

Norwalk Public Library History

The Norwalk Public Library System consists of the Norwalk Main Library and the South Norwalk Branch Library. Both these libraries were founded in the late 19th-century as separate libraries and both functioned independently for most of their existence. In 1913 the cities of Norwalk and South Norwalk were united as one City of Norwalk, but the libraries remained separate local libraries. Not until the 1970's were they merged into a city-wide library system.

Early Years – South Norwalk

In 1878 a group of businessmen in the City of South Norwalk formed the South Norwalk Library and Reading Room Corporation. South Norwalk was then a booming industrial area which had been incorporated as a city in 1873. The businessmen wanted to provide young men with a public place where they could pass their time “pleasantly and profitably”. They also felt that a library would make the city more attractive to new businesses and to immigrant workers.

The South Norwalk Corporation started with 500 donated books which were kept on the shelves of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union reading room in South Main St. The reading room was open to all, but only members of the Library Corporation, who paid \$2.00 for membership, could take out books. The Corporation sought money to build their own library building.



CITY LIBRARY—108 WASHINGTON STREET. PROPERTY VALUE, \$15,000
WATER COMMISSIONERS' AND STREET COMMISSIONERS' OFFICE

By 1885 the South Norwalk Corporation had raised enough money. The Corporation bought a lot and erected a three-story building at 108 Washington St., one of a row of similar commercial buildings. The front of the first floor was rented as a store and the upper floors as offices. These rents provided income for the Library Corporation, but meant that the library had only the back room of the first floor for its own use. Within a few years the library expanded to use the whole first floor, which improved the library but reduced their rental income.

Despite the office rentals and library subscription income, the costs of maintaining the building and running the library were too great for the Library Corporation. By this time public funding for libraries was becoming generally accepted and in 1890 the City of South Norwalk agreed to take over the Library, enacting a ¼ mill annual tax for its support.

This gave South Norwalk the first public library in Norwalk, but it was free only to residents of South Norwalk. Readers from areas such as East Norwalk, Norwalk, or Rowayton still had to pay \$2.00 a year.

The City of South Norwalk took possession of the library building but the library could still only use the first floor. The City used the remainder of the building for its offices until a new City Hall was built in 1913. The building at 108 Washington St. still survives as part of the South Norwalk Historic District and is now a clothing store.

The South Norwalk Public Library was popular with the public even though the Library had little money for new books. The Library was open six days a week, from 9:30 in the morning to 9:30 at night, with breaks for the Librarian to have lunch and dinner. The first Librarian, Miss Angeline Scott, ran the Library from 1890 until 1908.

The Librarian and a part-time janitor were the Library's only paid employees. The overall administration of the Library was done by volunteers, the same Board of Directors which had created the Reading Room Corporation and had seen it through to becoming a public library. Long-time directors included such men as Christian Swartz, cigar and hat manufacturer, banker, and two-term Mayor of South Norwalk; and Judge John H. Light, a distinguished lawyer who at one time served as Connecticut Attorney General. Judge Light joined the Board of South Norwalk Reading Room Corporation in 1884, at the start of his law career. He continued on the Board when the Corporation became a public library and was chosen President of the Board in 1907. He remained President until his death in 1947, giving over 60 years of volunteer service to overseeing the South Norwalk Library.

Early Years – Norwalk

In developments parallel to those in South Norwalk, a group of citizens of the Borough of Norwalk formed the Norwalk Library Corporation in 1879. Their library, at first only about 100 books, was housed in rented rooms in Wall St. Members paid \$2.00 a year for borrowing privileges. The Norwalk Corporation struggled to find sufficient money for rent, book purchases, and salary for a part-time Librarian.

As in South Norwalk, the Norwalk Library Corporation's long-term goal was to create a public library. Constantly short of money, in 1895 they persuaded the City of Norwalk to take over the Library books and fixtures and provide public funding. The new Norwalk Public Library, with no building of its own, rented rooms near the Boston Store at Wall and Main Sts., which was then the business center of Norwalk. The Public Library was free only to City of Norwalk residents but others could use it for a fee. The first Norwalk Librarian was Dortha Stone Pinneo, who headed the Library from 1895 until her death in 1924.

As in South Norwalk, the volunteer Board of Directors of the Library Corporation continued administering the new Public Library. Chief among these dedicated citizens was Dr. James G. Gregory, a prominent physician and banker. He joined the Board of Directors of the Library Corporation in 1881 and became its President in 1884. He continued as President of the Board of the Norwalk Public Library until his death in 1932. As dedicated as Judge Light, he found time during a busy career to devote over 50 years service to the founding and growth of his city's library.

Carnegie Buildings – Norwalk

Though Norwalk was second to South Norwalk in founding a public library it was the first to get a building from Carnegie funds. As its rental rooms were inadequate, in 1901 the library applied for a Carnegie grant. Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, a great supporter of public libraries, gave money for a library building to any town or city that would promise to continue funding the library at an annual rate equaling 10% of the building grant. The City agreed to provide funding, and Norwalk received a grant for \$20,000. The size of the Carnegie grant was a function of the population served by the library. Norwalk and South Norwalk were both very small cities at the time, each having a population of about 10,000.



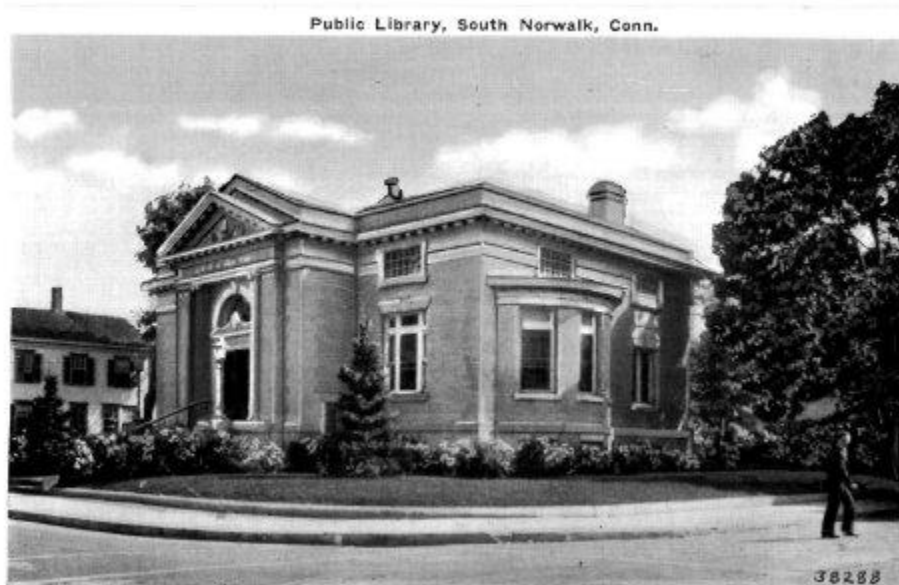
The Carnegie grant required the city to provide a suitable lot. Hubert E. Bishop, grandson of George G. Bishop, a leading Norwalk manufacturer, donated a lot for the purpose. The location, on the corner of Belden Ave. and Mott Ave., was ideally located, just to the west of Norwalk's business district. Prominent English architects W. and G. Audsley were chosen to

design the building. It was done in Tudor style with steep gabled roofs and leaded-glass windows. This was an unusual form for Carnegie libraries which were more often in Classic style. It was opened in April, 1903.

A bronze plaque by the front door commemorating the erection of the building reads:

**This Library Presented To the City of Norwalk By Andrew Carnegie Esq.1902
Site Presented by a Citizen of Norwalk**

Carnegie Buildings– South Norwalk



In 1908 the South Norwalk Library also applied for a Carnegie grant. Supported by the City of South Norwalk, the Library received a \$20,000 grant, as had Norwalk. Due to problems in finding a suitable lot, the Carnegie grant was not used until 1911, when a location on the corner of West Washington St. and Franklin St. was settled on.

The new building, designed by Boston architect W. H. McLean in Greek Revival style, was opened in 1913. The private home to the left of the library was replaced in 1937 by the South Norwalk Post Office.

1913 – World War II

In 1913, just as both libraries were settled in their own Carnegie buildings, the cities of South Norwalk and Norwalk were united politically as one city. Unfortunately, competing local interests remained strong enough to prevent unification of many municipal functions, such as water, electricity, and libraries. The South Norwalk Library was taken over by the Second Taxing District and the Norwalk Library by the First Taxing District, areas approximately the same as that of the earlier separate cities. Free library service was provided only to citizens of the local Taxing Districts. The opportunity to build a unified library system, free to all Norwalk citizens, was lost.

In addition to the Norwalk and South Norwalk libraries, by 1915 Norwalk had two other public libraries, Rowayton (founded in 1913) and East Norwalk (founded 1915). They were much smaller than the Carnegie libraries, and, like them, served only their local residents. The rest of the Town of Norwalk had no free library service.

After World War II

The Norwalk and South Norwalk libraries served their local districts well over the next thirty years, through two wars and the Great Depression. But by the end of World War II the Carnegie buildings were showing their age. The population of Norwalk as a whole increased rapidly after the Second World War, with housing developments spreading farther from the city centers. Having been built to serve a much smaller population, the Carnegie library buildings were now overcrowded. Increasing car ownership made parking near the libraries a problem. Designed at the very beginning of the automobile era, the Carnegie libraries had no public parking.

In 1948 the South Norwalk Library underwent a major renovation, adding an extension on the rear of the building. The basement was remodeled to provide a new children's room. In 1950 the Norwalk Library created a little more usable space by furnishing their basement auditorium as a children's room.

These measures were not enough to provide the space and services required by a city of Norwalk's size, and the funds supplied by the two Taxing Districts were limited. A 1961 survey of Norwalk's library needs pointed out that over half the population of Norwalk still had no free public library service. A 1966 survey done by the American Library Association found that Norwalk's small libraries had inadequate local funding, duplicate book collections, and insufficient staff. The survey recommended a city-wide library system, including a new building for a central library. None of the existing libraries was big enough to serve as a main library for a city Norwalk's size.

1970 -- The City-Wide Public Library

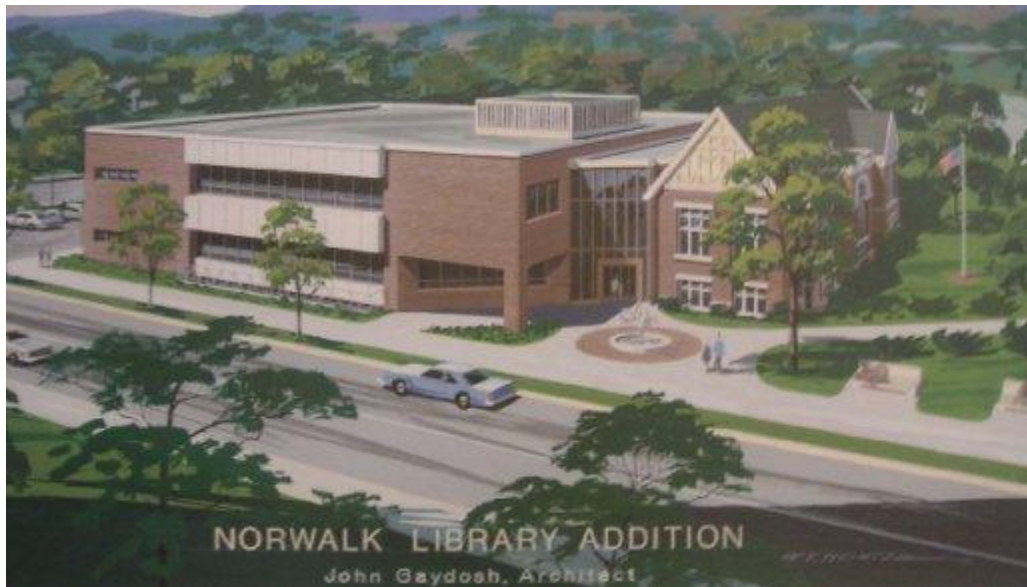
To implement these recommendations, in 1970 the City of Norwalk took over the Norwalk Public Library from the First Taxing District with the aim of making it the Main Library of a city-wide system. The city library was supported from general City of Norwalk funds, rather than by the more limited finances of the First Taxing district, and was free to all residents of Norwalk. In 1975 the City took over the South Norwalk Library from the Second Taxing District, adding it as a branch to the Norwalk Main Library.

The Director of the new city library was Donald Yazgoor, who had become Head Librarian of the Norwalk Library in 1966. A "young, aggressive, dynamic librarian", he spent the next thirty years expanding and improving the Norwalk Library.

The city-wide library needed a library building. The Norwalk Library on Belden Ave. had the most central location but was too small. The Carnegie building could be expanded, or replaced with an entirely new building on the same site. Another option was to build in a new location with space for adequate parking. The question was complicated by the terms of the original gift of the Belden Ave. land to the old City of Norwalk, which required that it be used only for a library.

The decision was made to save most of the 1903 Carnegie building but build on a much larger addition. A semi-circular stack rotunda at the back of the Carnegie building was removed, two

houses on Mott St. bought and demolished, and a new two-story library was attached to the old building. The purchase of the lots on Mott St. was made possible by a donation from the estates of Frank L. Chase and Lena M. Chase.



This illustration shows the architect's drawing of the proposed addition.

The new Library was completed in March of 1982, with the Carnegie building being used for Library offices. The architect, John Gaydosh, joined the old building to the new by an entrance facing Mott Ave.. The old front door of the Carnegie building on Belden Ave. was filled in and the front steps removed. The expansion included a small parking lot, inadequate even at the time

The new building was planned with computers in mind and automating the circulation system began as soon as the library opened. Computer use expanded in the 1980s, and in 1990 the Library closed the card catalog which had served the public for a hundred years. With much more space the Library's collections grew rapidly, especially the audio-visual materials. In 1995 the basement was remodeled to provide space for music, recorded books and movies.

In 1995 the Library tragically lost its Director, Don Yazgoor, when he was murdered during a robbery. Through his vision and determination he had guided the Library in its transition from local library to a modern city-wide library system.

The Renovated South Norwalk Library

During the last half of the 20th-century the residential neighborhoods surrounding both Norwalk and South Norwalk libraries changed drastically. Residents moved farther away from the old city centers and older homes were razed for commercial use. Declining employment was particularly felt in South Norwalk as its industrial base eroded rapidly after World War II. Library use in South Norwalk declined as the 1913 building became less and less serviceable as a modern library.



In the 1990s proposals were made to close the old building entirely. This was met with strong resistance from the citizens of South Norwalk, who were still proud of their own Carnegie Library. Instead, starting in 2004, the building underwent a complete renovation, adding access for the disabled and remodeling the second-floor auditorium, which had long been closed as a fire hazard. The completed building, opened in 2006, retained the exterior of the Carnegie building and much of its interior decoration

South Norwalk Public Library, 2006

The Present

The current Norwalk Public Library system, with its Main Library on Belden Ave. and its Branch Library in South Norwalk, has about 280,000 items in its collection and a circulation of about 500,000 a year. In addition to its material collection, the Library provides dozens of computers with free internet access for public use. Its programs for children include story times, homework help, and a chess club. For adults there are book discussions, lectures, and computer training (in English and in Spanish). The Library also provides meeting spaces for community groups.



Norwalk Public Library, 2008

The Future

What does the future hold? Technology may make the library as we now know it obsolete. We are moving rapidly into the world of digital books, read on a device like a Kindle, Blackberry, or iPad. The internet has drastically reduced the need for library reference materials, and downloading of music, movies and books directly from the internet will no doubt reduce library circulation. However, internet access is expensive. Only through a library can information and entertainment be available to all free of charge.

One thing the internet cannot replace is the library as a cultural meeting place – a place where information can not only be accessed but shared and discussed with others. As was envisioned by the 1887 founders of the South Norwalk Library Corporation, a library is a place where people can pass their time “pleasantly and profitably”, free to all. As a public space that all the community can share, a library is a unique resource that should survive even in the computer age.

[Treasures of Connecticut Libraries Collection](#) - Type 'Norwalk' in the search box to view the pictures of the Norwalk Library & South Norwalk Library that have been added to this digitization project. More items will be added over the next two years.