

Grassroots Report

What to Do with Your Old Carnegie

by Jennifer Burek Pierce

In 1904, Charles City, Iowa, opened its Carnegie library, a facility with white columns flanking the front doors and stained glass windows. According to John M. Witt, author of *The Carnegie Libraries of Iowa* (Robidoux, 2003), this was the culmination of more than 30 years of effort to provide library service in the small but growing town.

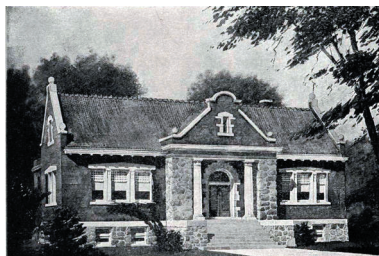
By 1978, the library had outgrown the ivy-covered brick building that had been placed on the state's historic register. The construction of a new library, a modern red-brick structure next door to city hall, created a question for the community: What was to be done with the old Carnegie facility? This question—one faced by numerous cities that own older buildings as the result of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic efforts—resulted in a particularly satisfactory response in Charles City.

The answer, explained Charles City Arts Center Director Tracy Sweet, came in the form of a petition that sought to house the arts center in the old Carnegie library. "A petition started around town, and Charles City liked the idea," he said. "There are pages of signatures," Sweet remembered.

The change in the building's use has preserved its space and cultural purpose. Sweet appreciates the former library's heritage, and he noted that artists who display their work at the center do too. "This building has never been cobbled up. It's been taken care of," he said. Space once devoted to stacks forms three galleries, including one partially hexagonal room.

Anna Burnham, now an elementary school teacher, worked in both facilities. She recalled the decision to build a new library in the wake of a tornado that damaged much of the town in 1968. The Carnegie library, though undamaged, already needed

expensive work to expand its space, make it accessible, and repair deterioration in the basement, Burnham said. When it was decided that the post office would repair its existing building, the land designated for a new one was offered to the library instead. Despite the gift of free land, the decision to leave the old Carnegie building was not easy, Burnham said.



The Charles City (Iowa) Public Library in 1904.

Burnham speaks warmly of the Carnegie library where she served as director for two years. "It's a different Carnegie library. It's built with materials from the area," she said, noting the use of river rock as well as brick in its construction. Among her favorite features is a stained glass window painted with an image of Little Red Riding Hood in the former children's area.

Current Charles City Public Library Director Virginia Ruzicka noted that the move to a newer facility benefited both the arts center and the library. For the library, benefits included the ease of staffing service points in a one-story building, ADA-compliant furnishings, and a "considerably larger" facility, said Ruzicka, who remembers using the Carnegie library as a patron.

While the former library serves a new purpose in this community, it requires adaptation. Sweet is currently conducting studies and raising funds for an addition housing an elevator to improve access. As Ruzicka explained, "They're trying to maintain the integrity of the building

while making it accessible. They've done an excellent job."

Burnham echoes this sentiment. Noting that Charles City has been awarded a Community Revitalization Grant in recognition for its cultural venues in a city of its size, Burnham credited the continued use of the arts center with a role in that effort.

In *Carnegie Libraries Across America* (Wiley, 1997), Theodore Jones wrote that Andrew Carnegie sought to ensure that libraries he funded were sole-purpose institutions. Still, he noted, "Carnegie libraries housed other recreational amenities to attract people who might not otherwise be interested in coming into a public library." Art displays, Jones found, were common features in these early Carnegie libraries.

In this, the Charles City Carnegie facility retains something of the significance of the building for this Iowa town—"used," in Jones's words, "in accordance with each community's sense of its civic needs and well-being."

At the University of Iowa, School of Library and Information Science faculty James Elmborg and Christine Pawley are working to preserve the history of Carnegie libraries in the state. Their Carnegie Libraries in Iowa Project is a digital library initiative aimed at capturing images, sound files, and documents related to the history of Iowa's Carnegie libraries and the communities that sponsor them (mingo.info-science.uiowa.edu/%7ECLIP/). ❖

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