



A Brief History

THE EARLY YEARS

The conception of the Kanawha County Public Library came about in July 1908, when the Woman's Kanawha Literary Club appointed a committee to organize action in support of a public library for Charleston, West Virginia. Their plans became a reality when on June 3, 1909, the Charleston Public Library opened under the direction of Miss Mabel Delle Jones, Librarian, with 1,200 volumes. The Library was housed in the YMCA building at Capitol and Washington streets.

In the early years of its existence, the Library's quarters were changed frequently. The first move occurred in the summer of 1912 when the YMCA needed space to accommodate its own expanding services. Rent-free rooms were provided by the First Presbyterian Church on Quarrier Street and the Library moved into the former residence of their pastor. On May 15, 1913 the Library was moved to the lower floor of the YMCA building on Virginia Street, just east of McFarland and began paying rent. On September 3, 1914, other quarters were found on the corner of Kanawha and McFarland Streets and again the Library moved. The Library remained here until March 1921, when it moved to the Red Cross building on the levee near Capitol Street.

In May 1926 the Library moved to its first permanent home, the former Capitol Annex Building which stood on Lee Street between Hale and Dickinson. Purchase of the building for \$400,000 was made possible by a gift of \$100,000 by Colonel Albert E. Humphreys, which inspired other contributions.

EXPANDING SERVICE

In 1934 the Charleston Public Library became the Kanawha County Public Library.

That same year Bookmobile service was started and was known as the Book Truck and/or Traveling Branch Library. In 1953 the Kanawha County Board of Education gave the library \$10,000 to purchase a new Bookmobile. By July of 1990, the Library had raised the \$82,000 needed for a new Bookmobile which had a capacity for 3,500 items. When the library purchased a new bookmobile in 2010, this bus was donated to a local food pantry. The current Mobile Library began service in January 2010 and operates Monday through Thursday (and other days as needed for special events), visiting 26 locations throughout the month, including 7 schools.

A solid foundation was provided for the Library by John V. Ray who, with diligence and vision, prepared and successfully guided the Kanawha County Public Library Act through its passage by the West Virginia Legislature (Chapter 178 of the Acts of 1957). Its mandate declared that appropriated support shall come from the Kanawha County Board of Education, the Kanawha County Commission and the City of Charleston. The constitutionality of the act was unanimously upheld by the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia which declared, in part, that; "huge sums of money have been expended in the state pursuant to statutes, city ordinances, or orders of county courts for the physical development or pleasure of its citizens. Football stadiums...recreation centers...swimming pools, public parks and other public recreational and entertainment areas exist in all sections of the state. Public Libraries are scarce. However, we find that they are as much a public function as are the other enterprises heretofore mentioned. The importance of physical development cannot be minimized, and the importance of mental development must not be minimized."

The Library kept growing and by the fifties, the Library Board began considering alternatives of renovating the Lee Street building or finding a new location. The Federal Building at 123 Capitol Street, originally built to house the Post Offices, Federal courtrooms and other Federal government offices and agencies, was vacated and declared surplus property. In 1964, following negotiations with the Federal Government, the General Services Administration agreed to sell the property to the Library Board for \$500,000 payable over 20 years at 4.5% interest.

FINDING A HOME

In November 1966 the Charleston Library closed its doors at the old Lee Street location and began the move to Capitol Street, opening a new year at its new location on January 4, 1967.

This began a new era for the Kanawha County Public Library. John V. Ray directed the sale of the former library site at Lee, Hale and Dickinson Streets to the National Bank of Commerce for the unexpected sum of \$711,000, which according to the Charleston Daily Mail was "believed to have established one of the all-time high prices for downtown real estate." The newspaper editorialized, "The Kanawha County Public Library is about to come into its own and its success makes pleasant reading." Additional construction funds were received through the Federal Library Services and Construction Act and the Appalachian Regional Development Act. The 1.5 million dollar renovation project was begun. Only the classic facade of the former Federal Building remained. The interior was extensively remodeled for library use.

The firm financial foundation established with the passage of the Special Bill in 1957 has been strengthened by annual per capita grants from the State of West Virginia through the West Virginia Library Commission. Gifts have also played an important role in the life of this institution. In addition to the generous contribution of Colonel Humphrey in 1920, a gift of \$40,000 from the Joe Lowenstein Memorial Foundation made possible the exterior landscaping of the main library, including the sculptured fountain. Sculptor Robert Cronbach designed it to represent "water falling over rocks and mountains."

BRANCH DEVELOPMENT

1963 saw the emergence of the first branch library in St. Albans, where local citizens had started a volunteer library in 1952. Through a tremendous local fund-raising effort and a federal Library Services and Construction Act grant, a new library was built in 1963 and turned over to the Kanawha County Public Library to operate. Local fundraising efforts continued and a second floor was added in 1971.

No other branch libraries developed until the mid-1970s, when a combination of increased federal dollars and state money earmarked for library construction resulted in a flurry of activity. Like St. Albans, Dunbar had a community library that was established in 1965. Through local fundraising efforts and grants of federal money Dunbar was able to build a new, modern library and in 1977 turned it over to the Kanawha County Public Library to operate.

In most other areas of the county, groups of interested citizens organized into library boards – particularly in areas of heavy Bookmobile use. These local boards raised funds and applied to the West Virginia Library Commission for federal and state grants for library construction. Although these local boards worked in cooperation with the Kanawha County Public Library, the Kanawha County Public Library never had any overall plan for the development of branch libraries. As a result of these local efforts the following branches were built and turned over to the Kanawha County Public Library to operate: Cross Lanes – 1976; Elk Valley – 1977; Sissonville – 1979; and Marmet – 1980.

In Glasgow, thanks to federal revenue sharing, a large, modern town hall was built in 1976. The town approached the Kanawha County Public Library about using some extra space in the new building for a library, and consequently branch service began in Glasgow in 1976. The Clendenin branch was initially an affiliate library (having some, but not all of the benefits of a full branch), but became a full branch in 1988 after certain conditions were met.

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

In 1989 the Library received a one million dollar endowment from the estate of former Library Board member Bernard Jacobson. Mr. Jacobson served as a Board member from October 1964 to June 1986. The interest from this endowment is used to purchase library materials. We are indebted to the thousands of Library users over the years who have donated and continue to donate funds for library materials in honor of an individual or occasion or in memory of a loved one.

The major development in the 1980s was the automation of the circulation and cataloging functions of the library. Planning began in 1983 and in July 1985 the online circulation of materials was begun. In 1988 card catalogs were removed and the public catalog was made available online. This was a major step forward in making the entire library system's collection available to all citizens of the county. As a result there has been a significant increase in the interchange of materials among the various public libraries in Kanawha County.

In 1990 the Library's Board of Directors approved the Library's first Long Range Plan. As a result of this Plan a study was made of the library system's facilities and a twenty year plan to improve the space available to serve the public was approved by the Board of Directors in January 1993. In response to patron demand and input from leaders and citizens all across the community, in 2006, the library launched a campaign to build a state-of-the-art Main Library in downtown Charleston and to make improvements to six of our nine branches, finalizing the long-range plan that the Library Board established in 1990. The Open a Modern Classic capital campaign was launched and fundraising continued for several years.

In 2011, the first project of the campaign was completed when a new 8,500 square foot Elk Valley Branch Library opened at The Crossings Mall in Elkview.

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