



Ridgefield Library

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Ridgefield Library Centennial History

by Anita Daubenspeck, Ridgefield Library Director, 1975 - 2000

The June 1903 dedication of the Elizabeth W. Morris Memorial Library was not the first effort to provide public library service to the Ridgefield.

Samuel Goodrich's Recollections of a lifetime, published in 1857, dates the first library in Ridgefield to 1795. 150 items were available for circulation. Hiram K. Scott, one-time Town Clerk, began a subscription library in Ridgefield in 1852. His advertising for this venture stated that "novels, travels, etc, in pamphlet form [cost] 25 cents" to borrow for a week. 50-cent books (evidently the most expensive) were 9 cents a volume to borrow. It is not known how long this library existed.

The source of the present library organization is a meeting of twelve men, held in the office of physician William S. Todd on October 16, 1871 to consider ways of developing a library for Ridgefield. The men formed a "Library Club" and each pledged \$3 a year to purchase books for their own use. All books were sold at the end of the year, with the proceeds and dues used to purchase new books. In 1878 and 1879, the books were not sold but stored in the attic of the club treasurer, Dr. Daniel L. Adams and became the nucleus of the original library collection.

Mrs. Ebenezer Keeler is credited with persuading the men of the library club to organize a Ridgefield Library Association in 1880. Mrs. Keeler, Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Larman W. Abbott were appointed to make arrangements to circulate the library materials, a duty later delegated to the Women's Committee until 1974. The 1880 seven-page printed catalog of the library association's 312 books is divided into juvenile, scientific and practical, travels and adventures, fiction, history and biography and miscellaneous sections. Each section lists the books alphabetically by title.

Ridgefield's population in 1880 was 2,028. The library was located in Town Hall and was open for two hours on Wednesday afternoons and two hours on Saturday evenings all year. Cost of a subscription membership was one dollar per year, books circulated for two weeks and fines were ten cents per week.

In 1882 the by-laws and constitution of the renamed Ridgefield Library, Inc., were sent to Hartford but the name change and incorporation were never recorded. In 1883, former Governor Phineas Lounsbury donated a two-room building that had been a telegraph office on Bailey Avenue for exclusive use by the library. The library and building were later moved to Governor Street where the present Ridgefield Bank drive-up branch is located. This building became the Town's first telephone office and later the office of the Ridgefield Water Company.

The library needed more space. It housed 2,956 volumes and had hired Jennie Smith as Head Librarian in 1899. Miss Smith and volunteer Miss Mary Olcott of Casagmo closed the library for three weeks to convert the library's collection to the new Dewey Decimal Classification system.

On July 9, 1900, an anonymous offer of \$15,000 was made to purchase the property at the northeast corner of Main and Prospect (then Depot Hill) Streets, the site of Smith Tavern and now the location of the present library and Webster Bank buildings. Evelyn Smith deeded the land to James Morris, the donor, in September 1900. The property was given to the Ridgefield Library Association in June 1901, after Mr. Morris and E. P. Dutton had secured a charter for the Library through an act of the Connecticut Legislature in 1901.

At the Library annual meeting June 21, 1902, James Morris was reelected president. The treasurer reported expenditures of \$663.51 on an income of \$1,199.29. The endowment was \$9,356. Head Librarian Jennie Smith received a salary of \$250. 3,593 books were owned and annual circulation was 7,124.

Mr. Morris contracted with architect Raleigh Gildersleeve of Fifth Avenue, New York, to design a library building. The original interior contained features typical of public libraries at the time, including skylight, a translucent glass floor to let light into the lower level and a circular iron stairway. Mr. Gildersleeve also designed the Roma Pizza building on Main Street, Ridgefield and several eating clubs at Princeton University.

Members of the Library Board and Women's committee completed furnishings and landscaping. A. Newbold Morris furnished the interior. Misses Anne and Ellen Stone provided grading, landscaping and the stone wall. Mr. and Mrs. William Hawke contributed the sidewalk, and Mr. George M. Olcott donated the oak trees down Prospect Street.

The building dedication June 15, 1903 was a simple service. James Morris made a short speech to present the deed, and Mr. Olcott accepted for the board and gave Mr. Morris \$1. The day was stormy and, the Ridgefield Press noted, "The public generally did not come, there being no invitations to them...." The library opened to the public June 22, weekdays from 10 AM until noon.

James E. Morris died at his home in New York City October 17, 1903.

Businessman James Morris and his wife Elizabeth were among many from New York City who owned summer homes in Ridgefield. They purchased parcels of property at what is now 164 Main Street in 1890, 1891 and 1897. The Morris' permanent home was Washington Square in Manhattan. Mr. Morris' brother, A. Newbold Morris, and family also owned a summer residence at 48 East Ridge. Both families were involved, together with many summer residents, in Ridgefield community life.

Elizabeth W. Morris died at her home in Ridgefield October 15, 1899. Her only child, a son, predeceased her. Little more is revealed in her obituary than that she had been an invalid for some time.

For many years, the Ridgefield Library Board met only in June for an annual meeting. Daily operations, staffing and book selection were managed by a volunteer Women's Committee. Reports to the Library Board on the endowment fund began in 1901. Board president George M. Olcott organized a drive to secure endowment subscriptions in 1907 to support library operations, but an economic panic the same year resulted in reduced or lapsed pledges.

At some point, before 1920, the corporate charter was amended to read the Ridgefield Library and Historical Assn., Inc.

In 1919 cost of electricity was \$31.80 and fuel cost \$306.80 for the year.

A children's library in what is now the History Room opened in 1924. Miss Jennie Smith retired as Head Librarian to be replaced by Marion H. Nash. Miss Nash served as librarian

until her death from being struck by an automobile on Main Street in 1930. Annual cost for salaries of the librarian and assistants was \$1,028.

In 1927, the Library contained 15,000 volumes. \$396 was spent on adult books and \$378 on children's books. Library salaries were \$1,485. Total expenditures were \$3,201.

Christie L. Nash replaced her sister-in-law as librarian in 1930. She served until 1953, except for a period from 1944 to 1949, when children's librarian Mrs. Sylvia Davis served as Head Librarian. Mrs. Nash reported in 1941 that average daily circulation was 96.

Sufficient operating funds were always a problem for the library. Library benefit drama performances and special events were organized to raise money. Ridgefield neighbors, opera star Geraldine Ferraro and NBC music director Sam Chotzinoff, persuaded Arturo Toscanini to return from retirement in Italy and conduct the NBC Symphony Orchestra in concerts to benefit the Library in 1946 and 1949 at the then high school auditorium on High Ridge (now the Ridgefield Playhouse).

Children's library services were moved to the lower level room with an outside entrance in the 1930s. Miss Phyllis Paccadolmi joined the library staff in 1946 and remained a continuous presence at the adult circulation desk and a rich source of information on local history and former residents until her retirement in 1999.

The Library Board sold about half its property in 1939, on Prospect Street, for \$7500 because the library needed cash. A movie theater, now a bank, was built on that half. The Library Board repurchased the property in 2001 for \$1.5 million following negotiations by Board President, Morton Bailey.

The library remained a subscription library through the years. A library card cost \$1 a year from 1890 to 1955, when the charge was raised to \$2. In the 1940s, the Ridgefield Board of Education paid, to the library, 40 or 50 cents per student in the public schools so that students could use the library free. The fees finally ended in 1968 when the Board of Selectmen named Ridgefield Library the principal public library for the Town of Ridgefield, qualifying it for State funds.

Ridgefield doubled in population between 1950 and 1960 and doubled again between 1960 and 1968. It seemed that a new school was being built every year. The library space became very cramped, and in 1962 the Board launched a fund drive. Governor John Dempsey dedicated a new wing in 1963. This construction doubled library space to 8,000 sq. ft and provided for a new "student's library" and adult shelving space.

The Library Board contracted for a self-survey and analysis in 1973. The Library was deemed inadequate in resources and services for a community of Ridgefield's size. An immediate result was the hiring in September 1974 of a professionally degreed librarian (Master of Library Science: MLS) Louisa Campbell as Library Director. Mrs. Campbell resigned in May 1975, and was replaced as Library Director by then Children's Librarian Anita Daubenspeck MLS. Ms Catherine Burke MLS replaced Mrs. Daubenspeck as children's librarian and Joan Vaillancourt MLS joined the staff as reference librarian in 1976. Friends of the Ridgefield Library was organized in 1976. The annual budget was \$125,000.

The volunteer Women's Committee was able to disband in early 1977. A building program was commissioned by the Board and developed by the Library Director with assistance of a professional consultant also in 1977.

A bequest received by the Library enabled the Board to purchase from Dr. James Sheehan the property adjacent to the Library in 1978. An architect was hired to design a library expansion

that same year. For the first time, in 1979, the Library asked the Town for funds to expand the building. The proposal was narrowly defeated in referendum. The Sheehan house was demolished to provide a temporary parking area, as parking on the street had become hazardous.

The expansion plans were reduced from 18,000 square feet of new construction to 13,500. Discussion with Town funding authorities continued until March, 1983, when Board President Al Hall announced an anonymous donor had offered one million dollars to build the expansion provided the Library Board contribute \$500,000 and the Town assume responsibility for majority funding of the annual operations. The proposal was adopted unanimously at a Town meeting in August. A new Library Board, three-quarters of them named by the First Selectman, was seated in 1984.

The library closed for a month following construction to move the collection, and the 21,000 square foot library was opened December 1984.

Concurrent with the construction, the library joined Bibliomation. Inc., a consortium providing data processing services to 48 public and school libraries in Connecticut. An automated circulation system was introduced in the library in March 1985.

Ridgefield Library was the first library in Bibliomation to provide automation of its card catalog in 1987. For the first time the library's adult and children's collections were available in one source. Users could find books in New Haven, Bridgeport, Danbury, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Chicago libraries on these computers.

A much-needed library program facility, the Charles Dayton Program Room was added to the library in 1990. This 2500 sq. ft. facility, built with gifts from Mr. and Mrs. Gordon McGovern and Mr. Eugene Katz and a grant from the State of Connecticut, has video and digital projection equipment, a small grand piano and a separate entrance and kitchen.

An unfinished area on the library's second floor was completed in 1992 to accommodate the adult fiction, audio and large-print collections. Janice Benedict MLS became the library's first adult services librarian.

Two projects in 1995 and 1997 reconfigured the library's second floor area relocating children's and adult services and staff areas, with 1200 square feet added for an enclosed children's program facility. A special computer-learning center for children was introduced at the same time. The "assembly room" in the 1903 building was restored to provide a gracious area for quiet study and reading. Public Internet access was provided on 2 computers in the adult information department and 2 in children's services. Ridgefield Library mounted its own web page and web address for public access to library resources from home and to some subscription information databases using a Ridgefield Library card.

The library implemented a \$300,000 technology upgrade in 1999. Network Administrator Anthony Cacciola was added to the staff and staff space on the second floor was converted for computer equipment and an office. More than 25 computers available for public use provide access to the catalog, word processing and learning games. A high speed T1 line gives access to Internet, email, genealogy and informational databases.

Anita Daubenspeck retired in late 2000, after twenty-five years. A 300 square foot addition to the library's main floor houses the sculpture "Storytime" by renowned sculptor Glenna Goodacre, was presented to the library by a devoted supporter in recognition of Ms. Daubenspeck's service.

Christina Nolan MLS became the new library director in November 2000. Mary Rindfleisch MLS was named the library's first assistant director in 2001.

1,100 items were borrowed each day from the library last year. The budget for 2002 was \$1.6 million. The library's parking lot was enlarged in 2002 with Town funds and a new strategic plan is in development to plan for services to Ridgefield's citizens in the years to come.

- Ridgefield population went from 2,626 to 23,600 in the past century.
- The library building grew from 4,000 to 27,000 square feet in its first hundred years.
- Library opened 10 hours per week in 1903; 58 hours per week in 2002.
- Library staff grew from 1 in 1900 to 22 full-time equivalent positions in 2002.
- Collection size grew from 3,593 in 1902 to 116,203 in 2002.
- Annual circulation in 1902 was 7,124; in 2002 it was 376,356.
- Operating budget increased from \$663 in 1902 to \$1.6million in 2002.
- Average daily visits in 2002: 1,081.

This writer thanks the Ridgefield Press and its jubilee editions of 1950 and 1975, Samuel Goodrich, historians George Rockwell and Silvio Bedini, the microfilmed collection of the Press, the Library information services staff, the newspaper obituary index developed by Helen K. Lewis and a timeline history prepared by Hope H. Swenson for much of the above information.