

The History of the Exeter Public Library

The town of Exeter was founded in 1638 by a small group of settlers led by the Reverend John Wheelwright. By the late 1700s, Exeter had grown from a frontier village with less than 300 residents, to a prosperous town of about 1,700.

Books and reading must have been important to the citizens of Exeter. In 1792, the town's first private library, the Social Library was formed; 25 people became members for a \$5 to \$10 subscription fee.

In the early 1800s, Exeter was the home to 26 book and magazine publishers and booksellers. John J. Williams published over 50,000 books and pamphlets annually and employed about 50 people. Around 1820, some of these publishers began private circulating libraries in town and residents paid a fee to borrow books.

Exeter established its first public library in 1853 in the office of the librarian, Dr. Franklin Lane, editor of the Exeter Newsletter. The first annual appropriation from the town was \$300. In 1856, the collection was moved to a 2nd floor room in the old Town House on Court Street, the present site of the Senior Citizen's Center. The library was open two days a week, one for women and one for men.

In 1886, John T. Perry was instrumental in forming the Exeter Library Company to raise money for a library building and in May of 1892, the town meeting appropriated \$15,000 towards the construction of a library building. The new library was finished in 1894 at 47 Front Street, the current home of the Exeter Historical Society. It was designed like a Carnegie library on a smaller scale with a central rotunda and reading rooms on either side. It was built as a memorial to the 300 Exeter area men who served in the Civil War.

The reading room was a popular place and the reference area was always busy. Books were kept in "stacks" that only the librarian could access. If a patron wanted a book, he or she would give the number to the librarian, who would bring the book from the stacks. This is where the term "call number" originated. Today, call numbers are on the spine of each book and patrons can browse the stacks by themselves.

In March of 1941, the town accepted Gardner Gilman's bequest for a children's room addition to the library.

By the 1960s, the library was clearly too small and a new building was finally built and completed in 1987. The current library building located at 4 Chestnut Street overlooks the two dams at the confluence of the freshwater Exeter River and the saltwater Squamscott River. A large tunnel under the library, called the penstock, provided the waterpower to run the machines in the old Exeter Manufacturing Company downriver. Now the mill now consists of apartments and the penstock is no longer needed.

The present library building has 18,000 square feet on 3 floors and holds approximately 83,000 volumes. The library is considered to be the informational hub for the area. It provides equal access to a range of materials and strives to meet the informational needs of the community.