

Treasures from the Sherman Room

An Introduction to Brimfield History from the Library's Historical Collections

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The Library in Brimfield



The following is a history of the library taken from a booklet called "Brimfield Public Library 1877-1977". It was written by Helene Lindblad, Assistant for Sherman Room in May, 1977 and titled "*The Brimfield Public Library The First Century of its Life on Main Street*".

"There is probably nowhere a freer free public library than the one in Brimfield". A concise statement but with much meaning and which is just as true today as it was when written over seventy years ago by Miss M. Anna Tarbell. She was the moving spirit of the library during her many years of devotion to its health and well-being.

At that period in its development, she felt deeply about the town's "disadvantages of limited connection with the world, and the lack of conveniences and facilities", but was looking forward to a "new era for the library in a beautiful building". She wrote further: "perhaps there is compensation for its lack of

ways and means, conveniences and tools, in the absence of conventionality, fettering rules and formalities”, and she expressed the hope that “we shall continue to dispel the institutional feeling”. We know her hopes have been fulfilled because the library’s importance to Brimfield is still appreciated.

As we celebrate its centennial, it is also time to tell the story of its life on Main Street.

Our library came into existence when the voters approved the establishment of a public library to be known as the Brimfield Library with the use of the accumulated dog fund amounting to \$709.19, at town meeting on April 9, 1877. This custom of appropriation is still carried on.

This action, which apparently reflected the town’s literary sentiment, followed early social libraries of limited memberships. Brimfield Social Library Company was the first one, believed to have existed circa 1820. Brimfield Literary Society was active from 1827 to at least 1831. Other early libraries were Farmers’ Club Library, several District School Libraries, a Pastors’ Library in the parsonage, and the Hitchcock Free Academy library.

Members of the first Library Committee were: Henry P. Brown, Samuel W. Brown, Newton S. Hubbard, Thomas J. Morgan. They reported the next year that a proposition was made by General Fitz-Henry Warren that they purchase for the town his library consisting of approximately 500 volumes. A final agreement was made in which the Town library committee purchased 200 volumes for \$300; the remainder of his collection being sold to the Hitchcock Free Academy through its committee. Some of the books were out of print, many were leather-bound and nearly all were standard works and in excellent condition.

General Fitz-Henry Warren had returned to Brimfield after a career as First assistant Postmaster General under President Taylor, also Assistant editor of the New York Tribune in Washington. Having been a resident of Burlington, Iowa from 1844, he commanded the First Iowa Cavalry in the Civil War, and was made a General in 1862. In 1867 he was appointed Minister to Guatemala. The Warren family was in the boot and shoe business and their homestead was the property beyond the Academy Center, on Sturbridge Road, which is now owned by the Hopkins family.

As preparation continued for the library, it was provided that “The Library shall be under the care and management of five directors; three gentlemen and two ladies, who shall receive no compensation for their services and to be elected as follows: three males selected by the Town, one for one year, one for two years, and one for three years, and hereafter at each annual meeting one shall be chosen to serve three years, and the three thus chosen shall annually elect the two female members to serve for one year”.

The first directors of the library were Henry F. Brown, Sumner Parker, E.W. Norwood, Mrs. James T. Brown and Miss Laura M. Spaulding.

There was some difficulty in finding a home for the infant library. Mr. James T. Brown, who operated the Corner Store, at the intersection of Main Street and Wales Road, offered to fix up a room over it for \$150 for three years, to be paid in annual installments of \$50. This room was located on the second floor at the far side, probably to the rear of the building. The library’s opening day was February 23, 1878.

In April the directors reported to the town meeting that “the income from the Dog Fund will not meet the running expenses of the library and enable the purchase of many books”, and also that “we believe the Town can take no wiser action than to appropriate a certain sum annually to maintain the usefulness of our library.” Purchases and donations by this time had brought the total number of books to 844.

One hundred dollars was appropriated at town meeting in 1879. Mr. Charles A. Worner was paid \$50 per year for his services as librarian. For a while the Town did not regularly support the Library; however, over the years a number of trust funds were established. The library still received interest from them in addition to appropriations as voted.

The library continued to grow and its collection of books amounted to nearly 5000 when the move was made to the second floor of Town Hall in 1881. The library room has been described as cheerful with photographs, steel engravings and works of art. Books were sent to East Brimfield and west Brimfield to be distributed by local residents, and were also loaned to local teachers. This room was later used by Brimfield Grange.

The last move for the library in its progress up Main Street was to the present building which was dedicated on June 30, 1904 as Danielson-Lincoln Library, at ceremonies in Town Hall.

James Danielson Lincoln gave it in memory of his mother, Sarah B. Danielson Lincoln and his wife, Eliza Melcher Lincoln. He was the grandson of Timothy Danielson, Brimfield’s most prominent Revolutionary soldier, whose services to the people included activity in the preliminary movements of the colony’s struggle

for independence and finally as a member of the State Constitution Committee and as a Senator and Councilor in the postwar period. James D. Lincoln's father was Dr. Asa Lincoln, a well-known physician in town, who also served for many years as justice of the peace and several terms as state senator.

The Lincoln homestead was the property now known as Reid's Auction Acres and the Danielson home was located between it and the library site.

When James was ten years old, his mother died and he left Brimfield to live with relatives. In his later years he decided to give a library to his native town. A Boston architect, Mr. Edwin J. Lewis, suggested that it be built in the orchard. It was constructed from field stones taken from walls of the old farm. The reading room with the fireplace was used for many years as a meeting place for village groups and organizations. It was familiarly known as "The Village Hearthstone."

On town meeting days, occasions of farmers' institutes and Pomona grange meetings, the library was opened. The Women's Education association of Boston for many years supplied traveling librarians on various subjects for monthly displays. This may well have been the first incidence of a "Bookmobile."

In March, 1965, the voters of Brimfield accepted the gift of \$15,000 offered by Miss Margaret Sherman of Northboro, Mass., for the purpose of building an addition to the library. Miss Sherman's gift was made specifically in memory of her father, George Sherman, and his brothers, all of whom were born and brought up in Brimfield, and were descendants of Captain John Sherman, one of the town's pioneer settlers.

This new room was dedicated and accepted on July 30, 1966, as the Sherman Memorial Room, and was to be used to house historical records and documents that would be available for reference to all who are interested in the history of Brimfield.

At present it contains the F. Edgar Brown and Walter B. Corbin photo collections from the period of late 1890's to early 1900's; also Mr. Corbin's genealogical records of various Brimfield families, as well as a small collection of genealogies as gifts. Early maps of our town, together with photos of early schools, and various artifacts, are of much interest to visitors.

A recent gift from Mr. George H. Watson of Brimfield, has started a collection of books on early American and New England architecture and historic preservation.

The Sherman Room also serves as headquarters for the Brimfield Historical Society, which was founded in May 1962 and whose membership includes present and former residents of Brimfield, Holland, Wales and neighboring towns.

LIBRARIANS OF BRIMFIELD PUBLIC LIBRARY

MISS M. (MARY) ANNA TARBELL gave 40 years of service to the library and town. She taught history at Hitchcock Free Academy. She became librarian when it was located in the Town Hall and was in charge of the move to the new building in 1904. Miss Tarbell was vitally interested in Brimfield and its history. Through her efforts, our library became well-known as one of the outstanding small libraries in Massachusetts. She was the author of "Stage Coach Days in Brimfield", and a number of pamphlets concerning the library, and the "Minute Men of Brimfield". She lived in the Colonel Abner Morgan house, on Brookfield Road, opposite the entrance to East Hill Road, which owned by the late Mrs. John Scammell.

MISS MARGARET DUNSMORE, a life-long resident, succeeded Miss Tarbell, and was completely devoted to the town and library. Her home was next to the library, now owned by Mr. and Mrs. James Matthews. She served 25 years as librarian, until her death in March 1958.

Mrs. Katherine Parker and Mrs. Alice Belanger then kept the library open until the next appointment.

MRS. MARY ELEANOR STREETER was appointed in 1958. As the wife of the late Robert J. Streeter, a native of Brimfield, she spent many vacations here and adopted the town with enthusiasm. She had had exceptional training and experience as a librarian in Ohio, with a special interest in children's books. She served as librarian for nine years until 1967, when her health would not permit her to continue.

MRS. HARRIET T. BROWN was assistant to Mrs. Streeter and succeeded her in 1968. She is the grandniece of Miss Tarbell, the first librarian.

In a country library, the selection of books and their distribution to patrons is bound to be specialized because of the librarian's knowledge and acquaintance with tastes and needs . Mrs. Brown is most particular about this, which adds that certain personal touch.

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Early interior photos of the library



In honor of the 100th anniversary of library service in Brimfield, Mrs. Esther Mayberry wrote the following poem.

Born of New England countryside
This pleasant house of stone,
Upon a little hill of grass
It stands in dignity alone.

All men are equal in its walls
It sees no color, creed.
It only has one requisite:
A willingness to read.

No one's too old to enter here,
No child can be too small,
For waiting in its quiet aisles
Is something good for all.

When of the busy world we tire,
And long for just a lowly nook,
We hear its gentle pleading call
To come within and read a book.

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The following excerpts from various Library Reports give a glimpse of the library in the early 20th century.

1903

"It is believed that the library, since the last report, has entered upon a new era of usefulness and success. In a sense it has become a new library, not because many new books have been added, but because, by being classified, it has become an organized library instead of remaining simply a collection of books. All the books on each subject now stand together, preceded and followed by those most nearly allied. Patrons can readily find books desired, and also see at a glance what books on a given subject the library contains. The value of the library to the community, as well as the convenience of conducting it, has been greatly increased."

"The need of classification, long realized, was more and more felt as the library increased in size. About 4000 volumes have been classified and a partial card catalogue has been prepared."

1906

"The problem of lighting the library with lamps has been a difficult one. It was important that the light should be thrown on the lowest shelves of books extending around the room, and also that the lamps should be of a pattern harmonizing with the architecture of the interior and attractively suspended from the high ceilings. The lamps have been made to order of wrought iron from a design drawn by Mr. Edwin I. Lewis, the architect of the building."

1910

"Cooperation with the schools has continued; and it has been more extensive with the Academy than before, because of the town librarian's serving also as librarian of that institution. While the Academy has been the means of keeping up the standard of education and intelligence for so many years, it is entitled to have the benefit of the additional resources of the town library, as well as privileged to enjoy its hospitality and influence as part of the school's environment. In the use of the two libraries the pupils have unusual reading privileges with much freedom of choice, so that they are gaining a general acquaintance as to quality. The library has cooperated with the town schools to which it has given special privileges and whose teachers have thereby interested the pupils in good reading in school and outside. The pupils have also drawn many books of their own choosing. There has been cooperation with the Grange by furnishing references and other material for the literary programs. The character of our town and its interests make it possible for us to have general cooperation and unity of spirit and purpose which the library can promote in many ways.

1913

"The greatest need is that of better lighting. It has seemed unwise to add more hanging lamps with the prospect of electric lighting in the near future. The present handsome fixtures are well adapted for electricity and the building can be easily wired.

Another need is that of folding chairs which would make it possible to use the library occasionally for informal lectures and talks. Such gatherings as we have had since the library was built have been the more enjoyable because of attractive surroundings with a cheerful fire blazing on the hearth in its season. But it has cost too much effort to carry chairs from the town hall and neighboring houses.”

1917

“Favorable conditions have made possible the long-needed establishment of a center for the regular distribution of books in East Brimfield. In the past people in that village have been accommodated at various times by the generosity of individuals who have selected and transported the books and given them out from their homes; but this method could not be kept up regularly. The offer of a room in the village store and the availability of Mr. Plympton have made it possible to start an organized library system in East Brimfield. The beginning was made early in October and the service should be developed to a greater extent the coming year. This service should not consist merely in the circulation of books which have been on our library shelves, but should consider the tastes and needs of the people of that section of the town which includes skilled mechanics in its population when books are purchased.”

1920

“A most valuable addition to the historical collection is a large military drum which belonged to the Brimfield Rifle Company described in the History of Brimfield as an independent light infantry company organized in 1828 ‘to be annexed to the 5th Regiment 1st Brigade 4th Division Massachusetts Militia.’ The drum was preserved by the late Henry F. Brown, a member of the company, and has come to the library through his daughter, Miss Julia T. Brown.”

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MARY ANNA TARBELL