

A HISTORY OF THE LADIES' LIBRARY ASSOCIATION OF ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

-- Frances A. Hannum -- 1948

In March, 1866 some thirty representative women of Ann Arbor met in the First Presbyterian Church and organized the Ladies' Library Association. A constitution was presented, accepted and signed. The ladies subscribed \$118.00. A Board of fifteen was appointed with Mrs. A. E. Kellogg as President. This subscription library was started in an upstairs room in the Hangsterfer Block on the southwest corner of Washington and Main Streets at a rental of \$50.00 a year. Early in April, 1866, the Association was incorporated according to law. The usual round of entertainments and strawberry festivals brought in \$453.28 for equipment and books. At the end of the year there were 79 members, 302 books and total receipts of \$780.79.

Its first birthday was celebrated by a gathering in the Congregational Church, at which President Haven delivered an exceedingly interesting anniversary address, full of good cheer and encouragement. Judge Cooley also made some happy remarks. Fifteen new subscribers gave their names. The Argus at this time states that no Association in the State has in several years accomplished what has been done in one.

Not yet one year old in January 1867, the library outgrew its quarters and was moved to a larger room at 22 South Main Street over the then First National Bank.

Mrs. Thomas Cooley became President in 1870 and Mrs. Adams in 1871. From the beginning in 1866 until April 1873 Mrs. A. H. Hunt

acted as Secretary. Mrs. Gilmore was Treasurer from 1867 to 1873. Miss Sarah Barry was the first librarian, resigning in 1875 because of ill health.

About 1870, the Ladies' Library Association petitioned the City Council to take over the subscription library and make it a public library. The Council declined.

In 1879, when the Board of Education offered to combine the school district library (then located in the Court House) with the Ladies' Library Association library, the Association declined.

In 1880, the Ladies purchased a 60 x 132 lot at 324 East Huron Street and erected a building in 1885 at a cost of \$4,268. Books were still circulated on a subscription basis only. In [the fireplace] alcove in this building, the 145 volumes of the library of the Daughters of the American Revolution were housed. A real antique was also kept in this building -- "a hand painted tortoise shell [fan], the property of Mrs. Ann Allen." What has become of it? Who knows? [Note by Alice S. Wethey in 1986: Ann Allen was wife of one of the first settlers of Ann Arbor. Her elaborately pierced tortoise shell fan with its quite sumptuous hand painted floral decoration belonged at one time to the Daughters of the American Revolution, having been donated by one of her descendants. In 1908 it was displayed in the same fireplace alcove which housed the books of the DAR. Still later it became the property of the Washtenaw Historical Society, whose present headquarters are in the historic Kempf House on Division Street, and there was permanently displayed in 1986].

The Ladies' Library Association was the prime mover in securing the present Carnegie library, built in 1905-1906. Through the efforts of the Ladies, a Carnegie grant of \$20,000 was promised for a library building, with the understanding that some governmental unit should maintain it at not less than \$2,000 a year. Several sites were proposed but the final decision had to be made between the Ladies' Library Association property at 324 East Huron Street and the corner of Huron and Thayer Streets, a part of the High School site. The debate waxed strong among the Ladies and the Board of Education and also the townspeople. In December, 1903, the Board of Education voted 5 to 3 for the present site at Huron and Thayer Streets. The Ladies were dissatisfied and the Ann Arbor Daily News for December 9, 1903 carried the following headline: "The Carnegie Library may be killed. The Ladies' Library feels piqued and withdraws the proposition to join with the School Board."

Just what happened or what agreement was reached the writer has not been able to learn definitely. In December 1904, the High School burned. Plans were made for a new school building and the library known as the "Public Library" was erected at the same time from Carnegie grants:

September 1, 1905, Gift from Andrew Carnegie \$15,000.

August 31, 1907, Gift from Andrew Carnegie \$15,000.

A resolution to combine with the Ladies' Library was passed by the Board of Education which was printed in the Ann Arbor News Argus for November 15, 1907, as follows:

"Board of Education adopted resolution tending to unite Ladies' Library with Carnegie Library"

"The following resolution which would seem to be the solution of the library question was offered by President Copeland and unani- mously adopted:

"Whereas, The members of the Ladies' Library Association initi- ated the movement which has resulted in a beautiful and commodious library building, and

"Whereas, By the terms of the gift and in the nature of things, this building should be put to its highest use and made the instru- ment for the dissemination of culture to the greatest possible num- ber of our citizens, and

"Whereas, By the duplication of fixed expenses for maintenance, to say nothing of the unnecessary duplication of books, the total amount which might be expended in increasing the efficiency of the combined collections is considerably lessened each year, be it

"Resolved, That the Board of Education does herewith invite the Ladies' Library Association to join fortunes with the School District Library, with the following as a basis for consolidation:

1. The School District to provide storage, safe keeping and repair of books, efficient library administration, janitor service, heat and light.

2. The School District to provide and maintain a suitable room for the board meetings or other uses of the Ladies' Library Associa- tion.

3. The funds of the Ladies' Library Association to be administered, expended and controlled as now.

4. The books owned or hereafter purchased by the Ladies' Library Association to be marked with the book-plate of that Association, but to be controlled and distributed by the Board of Education in the same manner and under the same rules as are the books owned by the School District.

Resolved further, That the Clerk of the Board of Education transmit an official copy of this action and invitation to the Ladies' Library Association."

In 1916, the Ladies' Library Association transferred its 5,000 books to the Public Library and deeded its property at 324 East Huron Street to the Board of Education with the following provision:

"If at any time in the future, the parties to this proposed agreement deem it wise, and for the educational advantage of the inhabitants of said city, to erect a library building in some suitable place to be agreed upon by said parties, then the funds realized or that may have been realized, from the sale of the property proposed to be deeded, may be applied to that end and used for that purpose."

The site at 324 East Huron Street was purchased in 1947 by the Michigan Bell Telephone Company on which their new offices now stand.

The Ladies' Library Association is still in existence. At the present time (April 1948) Mrs. Philip E. Bursley is President and Mrs. John Garrett Winter is Treasurer. During the years that the Ladies' Library was circulating its books, the Association received three

memorial gifts:

\$1,000 from David Henning in the name of his wife.

\$ 500 from Governor Felch in the name of his wife.

\$3,000 willed by Mrs. Alonzo B. Palmer.

These funds, a total endowment of \$4,500, were invested in bonds the interest from which has been used to buy books for the public Library. Since 1929, this interest has been used for art books of many kinds. Today the Public Library (thanks to the Ladies' Library Association) owns an enviable collection of art books valued at more than \$9,000. The good work of the "Ladies" goes on.