Owatonna (Minnesota) Builds a Library

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Abstract

Although Owatonna, Minnesota, enjoyed a limited amount of social library provision from the mid-nineteenth century onward, it was not until the 1890s that pressure mounted for a public library to be established under the terms of the State Library Act of 1879. The opportunity to provide a public library arose with a bequest from Mr. and Mrs. Elisha Hunewill, who had run a hardware business in the town. Attached to the money they left in their wills for a library building and books were conditions not greatly different from those imposed by Carnegie, but without the detailed design guidance that was later pioneered by Carnegie’s organization. This paper focuses on the way that the leaders of the community went about planning and building the new library, with the services of an able architect, but also with a determination to learn lessons from the users of earlier buildings that was to prove sadly unusual in the architectural history of a building type that combined to a high degree both functional requirements and cultural values.

The small town public library building in America is so often the product of Andrew Carnegie’s largesse, that it is easy to forget the earlier tradition of local philanthropy and community self-help that funded most of the pioneer library buildings. Owatonna, Minnesota, started a library association before the Civil War. The People’s Press, and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) later organized reading rooms, and a book-store circulating library operated before pressure mounted in the 1890s for a public library under the State Library Act of 1879 (Vaillancourt, 2000, pp. 1–5). Action was finally achieved only after the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Elisha Hunewill, leaving money from their successful hardware
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business for a library building and books under conditions not greatly different from those imposed by Carnegie, but without the detailed design guidance that was later pioneered by Carnegie’s organization. This paper focuses on the way that the leaders of the community went about planning and building the new library, with the services of an able architect, but also with a determination to learn lessons from the users of earlier buildings that was to prove sadly unusual in the architectural history of a building type that combined to a high degree both functional requirements and cultural values.

The story of the Owatonna Public Library begins shortly after the death of Mrs Elizabeth Hunewill in February 1896, leaving to the city $15,000 plus two-fifths of her residuary estate to be used for a public library. Her conditions were that the city of Owatonna should undertake to put up a library building for not less than $10,000 exclusive of site, to provide for its perpetual maintenance, to stock the library initially at a cost of not less than $5,000, and to maintain a permanent book fund of $5,000. When the executors reported that the Hunewill estate would yield some $20,000 for the library, the city voted to establish a public library under Minnesota law and appointed a board of nine directors who met for the first time in January 1897. In September 1897, the city acquired a site on Elm Street for $3,000, one block away from the large central square. After a lively campaign in which were deployed all of the familiar arguments for the library as an agency for cultural progress and the well-being of Owatonna’s young people, in March 1898, the project gained overwhelming approval from the voters for a $10,000 bond issue, which allowed the building committee to proceed with plans for a building costing about $15,000. This, at any rate, was the advice given to the first board meeting after the bond issue vote, which was attended by Frank Gutterson of the Des Moines, Iowa, architectural firm of Smith and Gutterson (Owatonna Public Library, board minutes, April 6, 1898).

Frank Gutterson was a local boy, the son of A. C. Gutterson who had taught music at the Pillsbury Academy in Owatonna, who had for many years directed the city’s Beethoven Society, and who was one of the original stockholders and chief cashier in the National Farmers’ Bank of Owatonna. Frank had trained as an architect at the University of Minnesota and MIT and had recently started a partnership with Oliver Smith with whom he practiced until his early death in 1901 from tuberculosis at the early age of twenty-nine (Vaillancourt, 2000, p. 12). Almost certainly, Frank Gutterson had been invited to advise his fellow directors by Carl Bennett, a contemporary Pillsbury student and an avid music and art enthusiast. Following a Harvard Education and travel in Europe, Carl Bennett had returned to Owatonna to join his father as a director of the National Farmers’ Bank, “Owatonna’s biggest,” and was soon himself to become its president. He was eventually to win his own place in architec-
tural history by commissioning Louis Sullivan to rebuild the Owatonna bank and, through his Midwest banking connections, to provide introductions leading to most of Sullivan’s final small-town bank building masterpieces (Millett, 1985, p. 9ff). Carl Bennett’s appointment to the building committee of the library board reflected his interest in the arts as well as his knowledge of finance, and it was to provide him with valuable first lessons in the delivery of a public building.

At this stage, however, Bennett was as ignorant of library architecture as his fellow board members and their architect, although Gutterson was later in his career to design competition-winning Iowa libraries for both Des Moines (1900) and Ottumwa, Iowa (1901). The minutes of the April 1898 board meetings record Gutterson showing “plans of a library building he had with him,” and discussing fees for design and contract supervision (4 percent), for design and specification only (3 percent), and a daily rate of five dollars plus expenses for time spent viewing library buildings at the request of the board (Owatonna Public Library, board minutes, April 6 and 27, 1898). Probably the architect had been discussing the problem of library design in general terms. If Gutterson had hoped to gain early approval of the plans, however, he was quickly disabused. It was clearly envisaged at an early stage that the board’s architect would travel with the building committee to visit successful library buildings before key decisions were made. The research and brief-making phase of this important civic project was being tackled with a thoroughness that would have won the approval of William Poole or Soule, or indeed any of the more demanding of the professional librarians.

On April 7, 1898, the day after Gutterson’s appointment as architect had been recommended by the library board, a circular letter went out over the signatures of B. E. Darby, R. G. Nelson, and Karl K. Bennett addressed to the librarians of recently completed library buildings seeking information to guide them in the erection and equipment of a free public library building (Building to cost $15,000. First installment of books to cost $5,000. Annual income about $1,800).

The Board will feel under especial obligation to you if you will send them any information concerned your own library which you think of importance. Especially does the Board desire pictures of your building, floor plans and arrangement of interior and suggestions as to errors to be avoided.

Would it be worth while for a committee of the Board to visit your library? An answer to the above question will be especially valuable in determining the direction of a trip of investigation and observation to be undertaken by a committee.

How many letters were sent out is not known, but the Owatonna library still retains 124 replies, mostly from librarians, many of them indicating that floor plans and pictures of their buildings were being sent under
separate cover. These of course had been returned, as requested. The postbag also contained promotional material from the Library Bureau, various book dealers and other suppliers, and the familiar approach soliciting the architectural commission from Patton & Fisher, architects of Chicago. The Chicago firm enclosed blueprints and photographs, and in the cover letter drew attention to their recently completed library for Carleton College in nearby Northfield, Minnesota, which had been donated by the same Mr. Scoville of Oak Park, Illinois, for whom they had built the Scoville Institute. “Mr Scoville,” they said, “for whom we had already planned several buildings, made just two conditions when he gave this money for the [Northfield] building,—that it should not exceed $25,000 in cost, and that Patton & Fisher should be the architects.” They urged the committee to choose an architect, rather than to run a competition (letter, April 21, 1898). By then, of course, Gutterson had already been appointed architect: but this had never deterred Patton & Fisher, and their record as the most prolific library designers in the Midwest was testimony to aggressive tactics as well as the support that came later from James Bertram at the Carnegie Foundation. This time they did not get a foot in the door. Their plans and photographs, however, were added to the growing pile of material that was being studied by Gutterson, Bennett, Darby, and Nelson throughout the summer of 1898. There was no shortage of free advice.

Fifteen respondents were very critical of their own buildings and urged the committee not to take them as models. Others were felt to be good for their time, but already outdated; too small to be of use; too expensive; or accommodated in old structures not designed as libraries. The importance of providing children’s facilities was stressed by a number of respondents, together with a preference for open stacks among those who addressed this divisive issue, and concern that sufficient book storage capacity should be provided. Some of the private replies were surprisingly frank, flatly contradicting the glowing reports published in semiofficial documents. Thus, Charles H. Greenleaf, librarian of the Adams Library, Chelmsford, Massachusetts:

Replying to your favor, I regret that I cannot send you any drawings, or plans, which could be of any service to you. We have a building, the plan of which is to be avoided. If you propose to visit this section, which is especially rich in small library buildings, it would be well for your committee to visit this Library to note what should be avoided, for although it has cost, with grounds, over £27,000.00, the Donor would select very different plans had he to do it over again. (letter, April 18, 1898)

The influential and widely distributed Massachusetts Library Commission’s Report of 1899 said of Greenleaf’s building that a “convenient reading room forms a part of the ground plan, and all the appointments are complete and admirably suited to their purpose” (p. 75).
William Cutter, writing from Henry Hobhouse Richardson’s Winn Memorial Library at Woburn, Massachusetts, was more tactful. “While beautifully architecturally, it is probably not exactly what you want.” Richardson, who had also died at an early age, was already recognized at home and abroad as America’s outstanding architect from the 1870s and 1880s. His Woburn library building (1876–79) and others that followed at North Easton (1877–83), Quincy (1879–81), and Malden (1883–85)—all in Massachusetts—delighted architects and patrons with their magical dark interiors, galleried alcoves, monumental fireplaces, beautifully crafted stonework, and the large round-headed arches, which soon gave his name to a style that was copied all over the United States and described as “Richardsonian Romanesque” (Breisch, 1997). However, Richardson’s library buildings did not find favor with librarians who criticized the low levels of daylight, the winding stairs and narrow galleries that had to be used to fetch books, and their inability to observe all parts of the buildings.4 Like a number of others who responded to the Owatonna letter, Cutter recommended an approach to the Library Bureau, and he picked out for their attention “the beautiful little building” at Lincoln, Massachusetts, which had been completed in 1884 (letter, April 23, 1898).5 Charles Soule, writing in his capacity as a trustee of the Brookline (Boston) Public Library enclosed an offprint of his well-known Library Journal article on “Points of Agreement between Architects and Librarians” and invited the party to visit his building, which demonstrated, he promised, lessons in how to cope well with inadequate arrangements (letter, April 22, 1898). Many correspondents courteously extended invitations to visit their buildings, but—more significantly—over thirty buildings were recommended for visits by librarians or trustees working in other places. Most but not all of these recommended buildings were in New England.

The letter that was eventually to prove most useful came from Mr. C. B. Tillinghast, Massachusetts state library commissioner. Tillinghast sent the latest reports of the state library commission (the monumental 1899 report was of course not yet published), offered help should the Minnesotans visit Boston, and recommended visits to three recently completed Massachusetts buildings in the Owatonna price bracket, those at Middleton, Northfield, and Westford (letter, June 28, 1898).

It had been envisaged since April that Directors Bennet and Ford, together with the architect, would visit the East in June, perhaps stopping at Ilion, New York, to see a library that much interested the directors in the spring and for which additional information on costs had been requested.6 By early July, Mr. Bennett and Dr. Ford were trying to make way for substitutes, but all of the other directors urged them to go “believing it necessary in order that no mistake be made in the building.” Director Connor moved that the committee go, “as soon as possible, and not later than August 1st, 1898” (Owatonna Public Library, board minutes,
May 5, 1898). In the end, Bennett and Ford, without Gutterson, spent two weeks in the East in late August and reported in great detail, in writing, on their return. Like the records of all other board meetings, the minutes were printed in the Owatonna newspapers and the cutting pasted into the ledger, which served as a minute book for the chairman’s signature. Their report covered most of a broadsheet page (Owatonna Public Library, board minutes, September 7, 1898).

The party had begun their visit in Boston, where they were shown the newly completed Public Library, the Athenaeum, the Cambridge Public Library (that is the Rindge Library), Harvard College’s Gore Hall and its various extensions, and H. H. Richardson’s library buildings for Malden and Quincy. Except for McKim, Mead, and White’s Boston Public Library, these were already “old” buildings, and one is left with the suspicion that the Midwesterners were taken there to admire the architecture but to be persuaded of their many defects as modern working libraries. Bolton at the Athenaeum, Tillinghast at the State Library Commission, and Goodwin, superintendent of the Library Bureau, gave much assistance and presumably recommended the less well-known libraries that were to be visited. These included (“amongst others”) the libraries at Holbrook, Everett, South Weymouth, Littleton, and Westford. It would be interesting to know what “others” they saw, but the report lists only those mentioned.

The Holbrook library occupied rooms in the town house and had recently lost many of their books in a fire, resulting in a $5,000 insurance claim and the opportunity to introduce a new card catalog when the replaced library reopened in June 1898 (Massachusetts Library Commission, 1899, p. 167). Presumably the visitors were taken there to see the most recently installed Dewey catalog system in a small-town library. In their report they drew attention to the importance of “many ingenious inventions—such as cards of different colours to indicate the class of a book, as fiction, poetry, history, etc, the card system of charging books, and much more of the same kind” and urged the acquisition of the latest labor-savings devices for the librarian’s desk as well as three distinct card catalogs: one by topics, another by authors, and another by title. They also urged the employment of a trained librarian to select and catalog the first $5,000 worth of books.

The other libraries were all in new buildings completed within the previous three years and demonstrating a variety of styles. Everett, Massachusetts, in what is now part of Boston’s blue-collar suburbs, had two new buildings. The Frederick Parlin Memorial (architect, John C. Spofford) had cost $22,300 total and had been dedicated in September 1895. The materials and the use of a low-key Romanesque is similar to the architectural formula that appealed at Westford. The Shute Library (architect, William S. Lougee of Everett) had been completed in June 1898 at a total cost of $9,000. It was much smaller than the Parlin
Memorial library, but used a wide-fronted layout similar to that later adopted in Owatonna.9

The Fogg Memorial Library of South Weymouth was so new it had not yet opened when Bennett and Ford visited. It was to be dedicated about two weeks later on September 14, 1898, and had cost $25,000. Described as “Italian Renaissance” in style, it boasts an arcaded Renaissance portico, although the building itself is more Northern European in feeling, with crow-step gables at each end. It too is wide-fronted, and the main floor plan was mentioned particularly in the report for its openness, for the central location of the librarian, and ease of control by one person. Drawings were to be sent on to Owatonna.10

The Reuben Hoar Library of Littleton, completed in 1895, was another “Renaissance” building with Palladian touches; but the stack room had been open for readers since the opening, and the library made very full provision for children. These aspects of library administration may well have been why the visitors were directed there (Massachusetts Library Commission, 1899, p. 202). It was also close to Westford, near where the Bennett family had first settled in New England, before moving to Illinois where Carl was born. Whether it was this old family connection that brought Bennett and Ford to Westford, or whether it was Tillinghast’s strong recommendation, it was here that they found the building which “came nearer to our idea in many respects than any other.”

What appealed to Bennett and Ford about the Westford library building was its simple, chaste appearance (their words) and the materials employed to give a range of natural colors (fig. 1). In the words of the report:

The foundation is of gray granite . . . in four courses. The superstructure is of light buff brick with a course of granite just under the windows of the second story and another course of granite somewhat wider between top of second story windows and the cornice. The front steps are of the same material as the foundation and the lower half of the arched doorway is granite, while the upper half is of special moulded brick, same color as the body of the building. The roof is slate, the cornice and ridge finishing and gutters are copper, natural color. This building is rich in color, plain, massive, substantial, with hardly any ornament. It looks as if it would be there just the same in a hundred years. . . . The arrangement and quality and color of materials, the chaste, neat, substantial style of building we should do well to follow. (Owatonna Public Library, board minutes, September 7, 1898)

The only real problem with the Westford building, as Bennett and Ford saw it, was that it was much deeper than its frontage, and with the main door on the front there was a good deal of wasted circulation space between the front door lobby and the rear book stack extension. But it had an upstairs art room and museum, which appealed greatly to Bennett, who had noticed this feature in a number of the New England buildings
they had visited and had ambitions of his own to bring art to Owatonna. They had also local precedents. The Minneapolis Public Library on Hennepin Avenue incorporated an art gallery, and the Winona, Minnesota, Laird Library (opened January 21, 1899) also included a formal art gallery.

The final Owatonna scheme borrows only some features of Westford—notably its use of a simplified style of architecture, a limited range of exterior materials, and its upstairs art gallery. Owatonna eventually adopted a restrained classical style, while Westford—of which Bennett reported, quite correctly, “This building does not conform to any one style of architecture”—employed an understated Romanesque for its round-headed main doorway, the most prominent facade feature.

However, the floor plans of a deep T-plan library such as Westford were not at all the same as those adopted for Owatonna. Bennett and Ford clearly liked the South Weymouth plans. The plans that most closely resemble the final Owatonna scheme are those of the Lithgow Library in Augusta, Maine, which had not been visited, but whose librarian had already supplied drawings and a brochure in the summer. This material had of course been returned, as promised. However, the Lithgow Library trustees were also responsible for a lavishly produced book describing all aspects of its history, the Lithgow donation, and the events of the Masonic cornerstone laying and dedication ceremonies. Plans of the basement and the two main floors are also included, together with background information on the two Pittsburgh-based architects who had landed the commission for the very similarly planned library at Norwood, Massachusetts.
on the wave of publicity surrounding the Augusta building. Norwood is not mentioned in the report of Bennett’s tour, and its styling—Collegiate Gothic—is quite different; but it is part of the southwest Boston conurbation and could easily have been reached when the party visited Holbrook and South Weymouth. It was opened in January 1898, but cost about $70,000 and for this reason could have been considered too expensive for the Midwesterners. Tillinghast at the State Library Commission would almost certainly have had information on such a recently completed building so close to Boston.

The report was presented to the full Owatonna Library Board on September 7, 1898, only a few days after Bennett and Ford returned from their 3,500 mile journey. It dealt pragmatically with matters of library administration, furnishing, and planning. A “most expert lady of long experience,” they told their fellow directors, had offered to spend from two to four months in Owatonna, cataloging the 5,000 volume collection and training a suitable person as librarian. All the latest catalog devices should be provided. For the new building, abundant daylight was an important requirement, as well as a much greater provision than in most buildings of electric light for evening use. The importance of ventilation was stressed, “as the reading room will at times be crowded.” Fireplaces served a useful role here as ventilation flues, although the building was to be centrally heated. A children’s room was advised by the best authorities, with a separate entrance. Here they could be accommodated in the basement, with an entry at the rear of the building. On the advice of most librarians, there would be no conversation room and no public toilet room. Owatonna’s library was to be for serious people, old and young, not for loafers.

Ease of control by one person was something to which Bennett and Ford had given special attention and would “practically decide the shape of the building.” Indeed the report that Bennett drafted (using the “I” form much more frequently than “your committee” in his presentation) went on to describe in words a plan that turned upon openness and visibility and apparently left the architect—who was present at the meeting—very little to do:

The main body of the building should be a rectangle, say 80x40 feet, the librarian’s desk . . . should be the partition between the stack room room and the reading room. There should be no partition between these two rooms, no corners or alcoves in the reading room. In such an interior every part is visible from the librarian’s desk.

The main entrance should be about at the middle of one side of the building, so that the visitor appears at once before the librarian’s desk at the left for business there or turns to the right for the reading room.

Of course there must be a suitable vestibule and perhaps an external porch which will occupy a projection on one side of the building beyond the large rectangular room already described. This projection
may also include a reference room connected with the reading room by a door near the librarian’s desk. Exactly opposite the main entrance . . . another projection may contain secondary entrance, stairway to second story and basement and librarian’s room.

At South Weymouth, Mass., we saw an interior first [ground] floor of this kind, well nigh ideal for our use. In a few days we shall have the floor plans of this building.

Only after explaining his own and Ford’s current thinking on the planning, did Bennett turn to the exterior features of the Westford library, which they had both so much admired. “The interior must largely determine the general outline. Our architect must largely do the rest.” Bennett clearly felt that they had already decided the main lines of the planning, leaving Gutterson to add the “architecture,” with a very strong hint about the approach that the key directors wished to see adopted.

Director Darby then moved the acceptance of the report and, after further consideration on the form of the building, the minutes recorded, “It was the sense of the board that the architect remain here and continue making sketches and plans of the proposed building until something satisfactory to the board is secured. As soon as such are ready for inspection the members of the board are to be notified and a special meeting held.”

Gutterson and Bennett were of course old friends. It may be that an offer of hospitality in his home town and close client collaboration in the design development process made acceptable what most other architects would have regarded as very tight constraints, if not intolerable intrusiveness.

Whatever his feelings, Frank Gutterson stayed in Owatonna and one week later presented outline drawings and sketches of the proposed library building (Owatonna Public Library, board minutes, September 13, 1898). These included the main west front elevation to Elm Street; the highly visible south end elevation; and plans of the basement, ground, and upper floors (fig. 2). “After long and careful consideration and a thorough discussion,” recorded the minutes, “Director Bennett moved that the tentative plans and sketches be accepted subject to final approval of the prospective [sic] plan to be sent here later if it was also found to be satisfactory.” A water color perspective was considered at the board meeting on October 6, and accepted with “slight modifications,” namely the substitution of range-stone lintels over the windows in the stack room instead of brick. A motion was also carried unanimously that the library building face onto Elm Street, as shown in the sketch, which suggests that an alternative orientation (presumably facing toward the East) had been under discussion (Owatonna Public Library, board minutes, October 6, 1898). The board continued to prod their architect, however, and it was not until November 25, 1898, that Gutterson made his final presentation and read through the specifications, with so many interruptions for comment and explanations and detailed discussions about the types of stone
and brick to be used, that the meeting continued on November 26 to
discuss the measures needed to render the building fireproof. The main
potential stumbling block to progress, however, was the architect’s cost
estimate. If all the approved features were to be included, the building
would “probably cost in the neighborhood of $18,000 while the funds at
the disposal of the board were only $12,500” (Owatonna Public Library,
board minutes, November 25–26, 1898).

The board pressed ahead, however, to obtain competitive bids in Feb-
uary 1899, when contracts were signed with the local firm of Hammel
Bros & Anderson for $19,000 excluding finishes for the basement and
upper floor rooms. It had been decided before Christmas to save money
by leaving these rooms unfinished, but this policy was reversed when the
trustees of the Hunnewill estate indicated that they would withhold a final
payment until the building was fully finished. Also excluded in Febru-
ary 1899 were the costs of furniture and equipment—including expensive
items such as the stack shelving—which was still being priced and ordered
in the summer. What promises and personal guarantees had been given
to justify this hazardous policy are not recorded in the library board min-
utes, but before the end of the construction program, a further $5,000
bond issue had been approved by the city and an additional $5,000 raised
by public subscription. To the leading citizens of Owatonna, the comple-
tion of the highest quality public library building had become a question
of private and civic pride and the resources of the community were fully
mobilized.

Work on the Elm Street building site also stimulated gifts and contribu-
tions in kind. The Hon. M. H. Dunnell, of the House of Representatives,
gave a lead with a letter to the press urging acceptance of the second bond
issue and himself donating 700 volumes (Owatonna Public Library, board
minutes, August 28, 1899). But less spectacular donations are probably a
better index of community support. Mr. O. Lindesmith, who had supplied
the stone, presented a large mounted spread eagle for the Grand Army of
the Republic (GAR) exhibit, which it had been agreed would form a per-
manent display in the Trustees’ Room (Owatonna Public Library, board
minutes, July 19, 1899). Mrs. Colonel Drum [sic] presented the library
with a set of the *Official Records of the Rebellion*—which at the turn of the
century was still one of the most heavily used works in American public
collections (Owatonna Public Library, Board Minutes, August 20, 1900).
The ladies of the Cosmopolitan and Nineteenth Century clubs undertook
the furnishing and staffing of the children’s room in the basement (letter,
February 15, 1900).

The building was formally dedicated on Thursday, February 22, 1900,
Washington’s birthday. In the middle of a Minnesota winter, the events
all took place indoors, with an open house during the afternoon when
“the manifold beauties of the interior of the building were seen for the first time by many of our people . . . and many were the expressions of surprise and pleasure that were indulged.” In the evening “a most appreciative throng comprising a large number of Owatonna’s best known and most prominent men and women” filled the reading room, with many standing along the sides to hear the speeches from the platform set up against the librarian’s desk on the stack side of the delivery hall. A sextet of young men led the singing of America. The Rev. Dr. James Tanner, an old settler of Steele County, gave a lengthy appreciation of Mr. and Mrs. Hunnewill, who had modestly indicated that their name was not to be associated with the building they had bequeathed to the town. Tanner knew his libraries and had visited the Newberry in Chicago. “We don’t expect anything like that,” he allowed, but the historical collection planned for Owatonna would still be “well worthy of a man’s time to investigate.” Judge Wheelock contributed more memories of the Hunnewills and lectured everyone to behave themselves in the library. “We have to come in here very quietly. This is not the place for young people to come and visit as they did in a reading room which we had before, come, as I heard it expressed, ‘to spark.’ Now we want nothing of this kind here. You are to come in here quietly and here get the information you desire.” Carl Bennett gave a lengthy—actually a very lengthy—account of the project, the trip to the East and a detailed cost breakdown, before pointing out the beauty of the reading room, the children’s room, “soon to be one of the
most attractive rooms in the library,” and the upstairs art room, “soon to be adorned with reproductions of the great masters and . . . other articles of beauty and virtù . . . making this room a source of inspiration and education in things artistic.” His address finished with a statement that underlined the local significance of the architectural undertaking in terms that would have been understood by a Renaissance pope or any small-town City Beautiful committee: “Our library building is the first public building of importance to be erected in this city. It is representative of the whole city. The good taste, stability, wealth and civic pride of our city is largely reflected in this building. Therefore the board have thought it befitting to employ only the most skilled workmen and the best materials. Anything less than this would sooner or later have brought reproach upon us.”

The completed building is clearly classical in inspiration, but without many of the features that increasingly were to be criticized by functionalists (among whom librarians were prominent) in the early years of the twentieth century. There was no dome. There was no portico with detached columns projecting forward from the main facade and adding to the building’s cost without providing any additional accommodation. A short flight of steps lead up to the main entrance, which was marked by a small bronze canopy and set into the gable end of a two-story pitched roof structure forming what the architect had called a “transept” to the main library and book stack wing. The main wing was a generous single story on a half basement, so the taller two-and-a-half-story “transept” read as a portico, with the windows to its upper story handled as a strip of attic lights. This was one of the few features to be borrowed directly from the Westford library. The use of a light colored brick for the walls was perhaps another.

There was a surprisingly large proportion of glass in all three outside walls of the reading room wing (fig. 3), while the stack wing had the usual narrow vertical slots lighting the alleys between the shelves, and additional windows above them handled as if in an attic story. Both wings enjoyed a great deal of natural light. However, it was still a classical building. Acroteria crowned the central pediment, the external corners were treated as pilasters, and the basement was handled in larger stone courses projecting forward under a moulding. The restrained classicism of Gutterson’s design was—on the evidence of recorded speeches—much admired, and apparently imparted sufficient dignity to protect those responsible from any possible reproach. Certainly when I visited the library in 1989, there had been no attempts to “improve” the outside frontage.

The interior layout faithfully reflects Carl Bennett’s description of the South Weymouth plan, which had seemed “well nigh ideal” when he had returned from the East. The entrance lobby is flanked by a cloakroom to the right, and by the librarian’s office to the left, and leads to a central delivery hall, which in so many buildings of this period is handled as a
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The key feature of the interior is its well-lit open planning, with views from the librarian’s workstation in front of the stack across the delivery hall and into the reading room broken only by the columns in the delivery hall. No doubt Judge Wheelock would have approved of this control. The only ground floor room that was unobserved was the small reference room, opening off the delivery hall opposite the front door. Here standard works were available from the shelves, and the more scholarly library users could work undisturbed by comings and goings. The children

domed rotunda. Here it is treated as a hypostyle hall, with an unusual but impressive “forest of columns” supporting the floor of the art gallery and meeting room above. A turn to the right took the visitor into the reading room, with large windows on three sides (east, south, and west) and a handsome central fireplace. A turn to the left brought the visitor to the librarian’s workstation, and a railing closing off the stack wing (fig. 4). There is sufficient headroom for a mezzanine stack level, but the directors and their architect planned enough room for 25,000 volumes to be stored on one level within easy reach of the floor. This made it easy to admit the public when the stacks were opened in the 1920s, and has facilitated subsequent internal rearrangements. The original stack was closed.

Figure 3. Reading Room, Owatonna Public Library. Reproduced courtesy of Owatonna Public Library.
shared the basement with the janitor, who had been permitted to fit up one end of the basement as his own quarters, thus providing a round-the-clock presence in the building. The children’s library and the service entrance were in the back. The separate entrance allowed groups like the college extension classes to meet in the children’s room out of hours (which they did from an early date, having undertaken to supply extra adult-size folding chairs). A flight of stairs next to the reference room led down to the basement and up to the large art gallery and public meeting room in the central section. Part of this floor had been partitioned off to provide a meeting room for the directors, and it was in this room that the GAR installed their display of Civil War relics.

Postscript
This article was first drafted in 1989, shortly following an exploratory tour through the Upper Midwest visiting libraries and other cultural buildings as part of a project supported by the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Royal Society of Arts. The library itself was still largely in its original state, and after an initial search through the board minutes (which had been published in the local newspapers as an interesting experiment in open government), it became clear that there must be further material
from the postal inquiry described in the paper. Someone remembered that there was a package of documents in the roof space, and it was fetched down, wrapped in string and brown paper and covered in dust. Inside were all the replies. The librarian insisted on giving us the key to the Xerox machine and generously refused to accept payment for the copies, which—with the Board Minutes—formed the basis of the paper. Since then a large addition has been built and a very useful book written by Nancy Vaillancourt (see references), which gives an excellent overview of the library’s history. I have been able to make use of it to clear up some details, and am most grateful for Vaillancourt’s assistance with copies of the illustrations. But the paper itself stands practically unchanged, and records what still strikes me as a rare example of the research carried out into the planning of a small town library by the community leaders. This kind of exercise may well have been carried out in other communities; but in Owatonna the process was recorded, and in unusual detail.

NOTES
2. See also the letter from Cornelia Marvill, librarian of the Scoville Institute, who pointed out that “while our building is very beautiful it is bad from an administrative standpoint.”
3. Chelmsford’s library had been given to the town by Amos Francis Adams of Boston, who had been born in the town. It cost about $30,000 and was dedicated on May 8, 1895.
4. William Poole, who ended his career as librarian of Chicago’s Newberry Library, was perhaps the outspoken critic of Richardson. See Williamson, 1965, pp. 151–160.
5. The Lincoln, Massachusetts, library building had been completed in 1884, the gift of George Grosvenor Tarbell, who also left a bequest of $5,000 forming the nucleus of a fund of $7,000 to which the small town added an appropriation of $500 p.a. and the dog tax. It had a book capacity of 14,000 volumes, a stock of just over 6,000 volumes in 1898.
6. For the Ilion, New York visit. One hundred and fifty dollar travelling expenses were approved for each member of the party (Owatonna Public Library, board minutes, June 1, 1898).
7. It was actually the second fire in this library.
8. Mrs. A. L. Sargent spent four months in Owatonna cataloging the books when the library was preparing to open (Vaillancourt, 2000, p. 35).
10. See Massachusetts Library Commission, 1899, pp. 407–411, for the two libraries in Weymouth, where a social library had been in existence since 1800. The newest addition was built from a total bequest of $50,000 from John Fogg, a shoe manufacturer, who had died in 1892.
11. Westford’s library is described and illustrated in the Ninth Report of the Free Public Library Commission of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Library Commission, 1899, pp. 398–402). The social library had been established as early as 1797 by twenty-five prominent citizens buying shares to values ranging from $2.00 to $8.00. Until its new building opened in 1896, the library had operated from rooms in the Town Hall. Land for a new building (with a stack capacity of 40,000 volumes) was purchased by the town in 1894, but before the fund raising started, the Hon. Varnum Fletcher (banker and state senator) presented the town with $10,000 (later raised to $14,000) for the building.
12. The Augusta, Maine, library is described and fully illustrated in the commemorative volume, The Lithgow Library and Reading Room (1897). The architects were Joseph Ladd Neal and Alfred Hopkins (Hopkins had left the partnership by 1897 but is given shared
credit). Neal (born 1866) had trained in Boston and worked as a draughtsman for H. H. Richardson before moving to New York and later to Pittsburgh.

13. The quotations that follow in the next few paragraphs are from the report as included in the Owatonna Public Library board minutes (September 7, 1898).

14. The quotations that follow are taken from newspaper reports of the opening of the library contained in the package of archival documents retained by the library and described in the Postscript to this article.

REFERENCES


