

# Salem Free Public Library

## LIBRARY HISTORY



The 2004 Salem Free Public Library building features a central core with vaulted ceilings and clerestory windows to bathe the central structure in natural light. Ceiling fans facilitate air and heat circulation. The library is configured to allow public use of the large program/meeting room during non-library hours.

### IT STARTED AS A VISION:

John A. Young, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, was one of the originators of a plan associated with former Senator Hiram Bingham in a move to make books available to children in Salem. At the school graduation in June 1914, Professor Bingham first presented Geography prizes to Salem children. Mr. Young, in thanking Professor Bingham, emphasized the fact that contact with books brings a peculiar form of pleasure to children and at the same time directed attention to the fact that there were few books available to children in Salem. This statement led to an informal meeting of Professor Bingham, Mr. Young, Ernest W. Brown, another Yale professor who had recently bought the old Shingle Hill place in Salem, and James Lane, a longtime resident of Salem.

The outcome of this conference was the raising of some money, which formed the nest egg of a Salem Library Fund. The money was placed in the hands of Mr. Young, who was directed to investigate the situation and to raise further funds for the Library. As that autumn drew to a close, about \$200 in cash had been subscribed; which, together with gifts from the state, amounted to a total of \$500.

### SHARING THE VISION WITH OTHERS:

The housing of the Library was problem. The Town Hall, the Central School, or some room in a private home all offered solutions. Bela Pratt offered his house at Music Vale Road, rent-free.

In December 1914, Professor Bingham called another informal meeting of those who had been active during the summer and fall at his Woodbridge home to consider organizing a Library for the Town. Added to the original group was the late Ernest E. Rogers of New London, President of the Winthrop Trust Company and former Lieutenant Governor of Connecticut. They completed the articles of incorporation for the Salem Library, Inc., and established a board of trustees. Mr. Young, as secretary and treasurer, was authorized to cooperate with Mrs. Bella Halcomb

Johnson of the State Library Committee in selecting books and making the necessary arrangements.

Mrs. Helen Malona was appointed Librarian. An unused room in the parsonage was selected as the first home of the Library. The meeting of the trustees was held at the home of Town Clerk, Charles A. Williams, where the incorporation papers were signed. The process of incorporation was completed, January 19, 1915, when the approved articles were received in the records of the Town of Salem. The papers were signed by Hiram Bingham, Ernest E. Rogers, John Young, Ernest W. Brown, and James Lane.

## **PUTTING THE VISION INTO ACTION:**

Between January and October of 1915, much time was given to organizing the new Library. Many friends sent books. Several collections were gifts of the Misses Butts of Norwich, and the New London County Historical Society. Through Professor Bingham, Yale University made many contributions. Mrs. Hakes and the Cragin Memorial Library of Colchester were also very generous. Mrs. Sherwood of the Westport Public Library gave a set of Woodrow Wilson's reference books *History of the United States*.

## **A LIBRARY BUILDING IS GIFTED:**

For many years, the Library was in the north room of a house then owned by Charles Malona, former Town Clerk and husband of the Librarian. It was later the home of Joseph Chyinski. By 1928, distribution of books to school children alone was 1500 and 1300 to adults.

In 1928, Senator Bingham gave four acres of land for building the present library building. The largest contribution for the construction of the building itself was that of Mrs. Alfred Mitchell of New London, whose portrait hangs over one of the mantels in the Library today. The lot behind the Library was graded and later named Bingham Field.

The new Library building was formally dedicated September 24, 1928. The Library had grown from a tiny room in the church parsonage to a home of its own. Nearly 200 were present at this dedication. Credit was given architects Payne and Keefe of New London, who designed the building and kept constant watch over its construction. Harry Moore of Salem did the painting and decorating.

The original flag, presented to the Library at the dedication, was the gift of the former Miss Artis Coffey, now Mrs. Robert Strong, then president of the Girls Auxiliary of the Library Committee. Senator Bingham, as President of the Library Board, accepted it.

On November 10, 1944, the Trustees accepted with thanks the gift of another tract of land adjoining the new schoolhouse, which had been built on land south of the Library tract. This gift was Senator Bingham's final act as President of the Library Board. During his presidency, he had been successively a Yale professor, world explorer, Lieutenant Colonel in World War I., Connecticut Lieutenant Governor, Governor, and United States Senator.

Mitchell Bingham was appointed chairman of a Real Estate Committee to sell this latest gift of land. The funds were to become an endowment for the Library, the income to be used for general library purposes. At the 32<sup>nd</sup> annual meeting, it was reported that the lot next to the school had been sold to Edward Swider for the sum of \$900.

## **THE LIBRARY CHANGES HANDS:**

The Salem Library was served for many years by 40 faithful Trustees, 70 hard-working committee members, and many other interested persons. Mrs. Jessie Fraser was a committee member for 25 years and also Secretary and Treasurer for 15 years. Mrs. Helen Chyinski Lazawski served as a committee member, a Trustee, and in other capacities for over 25 years.

In 1961, at a Salem Town Meeting, the Trustees offered the Library to the Town as a gift from a non-profit corporation. The following March, Mr. Elmer Chappell, First Selectman, accepted the Library on behalf of the Town. It was renamed The Salem Free Public Library, and its Board of Directors are elected with other Town officials.

### **THE FORMER LIBRARY BUILDING:**



The original home of the Salem Library was a colonial type building of frame construction. It measured 36 x 24 feet in dimension (864 square feet) and had an attractive entrance of colonial design. Stone steps with wrought iron ornament railing led to the entrance door. An attractive cupola and a stone chimney at either end enhanced the exterior lines of the building. The roof was shingled and of the gambrel style. The main floor had a vestibule inside the entrance door, but the rest of the interior was open. There were open fireplaces at each end. The basement was of concrete construction with a heating system and lavatory. The building and landscaping originally cost \$10,000, with \$800 initially spent on furniture and equipment.

### **SALEM FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY GETS A NEW HOME:**

As the population of Salem grew over the next 70 years, so did the volume of books at the library. Books were stacked to the ceiling, arranged over windows, piled on top of tables and mantels. Chairs were replaced with bookcases causing narrow aisles. Many books were stored in the cellar. The time worn stairs threatened those who descended, and the sole bathroom was used on emergency basis only.

A 1999 Town survey quizzed residents on municipal priorities. In response to survey data that showed expanded library services as one of the top three needs in Salem, a Town meeting approved First Selectman Jim Fogarty's proposal to create a Library Building Needs Committee. The Committee was appointed with Carl Nawrocki as chair and charged with the challenge to look at the old structure and assess the viability of a possible addition.

In April 2000, the Needs Committee confirmed that additional library space was indeed needed and determined that adding onto the 1928 building was not feasible. It recommended that a new facility be built on Town-owned land at 264 Hartford Rd, adjacent to the Town Offices. The Committee also recommended that the Town make application for a Connecticut State Library grant, which would reimburse Salem for one third of the construction costs, up to \$500,000.

In May 2000, a Town Meeting approved First Selectman Peter Sielman's proposal to form a Salem Library Building Committee. The Committee members were appointed, and Paul Gianquinto was elected as chair. In October 2000, the Committee created and submitted an application for the construction grant with designs prepared by Noyes Vogt Architects of Guilford, CT.

The Connecticut State Library approved the grant request in the spring of 2001, and a bond request was sent to the State Bonding Commission. Friends of the Salem Library began a community awareness campaign with informational Town meetings, circulation of pamphlets, and media exposure.

In October 2002, the State Bonding Commission finally approved the full grant amount. The following February, by a margin of 2 to 1, Salem voters approved the \$1.6 million project for a new library. Friends of the Salem Library immediately began a building fund drive and received over \$85,000 in donation pledges for the new library. In September 2003, after reviewing competitive bids, the Library Building Committee selected G. Donovan and Associates of Lebanon, CT as the general contractor. Groundbreaking for the new library took place in October 2003, and construction continued throughout 2004.

On December 11, 2004, a ribbon cutting ceremony was attended by a large number of enthusiastic Salem Residents, and on December 13 the new library opened to the public under the direction of Margaret Leary, Librarian, and her able staff.

The Greek Revival style building has a steel frame and slab construction, and the interior encompasses approximately 7000 square feet, which meets the grant's population projections for 10-15 years. It includes a children's library and program room, a youth library with study carrels, adult stacks with task and social seating, two program/meeting rooms, public restrooms, and a spacious staff area. State-of-the-art computers, which were purchased with donations, are available to the patrons throughout the library.

**This information was compiled from the Salem Historical Society papers located in the Salem Historical Society Museum on the Salem Town green (Salem, Connecticut) and available on the Salem Public Library web site ([www.Salem-CT-Library.org](http://www.Salem-CT-Library.org)) in November 2004.**

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