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Florida Library History Project

Maitland Public Library

A Century of Service

by
Nancy Long

"In the good company of the written word"

Unfortunately, no one is around who can remember that first dedication, but we know there was prayer and "interesting addresses" and "a very delightful Fair gotten up and conducted by the ladies...A great variety of beautiful needle work was displayed, and delicious home made confectionery, ice cream, grape fruit ade, punch, etc. were served. All found ready purchasers, resulting in a profit to the Library Association of \$250."

That was an impressive sum in 1908 to help support the operation of a brand new library building and an example of the community's support and involvement from the library's beginning.

In 1896 Mrs. Clara J. Dommerich figured it was high time the town of Maitland, incorporated nine years earlier, had a public library befitting its legal status. She gave 360 books from her personal library, and Miss Emma Dart, teacher at the Maitland elementary school on Maitland Avenue, gladly kept those treasured volumes (three biographies, 16 volumes of history, three books of travel, nine of poetry, nine of religion and the remainder fiction and a few juveniles) in her living room for the townspeople to share.

When the library began to outgrow Miss Dart's living room, W.B. Jackson offered the use of a room in his store on Horatio Avenue, adjacent to the railroad depot. There, in the good company of the written word, Maitland residents gathered on Saturday afternoons to socialize and to check out books. Miss Margaret Simmons, later Mrs. C.B. McNair and mother of longtime resident Isabel Hulburt, took over as librarian.

There were few amusements other than gathering with one's neighbors in those days, and in any case, there were no automobiles to get quickly to distractions in other towns, so the Horatio storefront library became an early social center. Always willing to lend their support, the women of the town raised money for that temporary facility through bake sales and other affairs.

The town grew as an agricultural hub for the production of Florida's orange gold, and by 1902 it could boast of a hotel, the Park House, fine enough to attract notable Northern tourists, including Miss Rose Elizabeth Cleveland, sister of the President. Each year more books were added to Mrs. Dommerich's initial contribution, mostly by Northerners who maintained winter homes in Maitland. It wasn't long before the community began to feel its expanding library deserved a permanent home.

"This gem of architecture"

On February 6, 1907, 31 residents met with a single goal in mind. They organized the Maitland Library Association, with E.P. Boynton as the president and Isaac Vanderpool head of the building committee "for the purpose of erecting a library building."

Considering the length of time it takes today to build community support for a public building, apply for grants and conduct fund-raising campaigns--to say nothing of construction delays and cost overruns--what those 31 residents accomplished in less than a year is nothing short of miraculous. Even more so when you consider that the architectural style and the construction of the Maitland Library are as classic and as sturdy today as they were 88 years ago.

The site the new Maitland Library Association chose for a library was a municipal park at Maitland and Ventris Avenues, owned by the town and supervised by the Ladies Park Association. Apparently the Ladies Park Association was only too willing to surrender its park rights to the cause, for it also donated its funds to the library. The town donated the site, and the women of the town raised \$3,000 which was matched by L.F. Dommerich, husband of the founder, as an endowment for the library's operation. Architect Charles B. Waterhouse drew the plans and donated them. Miss Maggie Simmons continued as librarian.

It's no wonder the town was proud in 1908 when "this gem of architecture" was dedicated "in the presence of an assembly, including friends from Altamonte and Winter Park that crowded the building."

With its wide central fireplace and a convenient kitchen, the library immediately began to serve not only as a repository for books, but as a popular community meeting place. The fireplace-centered room was a cozy area to sit and read, but also, with its grand piano, a fine place for concerts. There were lectures and community suppers as well. In 1910 the fence of brick and iron was built around the grounds, and in 1911 bronze letters were placed above the doors.

The library was open from 2 to 5 p.m. Wednesdays, and on other days it was used by The Needlework Guild and for the myriad of other arts and social gatherings that took place there.

In the decade from 1910 to 1920 its interior was "modernized" with such technological advances as electric lights and its grounds expanded when adjacent land was donated by the Misses Mary C. and Clara M. Ely. The exterior was further enhanced when the Maitland Circle of the Garden Clubs planted trees and shrubs and the town and residents donated a sprinkler system.

`Good works' and bare-bones budgets

In 1924 Miss Stella Waterhouse was named librarian and henceforth dedicated her life to the loving care of the little white brick building and its collection that nurtured so many minds over the 30 years of her tenure. As with many generations of Maitland library supporters, her genealogy was entwined with the library and with Maitland history--her father, William, was an early settler, and her brother, Charles, was the building's architect. She retired in 1953, at the age of 82.

During the `20s boom the library board felt its good fortune had increased almost as much as that of the early land speculators. Many new books were bought, and local residents as well as winter visitors gave substantial numbers of reference books, biographies, scientific works and classics, as well as fiction and juvenile works. The annual circulation had increased until in 1926 it reached 3,140.

Appropriately, the board decided in 1927 to open the library three afternoons a

week. By 1930, when the circulation had reached 4,300, the board opened the library every day from 3 to 6 p.m. Miss Stella, as she was always affectionately known, saw a salary increase from \$25 to \$50 a month!

But by 1932, the Florida boom had gone bust, and the Depression had spread over the nation; it was decided that the library couldn't afford to stay open six days a week, and hours reverted back to 3 to 6 p.m. three days a week. Although Miss Stella had to work many more than nine hours a week to keep the building running and the books on the shelves, her salary dropped back to \$25; still, her dedication never waned.

In 1932, to give legal status to a now well-established institution, the board incorporated the library on March 29 under the laws of the State of Florida as a nonprofit corporation.

The next decades that embraced the World War II years saw slow but steady growth for the library; frugal administration kept it on solid ground. Volunteers held bake sales to raise money and helped maintain the grounds to save money.

In a March 29, 1948, letter to Alex L. Dommerich, president of the library board, secretary Anna B. Treat commended the board and volunteers on the "great success" of a Garden Tour and pointed out the board would be very cautious in spending the money raised. "There are some repairs that are essential but I hope we can keep them at a minimum until costs go down. The roof has not leaked at all this winter, so we should not have to worry over that."

Mr. Dommerich, who succeeded his father as president of the board, responded by underscoring the need for fiscal restraint. Such caution was understandable in those struggling years when the little independent library depended for its survival on fund-raising projects and the goodwill of the community through donations.

"...the Library ought to be congratulated on the good works that have been done," wrote Mr. Dommerich, "and also in regard to the Garden Tour, which I think was quite an event. As I understand it, you took in \$300 from this Tour, but I really do not think that we should go to work now and spend this money. We should be very cautious about it and only spend money where it is necessary."

Growth and the 'necessity of life'

But where monetary caution was necessary, growth was not to be denied, especially after the Dommerich family sold their great 210-acre Lake Minnehaha estate for \$420,000 in 1954, and the way was paved for an "exclusive subdivision" that would bring in hundreds of new families. By the late '50s demands for the library's services were increasing as rapidly as the population, and once again in its history a benefactor who had adopted the town as though he were a native came forward.

In 1959 George Morrison gave \$45,445 for an expansion, 34-foot-long wings on the north and south of the building. The money he donated, plus additional contributions to the building fund, brought the total to more than \$50,900. When the project was complete, expenses totaled \$49,112. That amount provided for construction, including a new parking lot; landscaping; the purchase of library furniture, equipment and more books. While great credit can be given to the library board for its management in accomplishing these things for less than \$50,000, one does pause to consider the changing value of the dollar as well.

At ceremonies for the opening of the new wings on May 7, 1960, the Reverend John F. Fedders eloquently dedicated the library "TO ALL CITIZENS of the town of Maitland and its environs who consider this building not a luxury but a necessity of life..."

That fall, a group of residents who believed firmly in the reverend's words got together and started the Friends of the Maitland Public Library. One of their first projects was to launch the popular library book sales, raising money through the sale of donated used books.

Those sales, held in April and October, have been more than a labor of love for loyal library supporters or a much-anticipated event for the community. The Friends' efforts over the years have raised thousands of dollars--since 1967, they have donated \$75,000 to the library.

The sales began on the front lawn of the library and after the addition of the Multipurpose Room moved inside. Through the years, Julie Champion has been a guiding spirit as chairman of the sales. She and other volunteers have logged

countless hours sorting and labeling used books that are deposited religiously in the green trash container in the parking lot and just as religiously organized and marked every Wednesday.

The Friends incorporated in 1976 and in 1984 published the Best of Friends cookbook as another fund-raising effort. Headed today by President Claire Simon, they have sponsored travelogues, political forums and literary and cultural programs for the community. Twice yearly the Friends publish a library newsletter and distribute it to all residents of Maitland.

With Maitland's growth in the 1960s, demands on the library grew even greater, much to the betterment of the collection. "Professional people were more demanding," says Elizabeth Wood, chairman of the Maitland Public Library Board of Trustees and a member of the board since 1962. "They wanted a good business collection, for example, and so we have a collection you wouldn't expect in a library of this size. They contributed to the growth and diversity of our collection."

But while the independent library continued to grow solidly in depth, its financial stability continued to depend on the goodwill of donors. Then, in 1965, the City of Maitland budgeted \$12,332 toward the operating costs of the library.

Elizabeth Wood remembers those exact figures well, for that year was the beginning of the city's financial help that was to ease the board's fiscal concerns. "Until then our primary source of income came after we sent letters of appeal to all citizens in Maitland. We stuffed and licked and stamped and hoped we would get enough money to operate the next year."

Indeed, the city's budget line for the Maitland Public Library increased each year thereafter until it reached \$34,140 in 1971 (the library board had agreed willingly after 1965 to send out no more letters of appeal).

'A happy relationship'

By that time, however, it was apparent once again that the library needed to grow to accommodate the needs of its patrons. The city agreed to float a bond to finance the building of a new city hall as well as a library extension. Because the city

could not use tax money to build on private property, the library board agreed to turn over all assets of the library--the grounds, building and collection-- to the city.

With that agreement the city not only continued to fund the operating budget of the library but to maintain the building and grounds. "It is a happy relationship," says Elizabeth Wood. "What they did [the city accepting the transferral of property and leasing it back to the library] made it all work. We maintain the corporate structure and can still receive gifts." "

The city wanted us to keep the nonprofit corporate status for that purpose," says John Bolte, president of the Maitland Public Library, Inc. and a member of the board since 1972. With almost every construction addition the library has made, funds for such things as furnishings and equipment have come from the nonprofit corporation, he points out. "The corporation has also established a book endowment fund for donations and memorials. Interest on this endowment allows us to buy additional books for the library."

While the city maintains property and grounds, the library hires staff, manages operations and purchases its collections. Each year the Maitland Public Library Board submits an audit to the city, and each year it presents the Maitland City Council with a proposed budget for the coming year.

Today Mayor Robert Breaux enthusiastically agrees with Elizabeth Wood's opinion that the library has enjoyed a "happy relationship" with the city. "From all the comments I hear, it is one of our most prominent features. Everybody I talk to is positive not only about the library staff, but its collection and buildings." It is not uncommon, he adds, to get quite a turnout when a library request is on the City Council agenda. City staff, Mayor Breaux says, is both "very protective and very supportive of the library." When potential disasters threaten, the city staff takes all precautions to protect the building and collections under the city's Emergency Management Plan.

In July 1973, groundbreaking for the west wing was held. In March 1974, the new \$227,944 addition opened, adding 5,000 square feet to the library. It was funded through \$180,000 raised by the city bond issue and \$47,944 from library funds.

The following year 75,000 books were circulated, 28,000 patrons had passed

through the doors and there were 6,500 active library card holders. The library was open a full day every day and on three days a week until 9 p.m. A far cry from 1908 when it opened one afternoon a week, or even from the boom year of 1926 when its circulation was 3,140!

Positioning for a `new age'

With physical expansion came more growth in collections and in usage of the library. Again it became apparent that the library needed more space, not only for its collections this time but for special programs as well.

Its most recent expansion, in 1989, has resulted in the Multipurpose Room and the growth of the west wing to create a larger children's area, with a new employees' lounge on the mezzanine and special rest room facilities for children. Total cost of this expansion phase was \$400,000, partially paid for through a state Division of Library and Information Services grant administered by the city and through library funds. The grant was for a \$333,000 construction project with the city contributing \$165,000 of that amount. The library's contribution for refurbishment was \$39,864.

The expansion brought the library's total square footage to 12,000, almost 10 times the size it had been when it opened 81 years before. And it provided more space for videos, books on tape for children and adults, a new book drop and a computerized magazine index.

Since Karen Potter joined the library as director of library services in 1992, the Story Book Room has been refurbished and the library has gone online with the OCLC (Online Computer Library Center, Inc.) for interlibrary loan, enabling patrons to get books available through other libraries in from three to four days. Today some 100 books a month are retrieved from other libraries through this service.

While the same friendly atmosphere that has always been an integral part of the library is as prevalent today as in Miss Stella's time, other technological advances have been added and will continue to be integrated in the system in the years to come. The TDD (Telecommunications Device for the Deaf) allows staff to communicate with deaf patrons via telephone lines. Staff members can access

Internet and World Wide Web, and patrons have computer access to the Maitland Community Bulletin Board, giving such local information as city meeting dates, municipal job listings, contact people and phone numbers in various city jurisdictions and even school lunch menus.

The city has included in its capital improvement plan for 1996 \$137,000 for library automation. Within the year, the library expects to have completely automated its system to allow staff and patrons to access the library's database through computers.

Ben Aycrigg, who has served on the library board for more than a decade and seen services move into the electronic age, looks forward to that time. "We're getting everything in position for a new age. You will be able to access the library from your home computer. There will be an enormous expansion in the scope of library service. It's a big first, like science fiction."

The Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) will also aid in the circulation of all materials, keeping a computerized track of check-out and due dates and calculating fines. New acquisitions will be categorized and added to the database instantaneously.

Electronic advances will bring the library up to modern-day standards, yet library programs with the human touch, such as the summer reading program for children, have remained popular through the years. Other programs have been and will continue to be offered in answer to the interests of the times.

In this TV/video era, it is heartening to see as many as 30 youngsters turn up regularly for the Tuesday and Thursday Story Hours. Adult programs range from lectures to films on subjects as broad as the interests of Maitland residents--from travel and history to business and technology.

The library staff--grown considerably since Miss Stella managed the collection and the building during her nine-hour workweeks--now numbers fifteen with four librarians, two full-time support staff and nine part-time library assistants. Its collection numbered 74,553 print and materials last year, and its circulation was 112,314.

Gathered around the cozy fireplace, residents still browse through periodicals to keep abreast of current news from over the world or read novels to escape into the past, and, hopefully, that atmosphere established at the turn of this century will prevail into the next.

While Maitland will continue its support for this "necessity of life," and the library will carry into the future the gifts the community has bestowed during its 100 years of life, its potential at the beginning of a new age is beyond our intellectual imaginations.