

History of the Portsmouth Public Library

The first library in Portsmouth began in 1831 at the corner of Front and Market Streets. It closed after just a few years. The next effort was a reading room maintained in the Peebles home on Front Street. Books were donated and a small fee was charged for maintenance. This continued for several years until 1879, when state legislation provided funding for a city library.

The Portsmouth Public Library was established in 1879 in a building donated by the Board of Education at the corner of Fifth and Court Streets. Colonel James Wharton was the first librarian, and through his efforts the collection grew to more than 5,000 volumes.

By 1901, the library had outgrown the location at Fifth and Court Streets. Mr. Henry A. Lorberg, a prominent Portsmouth businessman and an avid historian, took action. He contacted the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who had a passion for promoting learning and libraries. Mr. Carnegie agreed to donate \$50,000. He made no restrictions on the size, location, or style of the library. However, he did stipulate that “there should be no building near enough to interfere in any way so as to affect the light of the library building” and he wanted “an area entirely around the building as to give plenty of light and air.”

Both Tracy Park and York Park were considered as sites for the new library, but after considerable discussion and debate, a one-acre lot on the south side of Gallia Street was selected. The lot, adjoining Dr. Sellard’s property, was owned by W. G. Williams. Mr. Williams had started a foundation for his home, but he was agreeable to change. An article in the Portsmouth Times on Thursday, June 5, 1902, stated that the location “is admirably adapted for the purpose named. It will permit a large lawn, with lights and can be made into a most beautiful place. The price of

the ground is about \$9,000, a very reasonable figure, in fact is worth more, no good buildings will of necessity have to be torn down, and no buildings can encroach on it and darken the rooms.”

The architect was C. E. Richards, of the firm of Richards, McCarty and Bulford of Columbus, Ohio. The local firm of Smith Lumber was awarded the contract, and stone came from the Reitz stone quarries on the west side. The “Carnegie” Library opened with a formal ceremony at 7 p.m. on the evening of February 1, 1906. Growth was strong and steady.

During the influenza epidemic of 1918, the library was closed and all books were recalled by order of the Board of Health. In the devastating 1937 flood, between 8,000 and 9,000 books were damaged, including a part of the valuable Ohio history collection. Floodwaters reached a height of 22 inches on the main floor.

The library at 1220 Gallia Street has gone through many changes over the years. The exterior of the building maintains the beauty of the original architecture. When expansion became necessary, additions were constructed in 1971 and 1995. Both times the additions blended perfectly with the older portion. The second addition provided space for the Audio-Visual and Local History Departments and an expanded area for the Youth Services Department.

Bookmobile service began in 1938, expanding library services throughout the county. The first branch was opened in New Boston in 1941. Additional branches in South Webster, Wheelersburg and Lucasville provide library services convenient for all Scioto county citizens. The most recent services added are the Homebound program and the Technology Center.