

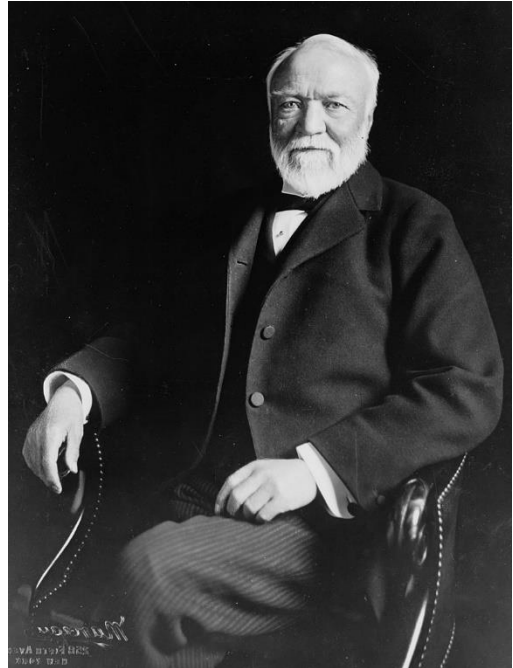
CATSPAW OF CARNEGIE

Perth's Carnegie Library 1907-1980

One might imagine that at the turn of the 20th century, a town of only 3,500 residents, when offered the gift of a public library building, would leap at the chance. Not so. Many citizens of Perth, and other towns across Canada, looked the gift horse in the mouth and concluded that “self-respect and pride of country” demanded refusal of such “a monument to avarice and servility”.¹

The man behind the library offer, Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919), was held in very low regard by many Canadians. Born in Scotland, he had emigrated to the United States in 1848 as a 12-year-old and by the 1860s held extensive investments in railroads, railroad sleeping cars, bridges, and oil derricks. His fortune, however, was truly made between 1875 and 1901 in the steel industry, in large part at the expense of the working man.

A fierce proponent of laissez-faire economics, Carnegie's success owed much to monopolies, market manipulation, and, above all, his dedication to cutting labor costs. Unions, he believed, impeded the natural reduction of prices by pushing up expenses and blocked evolutionary progress. In 1892 a bloody labor confrontation at the Carnegie Steel Homestead Pennsylvania plant lasted 143 days. Management locked the union out and brought in thousands of strike-breakers, with Pinkerton agents to protect them. The resulting violence left seven strikers and three Pinkertons dead and hundreds injured. Ultimately, however, the strike was broken, and the mill resumed operations with non-union immigrant employees in place of the original plant workers. That his wealth had been gained on the backs of exploited working men became an integral part of Carnegie's legacy.²



Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919)

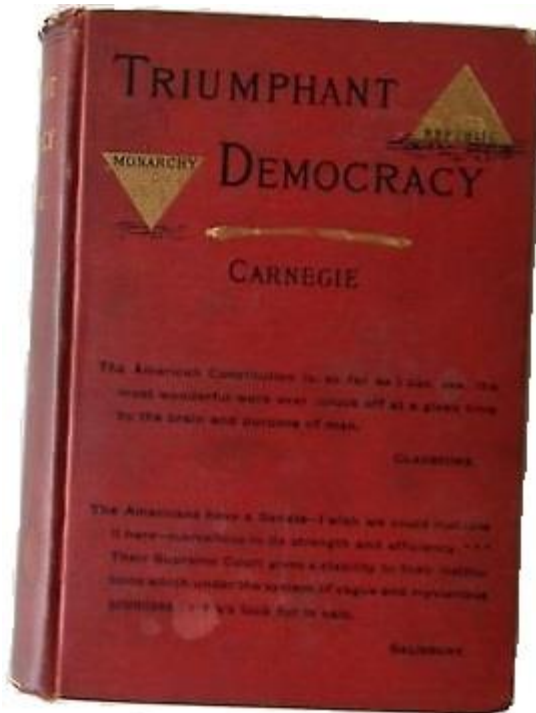
Even before the Homestead strike, Carnegie was unpopular in Canada for other reasons. In 1886 he published a book, *Triumphant Democracy*, in which he proposed the American federal republic as a model to replace the British monarchy. In those pre-WW1 days, when Anglo-Canadians still saw themselves as British (and nowhere more so than at Perth), such impertinence was bad enough, but in the same book Carnegie also wrote,

¹ *Brockville Times*, May 13, 1904, commenting upon resistance at Perth to a Carnegie Library scheme.

² Carnegie later told the Homestead workers “If I had raised your wages, you would have spent that money by buying a better cut of meat or more drink for your dinner. But what you needed, though you didn't know it, was my libraries and concert halls.”

But why talk of Canada, or of any mere colony? What book, what invention, what statue or picture, what anything has a colony ever produced, or what man has grown up in any colony who has become known beyond his local district? None. Nor can a colony ever give to mankind anything of value beyond wood, corn, and beef.

After 1901, when Carnegie sold his steel company to J. P. Morgan for \$480,000,000 (\$16 billion in 2022), he devoted himself to philanthropic causes, explaining that *“The man who dies rich, dies disgraced”*. During the last 18 years of his life, he gave away more than \$350 million (\$5.5 billion in 2022). Many, however, discounted his philanthropy as nothing more than a campaign to polish his tarnished reputation and re-shape his legacy.



Among his charitable initiatives Carnegie built 2,509 public libraries around the world, 125 of them in Canada, including 111 in Ontario.³ However laudable his philanthropy, however, the means by which he had amassed his fortune, and his contempt for Canada and Canadians, were not quickly forgotten or easily forgiven. In 1903, when Brockville Town Council accepted a Carnegie library grant, the local Trades & Labor Council passed a resolution condemning the decision and in 1904, when the possibility of a Carnegie Library was first mooted at Perth, the local newspaper editorialized that,

For our own part, we prefer the town having pride enough and having backbone enough to establish a library of our own. We are not in accord with those in favor of accepting a grant from Carnegie. His 'Triumphant Democracy' is sufficient reason for refusing his dollars, and when the Skibo laird⁴

wounds the patriotic Canadian citizen ... he hopes to soothe the sore with his library grants. Are we Canadians so void of pride that we are the catspaw of Carnegie? Let him keep his gold and we our self respect.⁵

Distain for Carnegie and his tainted lucre may have been widespread, but, at the same time, it was as widely agreed that Perth needed and wanted a public library. By 1903, when a new Carnegie Library project seemed to be announced somewhere in Canada every week, Perth had no functioning library at all, but it was the hope that wealthy men from Perth itself would come forward to fund a free public library.

³ Of the 2,509 Carnegie libraries built between 1883 and 1929, 1,689 were built in the United States, 660 in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 125 in Canada, and the remainder in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, Oceania, South Africa, Mauritius and Malaysia.

⁴ Andrew Carnegie was known as the 'Laird of Skibo', deriving this title from the estate in his native Scotland where he spent much time in his later years. Skibo Castle is located in Sutherland overlooking Dornoch Firth.

⁵ Perth *Courier*, May 20, 1904.

Perth's first library of any kind had been founded in 1825 when Reverend William Bell (1780-1857) "*preached in the courthouse and made a collection for the benefit of the Sabbath School Library. By this means we were enabled to add a number of useful and interesting books, well fitted to engage the attention and to improve the minds of the young*".⁶

Six years later (1831) Bell chaired another courthouse meeting at which 42 founding members signed a constitution and subscribed funds to form the town's first 'public' library. Regrettably, that effort collapsed after only a few years and for the next decade survived only in the form of a 'Congregational Library' at Bell's First Presbyterian Church. Lamenting the town's lack of a proper Library, the *Perth Courier* commented that it was,

... a most surprising circumstance that the importance of an institution of the kind, and the information to be derived from it, did not long ago prompt the inhabitants to an effort to get up one. The Township of Ramsay has no less than three libraries ... Dalhousie has had one for 20 years established under the patronage of the Earl of Dalhousie⁷, and it is truly discreditable to think that the District Town and the whole of Drummond Township within whose bounds it is, has never taken a move in such an important matter.⁸

Yet another public meeting was called in November 1847, this time at the Baptist Church, and a new public library association was launched.⁹

Meanwhile, in 1844, a Mechanics Institute had been established at Perth. Dedicated to 'improving the mind of the working class', Mechanics' Institutes began in the early 1820's in Great Britain and the United States as voluntary associations of working men seeking self-improvement through education. The movement arrived in the Canadas with Institutes established at Montreal in 1828 and Toronto in 1830. By the 1890s there were over 300 Institutes with more than 31,000 members in Ontario alone.

Mechanics' Institutes offered lending libraries, periodical reading rooms and evening lectures. Although the intent had been to serve factory workers and manual laborers, in reality these all-male organizations were generally controlled by merchants, doctors, ministers, lawyers, and the like, and largely served schoolteachers, clerks and shop assistants rather than manual workers. Moreover, members tended to frequent institute libraries and reading rooms to access newspapers, magazines, and popular fiction rather than works of science, art, or religion. Further, institute libraries and other facilities were not available to the general public, but only to those who could and would pay annual membership dues. Perth lawyer and politician Charles J. Foy (1867-1927)¹⁰, who's office was located in the same building as the local Institute, observed that "*At night, it is a club for the richest men in the town ... and in the daytime a rendezvous for boys*".¹¹

⁶ *The Condensed Diaries of Reverend William Bell*, edited by Robert Bell Douglas (1988).

⁷ See *The Dalhousie St. Andrews Society* elsewhere on this site at <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/dalhousie-st-andrews2.pdf>

⁸ *Perth Courier*, October 26, 1847.

⁹ The executive board elected was comprised of President, Rev. William Bell (1780-1857), Presbyterian Minister; Vice President, Roderick Edward Matheson (1825-1901), merchant; William Mair (1819-1864), merchant; and Thomas Brooke Sr. (1809-1891), merchant.

¹⁰ Town Councilor 1899-1916, Mayor 1905-1906, Deputy Reeve and Reeve 1908-1916, Lanark County Warden 1909].

¹¹ *Perth Courier*, January 1, 1904.

Although founded amid much enthusiasm, within three years the Perth Mechanics Institute, like the public library initiatives before it, struck the financial rocks. However, after a four-year shut-down, it was refloated in 1848 and combined with the public library scheme that had been initiated the year before. Under this arrangement, the library was open to the public, but was still not free. Access was subject to an annual subscription fee of five shillings. Through many ups and downs the Mechanics Institute served a fluctuating membership for the next 57 years. For much of that time the institute and library were housed in the Kellock Block at 39-43 Gore Street East, first in the street-level storefront at #39 and later on the second floor, although from 1863 to 1881 the library books were kept in the Town Council chamber, with the Town Clerk responsible for issues and returns.

By the turn of the 20th century the Perth Mechanic's Institute and its associated Public Library once again fell into serious financial trouble. For many years the library, and thus the Institute, had been supported in part by an annual Province of Ontario grant of \$250. In 1902, however, that grant was reduced to \$102, and then further reduced to \$50 in 1903, while the minimum expenditure on new reading material required to qualify for the grant remained unchanged. At the same time, a shrinking membership reduced fee income from \$175 in 1900 to only \$110 in 1902. In February 1903 a Library Board delegation appealed to Town Council for a \$150 municipal grant to help meet its annual operation budget of about \$455.¹² *"The deputation made their case very plain: if the town did not aid them ... the Library would have to be closed. Town Council had two alternatives: take the Public Library over and make it a Free Public Library or make a grant"*.¹³

Council dithered, debating whether or not, under Provincial legislation passed in 1882 governing Mechanics' Institutes and libraries, they could legally make such a grant. A few months later the warnings proved true, and insolvency forced closure of the Mechanic's Institute. Its landlord, James Francis Kellock (1851-1942), briefly seized a part of the 3,000 volume library as security for back-rent owing.

In October 1903 the library board again petitioned Town Council, asking that the town *"take over the assets and pay the liabilities of the library and establish and carry on the same as a free [vs. subscription] public library"*.¹⁴ Council chose to put the question to the electorate, asking in a plebiscite whether or not an annual budget of \$500 to \$600 in public funds should be provided to support a free public library. When the vote was counted on January 4, 1904, the proposition failed by nine votes, 337 to 328.

While accepting that the take-over proposal had been voted down, Town Council chose nevertheless to interpret the narrowness of that defeat as an expression of general support for a Library and Reading Room. The *Perth Courier* agreed; *"the library plebiscite went in the negative, but so small that Council cannot scarcely misinterpret the wish of the people. Perth must have a Free Public Library ..."*. At its next meeting Councillor Charles J. Foy tabled a motion aimed at finding some means to save the local library. It was resolved that,

¹² According to a letter-to-the-editor of the *Perth Courier*, the Town Council's of neighboring communities were paying annual grants to support their Libraries and Reading Rooms amounting to – Smiths Falls \$400, Carleton Place \$350, Almonte \$340. Those libraries also received a grant from the Provincial Government.

¹³ *Perth Courier*, February 27, 1903.

¹⁴ *Perth Courier*, October 16, 1903. The petition was signed by six of Perth's leading citizens - Robert Jamieson (1848-1932), Division Court Clerk 1873-1932; George Alfred Consitt (1836-1925), lawyer and insurance agent; Edward George Malloch (1842-1915), Lanark County Crown Attorney 1975-1915; Duncan Kippen (1830-1926), builder/contractor, Perth Postmaster for 16 years, Mayor 1893-1894; Marcus M. Jaques (1853-1923), Principal of Perth Model School; Andrew McArthur (1837-1911), coal merchant.

... steps should be taken to prevent the present library from becoming defunct, and that the Finance Committee be appointed a special committee to confer with the Library Board with the object of devising some means of carrying out a scheme for a Free Public Library.



Charles James Foy
(1867-1927)

Speaking in support of his motion, Foy argued that, while the plebiscite had failed, public opinion in town was in fact broadly in favor of a Library and Reading Room.

... there is no doubt at all, that if any exertion had been made on the part of those who were anxious, or appeared to be anxious, for the welfare of the library, the plebiscite could have been carried by a large majority ... The plebiscite was merely to get the wish of the people to direct Council, and I think the vote that was taken on it quite justifies the Council to take such steps to establish a library in Perth ... The indebtedness is now \$260 and if anything is going to be done, it must be done at once, before the indebtedness increases. It would be too bad if the books had to be frittered away to pay this debt.¹⁵

When the Finance Committee and Library Board met, it was decided “to enquire of Mr. Andrew Carnegie the conditions of the grant he gives to municipalities desiring of establishing a Free Public Library”.¹⁶

In 1897, Andrew Carnegie had hired James Bertram (1872-1934) as his personal assistant and made him responsible for managing library grant requests. It was Bertram who replied to Perth’s letter with an outline of conditions. The Town had to provide land, buy books, hire staff, commit to paying maintenance and upkeep costs (at the annual rate of 10% of any grant amount awarded), and not charge membership or entrance fees. Bertram included a questionnaire inquiring about the town’s population, whether it had any other libraries, how large its book collection was, and what its circulation figures were.

Public opinion may have favoured a Free Public Library and Reading Room, but there was less willingness to pay for one, yet the alternative, a facility funded by Andrew Carnegie, faced fierce opposition. The Perth *Courier* spoke for many when it wrote “*Let him keep his gold and we our self respect.*”¹⁷ In the court of public opinion, the issue was deadlocked.

In conjunction with the January 1905 municipal election a by-law authorizing establishment of a free public library in Perth was submitted for the approval of local electors. The library initiative itself passed 294 to 284, but once again, the associated money by-law to fund such a library from town revenue was defeated 219 to 176. With homegrown financing off the table, over the course of the following year the Carnegie option was debated at length, around the council table and throughout the town at large, but without resolution. Library supporters claimed the opposition camp was composed of not only of anti-Carnegieites, but of,

¹⁵ Perth Courier, January 15, 1904.

¹⁶ Perth *Courier*, February 12, 1904.

¹⁷ Perth *Courier*, May 20, 1904.

*Regular obstructionists of every plan that is advanced in the town's interest. Those who have wilfully misrepresented and distorted the question. Those who want a library but no reading room. Those who want a reading room but no library. Those who want a library and reading room, but do not want a library building presented to the town as a gift.*¹⁸

Unnamed clergymen, wishing to exclude a flood of immoral novels from the United States, were also said to be providing moral support to the opposition.

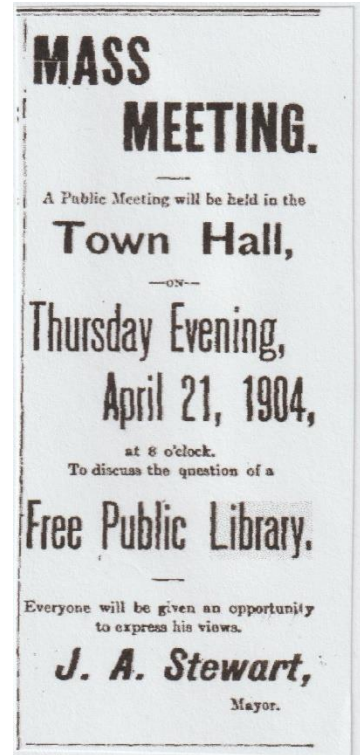
By January 1906, however, opinion began to shift when supporters of a Carnegie financed library organized under better leadership as the Perth Scientific & Literary Society, where

*... sentiment extended into the larger question of a free public library and reading room. That there is a majority for a Literary Society, Library and Reading Room in town no one will deny, and that it is coming is certain. The sentiment is ripe, Carnegie Library sentiment is also popular and is growing in favor. Of that there is no doubt.*¹⁹

With a new library-supporting Town Council elected for 1906, and the recently formed Literary Society leading the charge, the *Perth Courier*, speaking for many of those who opposed soiling the town's honor with Carnegie money, surrendered to the seemingly only workable solution.

The Courier on previous occasions intimated that gifts from local citizens would be more acceptable than one from Carnegie. These have not been forthcoming and the desire in town for a library being so general, our personal and sentimental feelings are bowed to the dictates of necessity.

*Be it thoroughly understood we did not at any time oppose the principle of building a library. We believed then and do now that a library building is necessary if interest in a free library is to be sustained. We would urge that the Council go right ahead with the Carnegie Library ... accept a grant, vote a sufficient amount to buy a site, and take all donations made for the primary equipment of the library with literature.*²⁰



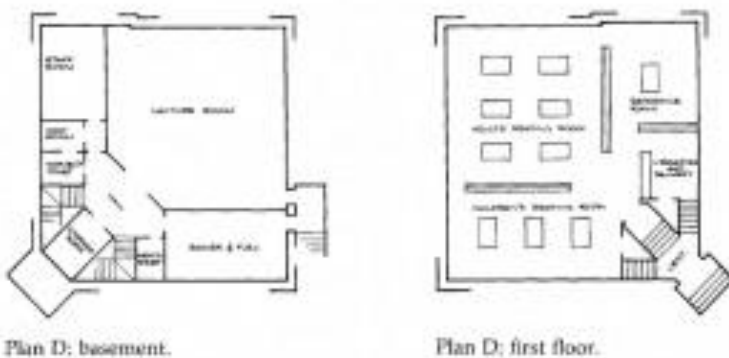
¹⁸ *Perth Courier*, March 23, 1906.

¹⁹ *Perth Courier*, January 26, 1906.

²⁰ *Perth Courier*, February 9, 1906.

In March 1906 Town Council finally took concrete action, approving a debenture by-law to raise \$1,500 to purchase a site upon which to erect a building paid for by Andrew Carnegie. A new Library Board of Management was named²¹ and the plot of land at 77 Gore Street East, opposite Town Hall, purchased from John A. Stewart (1867-1922)²² for the sum of \$1,470. With the building site in hand, in May the Library Board formally applied for a \$10,000²³ Carnegie grant, supported by a municipal guarantee to provide \$1,000 in annually operating funds (10% of the grant total).

The application was promptly approved, the funds transferred to the credit of the Library Board, and two months later the construction contract, inclusive of all masonry, carpentry, lighting, heating, plumbing, etc., was awarded to Casper J. Speagle (1864-1943) of Westport, Ontario. Work began almost immediately and, except for a short strike by stone cutters in September 1906, continued for the next year.



Floor Plan-D from 'Notes On Library Buildings', by James Bertram

On behalf of Carnegie, James Bertram had compiled a booklet entitled *Notes On Library Buildings* that was sent to all grant applicants. Architectural criteria included a lecture room, reading rooms for adults and children, a staff room, a centrally located librarian's desk, 12-to-15-foot ceilings, and large windows six to seven feet above the floor. The guidelines also set out six approved floor plans, 'A' Through 'F'. The

Perth Library Board chose Plan-D. No specific architectural style was recommended for the exterior, but overly ornate designs were usually refused funding.

Incorporating Bertram's requirements, the building was designed by Frank Darling (1850-1923), one of the most distinguished architects practicing in Canada at the time and the first Canadian architect to win the Royal Institute of British Architects Gold Medal (1915). Over his career, Darling designed more than 1,000 bank buildings and the Perth Library was modeled on the Bank of Montreal's head office in Toronto (now home to the Hockey Hall of Fame).

²¹ Province of Ontario regulations required that Public Library Boards be composed of nine members – two appointed by the Separate School Board, three appointed by the Board of Education, three appointed by the Town Council, plus the Town Mayor. The members of the first Carnegie Library Board were William Stevens Senkler (1838-1920), County Judge; Dr. Andrew W. P. Dwyer (1860-1939), medical doctor; Dr. John Robert Mitchell (1869-1906), dentist; James Alexander Allan (1859-1921), lawyer; John Andrew Kerr (1852-1940), Town Clerk; Thomas Andrew Wright (1868-1927), hatter & furrier; George William Rogers (1862-1943), hardware merchant; James McDonagh (1857-1929), potash manufacturer, town councilor; Charles James Foy (1867-1927), lawyer, mayor.

²² John Alexander Stewart - lawyer, Perth Town Councilor 1897-1898, Perth Mayor 1900-1904, publisher of the *Perth Expositor*, President of Henry K. Wampole Co. Ltd. (Perth), Andrew Jergens Co. Ltd., Perth Shoe Co. Ltd. and Perth Improvement Co. Ltd., Chairman of the Perth Board of Trade, Director of the Frost & Wood Co. Ltd. (Smiths Falls), Member of Parliament for Lanark South 1918-1921, Minister of Railways and Canals 1921-1922.

²³ Most small towns in Canada received a grant of \$10,000.

The completed three-storey edifice was a Beaux Arts structure characterized by its solid mass, red and yellow brick façade with rough cut stone on the base for rustication. Incorporating arched windows, two-storey pilasters, monumental pale yellow pediments and balustrade on the parapet, its angled entrance faces the corner of Gore and Basin Streets. There are two square-headed doors, each with a glass panel, double-hung sash windows with a gable top and continuous wood trim on the third floor, and half-circle window on the second floor above the entranceway.



The Perth (Carnegie) Free Public Library c1908

While the building was under construction, local women's organizations conducted a fund-raising campaign. Two door-to-door canvases and an art show raised \$1,815 toward furnishing and equipping the library.

Finally, after five years of debate and considerable discord, Perth's Free Public Library was officially opened on the evening Friday, December 27, 1907, by Ontario Lieutenant Governor Dr. Herbert Bruce (1868-1963). No one representing the man who paid for the project was invited or attended. In relief, above the entrance, in letters more than a foot high, was the single word *LIBRARY*. The name 'Carnegie' appeared nowhere on the building (as was almost always the case with Carnegie libraries Canada). Accepting an anti-monarchist, republican, robber baron's blood money was one thing, acknowledging it, was quite another.²⁴

²⁴ Well aware that he was not popular, Carnegie did not require that his name be placed on the buildings he paid for.

It was not until 28 years later that the philanthropist's generosity was fully acknowledged. At a November 1935 ceremony, Librarian Hattie Nicoll (1873-1943) unveiled a portrait of Carnegie, hung in the main reading room, "a gift of the Carnegie Foundation of New York in observance of the centennial of his birth".²⁵



**Lt. Governor Herbert Bruce
(1868-1963)**

The book collection and separate reading rooms for men and women were located on the main floor where patrons could also peruse a range of periodicals including English newspapers, quarterlies, the *Illustrated London News*, *Punch*, and Canadian and New York papers. Downstairs there was a smoking room where patrons could smoke, talk, and play checkers, chess, or whist. The basement also housed a room for resident caretaker George L. McCullough (1870-1946), a public toilet boasting hot and cold water, and the furnace. The top floor provided a meeting room and a number of smaller rooms where, after 1925, the Archibald M. Campbell (1868-1948) Museum was housed²⁶. The library was open 12 hours a day, 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Use of the facility was free to Perth residents and available to non-residents at a fee of \$1.00 per year.

Compiled by librarian Hattie Nicoll, who went on to serve in the post for 30 years (1907-1938), the library catalogue for 1908, made available at 15¢ copy, ran to over 100 pages, with the book collection arranged by subject area. In its first month of operation the library logged 450 borrowers.



Perth's Carnegie Library after the fire of January 1980.²⁷

²⁵ *Perth Courier*, November 29, 1935.

²⁶ The museum moved to more spacious quarters at the Matheson House in 1966.

²⁷ Photos courtesy of Brent McLaren.

Carnegie's brick and stone edifice at the corner of Gore and Basin Street served the people of Perth, young and old, for the next 73 years. Then, on the evening of January 3, 1980, a fire broke out in the basement and, racing upward, completely gutted the building. Despite the efforts of 50 fire-fighters from three departments working in sub-zero temperatures, the blaze destroyed 62,000 books, paintings, antiques, maps, and historical documents, valued at more than \$1,000,000.

Although the interior of the library was totally destroyed and its roof collapsed into the shell, the brick walls and steel frame were found to have survived without serious damage. In 1982 the building was sold to Gordon W. McMillan (1921-2012) who restored the structure, returning it to life housing various commercial tenants. It is now known as the McMillan Building. Perth's is one of 40 Carnegie libraries in Canada that have been converted to other uses. Twenty others have been demolished, but 65 continue to serve their intended purpose including those at Brockville, Carleton Place, Renfrew and Smiths Falls.

In 1981 Perth's Carnegie Library on Gore Street was replaced when the Perth & District Union Library opened in a new facility at 30 Herriott Street.

"There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration."

"A library outranks any one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert."

– Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919)

- **Ron W. Shaw (2022)**