

HISTORY OF MILLER LIBRARY

Miller Unit Appropriately Named After Life-Long Reading Devotee

Willis E. Miller, 1840-1904, in whose memory a fund was bequeathed to the Town of Hamden for a library and for whom Miller Memorial Library is named, lived a full, active and useful life in his 63 years. As a family man he was warmly devoted to his wife and two daughters, and as a business man he was conscientious to a degree about every minutest detail aimed at perfection of production and complete satisfaction for the consumers of his manufactured goods.

As a public-spirited citizen he accepted arduous responsibilities in the directorship of countless groups, including 32 such differing enterprises as two New Haven banks, The Palladium newspaper, the Hygeia Ice Co., the Henry Hooker Carriage Co., and Trinity Church; and in Hamden, the Woodruff shop, the Mt. Carmel Bolt Co. and the Central Burying Ground.

Miller was a typical self-made man. All the schooling he ever had was received in the one-room schoolhouse in Mt. Carmel, the first to be built in the town. The Axle Works at the head of the Sleeping Giant was his business, where he worked up from the bottom to the presidency, and he created a number of important inventions there. He traveled all over the country in the interests of the company.

Until his marriage, he lived in the Miller homestead, a little north of Mt. Carmel Congregational Church and across the street. He and his family lived for eight years in the Nathaniel Sherman house a little south of the church; but they lived longer in the Orange St., New Haven, residence, and in those years, Mr. Miller commuted daily to the Axle Works by train on the Northampton Line.

The daughters, Gertrude and Mabel were, as is so often true of sisters, utterly unlike; Gertrude was gentle, sympathetic, thoughtful, rarely critical, a real philosopher, and interested in everything in a

happy way. Mabel had a volatile temperament, one moment up on the heights of delight and down in a trice to the depths of pessimism or displeasure. She enjoyed vigorous sports such as tennis, shooting and horseback riding, and she was tireless in her pleasure in dancing.

Among the many gifts which Miller lavished upon his children, none were more consistently chosen and bestowed than good books.

The Millers were friendly, neighborly people, always doing kind and generous things for relatives, friends and neighbors. Miller had a great

deal of experience in the settlement of estates, and he made it a rule from a high sense of duty to accept the position of administrator or guardian whenever he was asked to do so.

Mrs. Miller was devoted to her husband, children, and household responsibilities. She outlived her husband 20 years; and when she died she left the library bequest in his memory in the close knowledge of his lifelong desire to be of service and usefulness to his town, his neighbors, and any person or group to whom his talents could be helpful.

Town Library Started With 50 Borrowed Books

The earliest library facilities open to the public in the last 60 years in Hamden, were offered in Mt. Carmel in 1899, and very soon after that a group in Centerville made its first efforts toward a collection of books. The unique way in which Mt. Carmel books were obtained was borrowing 50 at a time from a Bridgeport traveling library, and distributing them from the post office room. The library association was formed in 1900 and it soon had 51 members.

For seven years books were dispensed from a room in the building on the south east corner of Whitney Ave. and Ives St., and at one time quarters were used on the second floor of the store on the opposite corner. The next move was to the little white No. 4 schoolhouse that nestled under the hill across the street from the present quarters, where the library stayed for 14 years.

It was in 1922 that the town, in abandoning the two-room school on the avenue, was willing to turn it over to the library group, which has occupied it ever since.

While there was a nucleus of a small gift fund, the legacy received from the estate of Howard Bradley was the largest, and when the library facilities were turned over to the town in 1943, the association kept title to the building, and its invested funds. The income from the latter is used for repairs and added facilities for the building and for regular purchases of library books.

There was a unique feature also in the beginnings of the Centerville library group, in that 27 books were found in the cellar of the old Town Hall by the town clerk, a Centerville resident, who gave them to the group that was trying to form a book collection for public use in the rectory of Grace Church.

When the library association was organized the books were moved from the parish house to the Knox Shoe Shop, then to the room over the hardware store, and at last to the erstwhile Lay house that had been used by the Telephone Company, and which in 1931 the association purchased.

The Thimble Club, a corporate member of the association, worked throughout the years for the benefit of the library. Two of its members, Mrs. Walter Lay and Miss Lillian Jones left it legacies, as did Robert Sanford. These funds plus the money from the sale of the building, have been retained by the group, and interest is expended reg-

ularly for books and other helpful library things, two of which were the kitchen set and the grand piano for the Miller meeting room.

On the west side of town, plans to provide sort of library service, at least for children, began in 1941 in the Family Society quarters on Dixwell Ave., then were offered for four months in 1443 Dixwell Ave., and later in a second floor room at 11 Dixwell Ave. Following a campaign for funds, the Community group had, at the end of the first year, \$1,200 and 1,900 books.

Soon after the Legislature set up the Library Board in 1943, all three privately controlled libraries were turned over to the town.

The RTM approved a \$200,000 library bond issue in 1944 and three buildings were erected—Community on Central Ave.; Whitneyville on Putnam Ave.; and Miller in Centerville, the cost of which combined town funds at the Miller bequest. Community opened October 1944; Whitneyville January 1945; and Miller February 1952.

MILLER LIBRARY
2901 DIXWELL AVE.
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For more information, see pamphlet file - Hamden Libraries.

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