

# Dublin Historical Society

Dublin, New Hampshire 03444 •

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## Library Issue

**T**O SIGNALIZE THE COMPLETION of the new annex to the Dublin Public Library, our ever-closer neighbor, we are pleased to offer some historical background of the Library, both as a building and an institution.

### The First Free Public Library

We have all – well, most of us – paused to read the historical marker on Old Common Road in front of what is now the Cavanaugh's house. It says:

#### FIRST FREE LIBRARY

In this house was established (1822) the First Free Public Library in America, supported by voluntary contribution; through the vision and efforts of Rev. Levi W. Leonard, D.D., whose home was here.

The Library referred to was the Dublin Juvenile Library, founded by the joint efforts of the Rev. Dr. Leonard and David Carter, M.D., and precursor of today's Dublin Public Library. The books were kept in Dr. Leonard's study and he acted as librarian. It appears, however, that at that period his study was not in his house, but in a room at Chamberlain's Tavern, the building that is now the parsonage. It was moved in 1852 to make way for the present

church. At the Town's centennial celebrations in 1852, the Rev. Samuel F. Clark recalled:

"I am sure I need not remind very many who hear me, how, when we were children, we used to repair to the minister's study, in the old tavern-house, which is soon to give place to the new church, ... for those little books which his personal kindness always provided so liberally to culture our early love for reading. Thus were those books, furnished at his expense, carried into almost every family in town, till, at length, they attracted the attention of a practising physician, Dr. Carter, who perceiving their happy influence, took the matter in hand, and soon induced the people to establish the present juvenile library. The three hundred books then already in circulation were presented by the minister; and from this

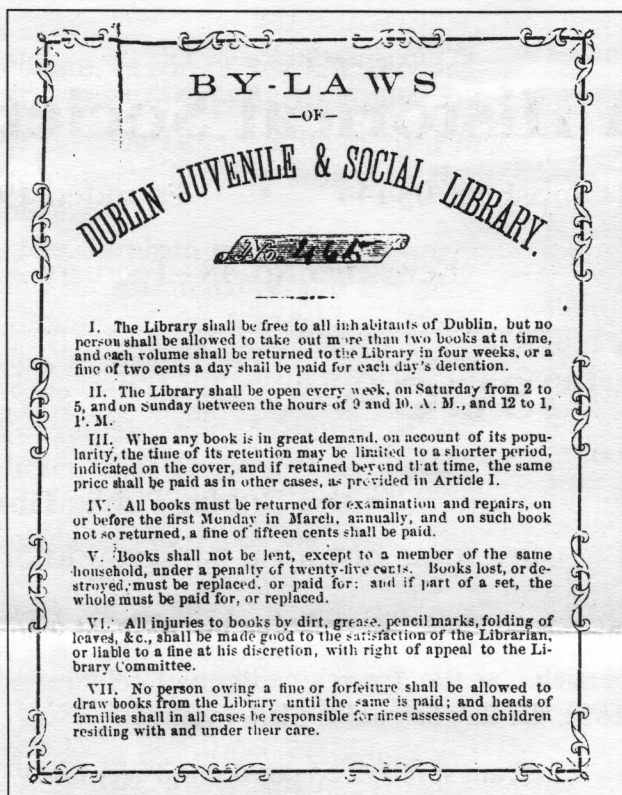
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Our winter pot-luck supper will be held in the Vestry of the Dublin Community Church on Friday, February 18 (snow date February 25) at 6:30 p.m.

The speaker, under the auspices of the New Hampshire Humanities Council, will be the well-known author, Howard Mansfield of Hancock, whose topic will be:

**The Same Ax Twice – Restoration and  
Renewal in a Throwaway Age**





*Rules of the Juvenile and Social Library as pasted into a book. The date would be between 1876 and 1884.*

gratuitous nucleus has grown this library, which now numbers nearly two thousand volumes,..."

This suggests that the first free public library was founded in Dr. Leonard's study in the present parsonage, and not, as the sign says, in Dr. Leonard's house. There is, however, ample testimony that the books were later kept in that house, so we needn't quibble. In any case, history is not what happened, but what is recorded as having happened.

### **From the Juvenile Library to the Dublin Public Library**

It is through the Juvenile Library, wherever it was begun, that the present Public Library traces its claim to be the oldest free public library in America. In the words of the 1893 Town report:

"In 1822 the Juvenile Library was instituted under the leadership of Rev. Levi W. Leonard and Dr. David Carter, since which date it has been open and the use of its books free to all persons in town. It was and ever has been, until united with the Dublin Public Library in 1890, supported by voluntary contributions in the various school-districts; a subscription

paper being annually circulated in each district for this purpose. Be it said, to the credit of the people, that there has never been an occasion for a compulsory public tax for the maintenance of this institution. It was incorporated in 1825, but its support and use were left unchanged by this act.

In 1855 it consisted of 1990 volumes. Some time previous to 1876 all other above mentioned libraries were united with this under the name of the Juvenile and Social Library."

The "other above mentioned libraries" were the Dublin Social Library (1793); the Dublin Ladies' Library (1799); and the Dublin Literary Society (1824). All these were private libraries, with books available only to members and subscribers.

In 1922, Dublin celebrated the centennial of its library as the first free library in America. One of the speakers said

"For two decades or more previous to the Civil War, the books had been lodged in the [Levi Leonard] house, on shelves placed against the whole rear wall of the front hall. Old residents of Dublin still recall the appearance of the books so accommodated, before they were removed at the close of the Civil War, to the basement of the First Church, a room having been partitioned off from the 'vestry' so called, to receive them. There could hardly have been a better location at the time, for the 'vestry' was the one meeting place, the one public hall put to every variety of use, for the village and for

Dublin's 1922 centennial celebration of the first free public library occasioned a spirited, not to say acrimonious, correspondence in the *Peterborough Transcript*, in which Peterborough partisans asserted that their library, founded in 1833, was really the first free public library in America. To this William J. Leonard, Levi's grandson, responded that Peterborough's library was actually modeled on Dublin's, founded eleven years earlier. The present consensus is that Dublin's is the first free public library, and Peterborough's the first *tax-supported* free public library. The two towns can share the honor of having launched the public library movement in America.





*THE ARCHITECT. John Lawrence Mauran in a portrait by Alexander James.*

Courtesy of the Historical Society of Cheshire County.

the larger portion of the town...."

"In the years preceding 1884, summer visitors to Dublin had become numerous and summer cottages were beginning to appear on the highland about the Dublin lake. A town house had been erected in 1881, and the 'vestry' was no longer the place of meeting. The need of a public library of the accepted type - that is, supported by taxation, was more and more felt."

The 1884 town meeting voted (54-21) to establish a public library. The resolution noted that

"Benevolent friends of the town of Dublin have expressed a desire to give to the town books and money for the establishment of a Public Library..."

and went on to elect a three-member Library Committee and appropriate one hundred dollars.

Minnie Piper Leffingwell was appointed librarian. At the outset, hers was a less than onerous task, since the library was open only on Saturday afternoons from 1:30 to 5:00. She served as librarian until 1930, when she was succeeded by our recently retired librarian, Dorothy Worcester. Two librarians thus spanned one hundred and fourteen years.

The earliest extant report of the Library

Committee, published in the town report for 1889, showed 947 volumes in the Public Library. In the following year, the library was greatly expanded by the addition of the books of the Juvenile and Social Library, which were moved to the town house from the vestry of the church.

### **Mrs. Farnham's Building**

In 1900 Eliza Carey Farnham, a summer resident, undertook to build a building for the town's library as a memorial to her late husband, Horace Putnam Farnham, M.D. Dr. and Mrs. Farnham, whose winter home was in New York City, had built the house on the Old Common now owned by Steven Levene and Susan Peters, but Dr. Farnham had died shortly after its completion.

The architect for the library building was John Lawrence Mauran, another summer resident who had already designed several summer houses in Dublin and was later the architect for the Consolidated School and the new façade for the Town Hall. The builder was Alamander L. Ball, whose experience as a builder included Emmanuel Church and its parsonage, a house on Beech Hill for General Caspar Crowninshield (now the Utleys') and a house off Lake Road for Dr. and Mrs. Hamilton Osgood (now the summer home of Michael and Pamela Peabody).

Amid prayers, speeches and song, the cornerstone was laid on July 10, 1900. Emily Derby wrote a poem of eighteen stanzas especially for the occasion and recited it to the assembled throng. It was a ceremonial age.

The dedication on June 20, 1901, was no less formal and included an oration by Dr. William S.



*THE BUILDER. Alamander L. Ball poses with the Library cornerstone.*

Gift of Edgar L. Ball.

Leonard, "a son of Rev. L.W. Leonard, D.D., the founder and preserver of the Juvenile Library, now merged in the collection to be stored in this building".

Mrs. Farnham gave an endowment fund for maintenance and left management of the building to three trustees, with power to fill vacancies arising among them. At the same time, the actual administration of the library, that is to say the books, remained in the hands of the Library Committee elected by the Town. This system of dual control remained in effect until 1941, when the two boards and their functions were merged by vote of Town Meeting.

The new annex more than doubles the size of the original building and should serve the town's needs handsomely over the next hundred years.

—J.W.H.



*Laying the Cornerstone, July 10, 1900. The Rev. Robert Collyer is preaching. Mrs. Farnham is the figure in black at lower right.*

*Note: Nancy Campbell helped with the research for this article. As usual, an annotated version of this article is available in the Society's archives.*

## Recent Acquisitions

Before demolition of the Joseph Lindon Smith house at Loon Point, **John Nelson** made carefully measured drawings of the first and second floor plans. At the same time, **Sharron Monaghan** took over a hundred photographs of the interior and exterior of the house. Not everything can be preserved, but a record can be kept, and that's what we try to do.

**Melanie Mongelli**, Abbott Thayer's great-granddaughter, whose visit was noted with pleasure in the last newsletter, has kindly sent us several items of Thayer material, including a photograph of Thayer's granddaughter, Elsie Birch Reeves. A collection of photographs, mainly from the 1960's and 70's, has come from **Jeanne Sterling**. We are also

grateful for other welcome gifts from **Nancy Powell**, **Linda Van Wyk** and **Brookes S. White**.

## IN MEMORIAM

We record with sorrow the passing of three valued members:

The Rev. Samuel W. Hale, Jr.

Marian Latti

Parker Leighton

## C R E D I T S

This issue of the Dublin Historical Society Newsletter was edited by John Harris.

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