

Case 5

Carnegie Public Libraries for America's Communities

Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1911

Steven Schindler

Background. Andrew Carnegie's personal interest in libraries stemmed from his father's involvement in the creation of a small library in Scotland and his own boyhood experiences at a private library in Pittsburgh. His father, a weaver, organized a group of fellow weavers to pool resources in order to purchase books they could read to one another as they worked. The collection of books became the first circulating library in Dunfermline, Scotland, Carnegie's boyhood home.⁷⁹ While Carnegie was still a boy, his family moved to the United States and settled in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Almost on arrival, Carnegie sought and was granted access to a private library established for working men in the town. He was infatuated with the library, and he later confessed that the joy he took from his afternoon visits to the library inspired him to resolve that, should he ever accumulate wealth, he would devote some of it to extending library access to other young boys.⁸⁰ The first recipient of a library grant in the United States was his hometown of Allegheny, in 1886.⁸¹

Carnegie's library-giving may have also been inspired by earlier philanthropists whose gifts established libraries. Ezra Cornell gave funds to establish a library in Ithaca, New York, and Enoch Pratt built a million-dollar library in Baltimore. Carnegie particularly appreciated the wisdom of the structure of Pratt's gift: Pratt stipulated that the city must pay 5 percent of the initial gift annually for the maintenance of the library and the purchase of books.⁸²

For Carnegie, the library was the manifestation of one central theme in his philanthropic philosophy: self-betterment.⁸³ He was known to enjoy elite company, but he devoted much of his philanthropy to building ladders for individuals to lift themselves in the world. Libraries provided opportunity for social improvement, and Carnegie structured his gifts to avoid pauperization of recipient communities so as not to hinder that improvement. Carnegie, like Pratt, required a commitment by recipient municipalities to provide annual funding for book purchases and maintenance, and he required the municipality to provide the site for each library building.⁸⁴ These philosophical underpinnings and the gift structure adopted from Pratt would propel Carnegie's library program from meager beginnings to a grand scale.

Strategy. Early in his philanthropic career, Carnegie funded a public library in Dunfermline, Scotland. He then sponsored the construction of combination library-and-community centers in Pennsylvania towns, including Allegheny, where his steel plants were located. Without issuing any apparent formal request for proposals from other communities, Carnegie received and granted a few additional requests for local libraries in other cities. As word spread of Carnegie's gifts, large numbers of requests for library construction began to pour in.

Between 1886 and 1896, Carnegie gave over \$1.8 million to construct fourteen library buildings in six Pennsylvania communities, all of which were home to Carnegie's industrial facilities. In 1897, James Bertram became Carnegie's personal secretary, and it became his duty to administer the library building grants. For the most part, Bertram's procedure for issuing Carnegie library grants was mechanical—he sent the list of prerequisites to all who inquired about obtaining a library grant, and if the recipient town's official, usually the mayor, agreed to the terms of the grant (provision of a favorable space on which to build the library and a commitment of an annual 10 percent of capital contribution for the operating expenses of the library), then Bertram approved the grant.

Carnegie's deepening involvement in philanthropic activities led him to establish the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1911 to administer his wide array of giving. Carnegie himself filled the post of president, but Bertram became secretary of the Corporation, and he continued to run the

library building program. The parameters of the program itself did not significantly change when the Corporation took over; by the founding of the Corporation, Carnegie had already given almost \$30 million from his personal accounts to establish libraries in the United States.⁸⁵ The Corporation continued funding library construction with the same requirements that the municipality provide the building site and commit 10 percent of the gift per year for upkeep. From 1898 to 1919, Carnegie's library gifts surpassed \$39 million.⁸⁶

In one of the earliest efforts to evaluate foundation programs, the Corporation began to distribute a survey in 1915, in response to a number of complaints about library management. The survey asked recipients of library grants questions about the status of the local library, including spending on books, salary expenditures, numbers of library card holders, and amount of money spent toward the construction of the building by other sources.⁸⁷ On the basis of the results of the survey, the Corporation suspended grants to nine communities that had abnormally high rates of default in contribution pledges, pending a reaffirmation by the default communities to fund the promised contributions.⁸⁸

In November 1915, the foundation decided to pursue a more exhaustive and intensive evaluation effort by hiring Alvin Johnson, economics professor at Cornell University, to conduct a nationwide assessment of the Carnegie Library program.⁸⁹ Johnson undertook a ten-week study of about one hundred Carnegie libraries throughout the United States.

Johnson considered public library funding a particularly fruitful example of foundation spending because libraries were appreciated by the public only on a general level but not enough to prompt the public to compel local officials to build a library. In his general assessment of public opinion, however, Johnson identified nuances between states such as California, which built libraries with only supplementary capital grants, and Texas, which benefited from fewer, more comprehensive gifts of buildings, as well as book and overhead provisions, that led to a wider acceptance of public libraries. In light of these differences, Johnson noted that a more flexible approach to the grant prerequisites might be a wiser policy.⁹⁰

In his report, Johnson made a number of recommendations for modification of the library program. Johnson's primary recommendations to the Corporation included hiring field agents to evaluate in person each community requesting a library grant, supporting trained librarians to help establish effective organization and service at new libraries, and providing scholarships for students attending library schools to increase the number of available trained librarians.⁹¹ Johnson also recommended that the Corporation narrow its grantmaking in the South, the region least receptive to public library service, to the support of a few model libraries to assume leadership roles in promoting effective and widespread library service.⁹²

Rather than adopt Johnson's recommendations, the Corporation, on the urging of James Bertram, rejected Johnson's report. Less than two years after the report, with a resolution adopted on November 7, 1917, the Corporation discontinued the library grant program and refused any grant inquiries received after that date. Though none of Johnson's recommendations would directly influence the process of issuing library grants, the Corporation eventually pursued some of Johnson's proposals, including support of model libraries, funding of library education, and support of the American Library Association.⁹³

Impact. In addition to Carnegie's personal expenditures, the Carnegie Corporation granted a total of \$13 million to its library building program between 1911 and the conclusion of the program—7 percent of its total grant amount during the Corporation's first thirty years.⁹⁴ These grants, in addition to Carnegie's personal disbursements of \$29 million, helped to build 1,679 libraries in 1,406 communities in the United States, with multiple branches in some cities. Including libraries established outside the United States, Carnegie was responsible for the construction of a total of 2,509 libraries.⁹⁵

The vast new network of Carnegie libraries appeared at a time when support for publicly funded

libraries was growing. In the mid-nineteenth century, many States enacted laws enabling municipalities to raise funds to support public libraries, beginning with Massachusetts in 1848. By 1887, twenty states had public library enabling laws on the books, and a total of 649 public libraries had already been constructed.⁹⁶

Carnegie's library gifts clearly sparked public interest in the concept of public libraries. The opportunity to obtain a Carnegie library grant provided an incentive for communities to utilize the power of the state enabling laws and to rally behind a library grant request. In addition, Carnegie's contributions, along with his suggestion in his famous essay, "The Gospel of Wealth," that libraries should be the second highest priority for philanthropic resources, prompted a flow of private resources into public libraries. In the 1890s, \$10 million went from private donors to public libraries; that number more than doubled between 1900 and 1906. Finally, the condition that the recipient municipalities provide 10 percent of the total grant in yearly funding for donated libraries pressured municipal bodies to take on the responsibility of providing local libraries, and Carnegie libraries were sufficiently widespread, that the public came to hold municipalities accountable for providing local libraries.⁹⁷

Notes

79. George S. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), 11.
80. *Ibid.*, 12.
81. *Ibid.*, 13.
82. *Ibid.*, 12.
83. Andrew Carnegie, "Wealth," *North American Review* 148 (1889), 663.
84. Stephen C. Wheatley, *The Politics of Philanthropy: Abraham Flexner and Medical Education* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).
85. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, 196.
86. Wheatley, *Politics of Philanthropy*.
87. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, 98.
88. *Ibid.*, 98–99.
89. *Ibid.*, 143–44.
90. *Ibid.*, 146.
91. *Ibid.*, 156.
92. *Ibid.*, 156–57.
93. *Ibid.*, 158–59.
94. Robert M. Lester, *A Thirty Year Catalog of Grants* (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1942), 146.
95. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, 3.
96. *Ibid.*, 7.
97. *Ibid.*, 191.