotary Club began to give the library a yearly contribution, the first of the local groups or individuals that have come forward over the years to help the library remain open.

As President Roosevelt's New Deal made federal aid money available in the 1930s, the town received some assistance from the Work's Project Administration, including help with library maintenance and development. Women throughout the state were trained in library functions and a "mending unit" was sent to Union to clean, mend, and rebind books, handling about 250 volumes monthly. Bookmobiles were purchased and put into operation to make reading materials available in rural areas. Called the Union County Traveling Library, this was the town's second public library and it was operated out of McClellan's five-and-dime store.

When the WPA program ended in 1943, the State Library Board initiated a program with emphasis on state aid to public libraries. In 1947, a field service librarian was assigned to consult and provide assistance to libraries in the state. In 1948, the city gave the Union Carnegie some money towards needed improvements, but the library continued to struggle. Regardless, by 1953 there were 2,231 patrons, 11,372 volumes, thousands of magazines, and a valuable collection of war relics. By the end of the 1950s, the library's board members were involved and optimistic, and were visiting other modern libraries in similar small towns for ideas.

The State Library Board had wanted to combine county libraries with regional libraries in South Carolina for decades, to share resources and reach more readers. In 1966, the plan was finally adopted and the Union County Traveling Library and the Carnegie were legally merged, qualifying the new city-county library to receive support from the county and state and legally appointing the Board of Trustees. With improved funding, the library was renovated beginning in 1967. Air conditioning was added, the furnace and the antiquated 1905 electrical system were replaced, the yard was landscaped, and the interior was painted and carpeted. With the help of state aid and

grants, new books and equipment were purchased, which greatly increased library usage, and programs were developed to reach more children, the disadvantaged, and senior citizens. Around 1971, the name was changed to the Union Carnegie Library, and its chances of survival had improved considerably.

The library hired its first professionally-trained librarian in 1973, and increased its hours of operation. Ed Burwell was hired soon after and has become another long-term, dedicated librarian to the Union Carnegie, having remained from 1973 until he retires in early 2003. Under **Burwell's** early tenure, the library collection was enlarged and new media and microfilm were added, as well as old county courthouse records, and newspapers dating back to 1851. By the late 1970s, the “tiny gem” of a library, with only 2,500 square feet of space, was piled high and overflowing with holdings.

In 1982, the Friends of the Library was organized by town resident Isla Ellerbe Magnifico in an effort to begin a campaign for expansion of the facility. Friends was officially incorporated in 1983 with 40 members, and by 1984 the organization had helped raise \$537,985 from matching grants, gifts and memorials for a new addition. In 1985, the size of the library was tripled by the addition of 5,500 square feet, while the architectural integrity of the 1905 structure was carefully preserved. Other changes were made to facilitate access to the building and to the collection. The renovation was completed in 1985, and the Carnegie was placed on the National Register of Historic Places with the South Street Historic District.

The Friends of the Library helped finance the initial electronic records for automating the library in the late 1990s and has since helped the library meet needs for up-to-date technology, as well as providing funding for public programs. In 2001, the Friends raised funds to make it possible for the library to receive a matching grant that enabled the purchase of new computer equipment. The upgrade allowed the library to operate on the Internet, giving public access to outside users and access to DISCUS, the State Library's virtual library. Friends celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2001 with 225 members, and the organization continues to energetically support and aid library endeavors.

In 2003, the Union Carnegie Library will **celebrate the 100th year since its inception. Today it serves** a county population of almost 30,000. According to a survey of Carnegie libraries in the mid-1990s, only 772 of the 1,689 free public libraries funded by Carnegie in the United States have survived, and the future of many of those remains uncertain. It is commendable that Union's Carnegie **has continued to steward** the intellectual life of the town for almost a century, against innumerable odds.

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