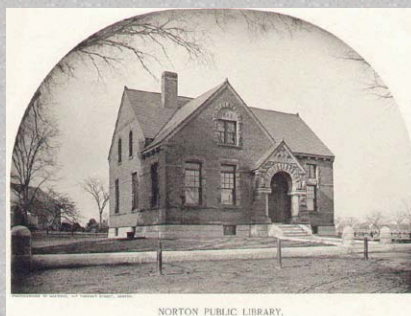


Norton Library History

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NORTON PUBLIC LIBRARY.

A Brief History of the Norton Public Library

The Norton Public Library was an outgrowth of the Norton Magazine Club, a private organization founded in 1879. Annually, each member paid \$2.00 for the privilege of reading the latest magazines, reviews and other publications. At first these publications were distributed at the Post Office. Eventually the group established a reading room at the Town Hall on Taunton Avenue. Miss Emily A. Titus was the librarian for the Norton Magazine Club. As the collection of reading materials grew, the members conceived the idea of forming a free public library which would be supported by the town. It would be open to all the citizens of Norton. The members' application to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for a chapter of incorporation was granted in 1886. The Norton Public Library was duly incorporated.

As the room at the Town Hall became too small for the growing collection of books and library patrons, the Directors of the Library turned to the town for help in securing larger quarters. Mrs. Eliza B. Wheaton responded by securing a site across the Town Common and erecting a building designed by the noted architect, Stephen C. Earle. The building, dedicated in 1888, was presented to Norton under the condition that it be permanently maintained as a free library. It provided 2,125 books for public borrowing and was equipped with tables and chairs for the use of library patrons.

For many years the library was open to the public for only nine hours a week. It operated without a professional librarian and on a minimal budget. Yet the circulation of books increased, as did the accumulation of books and the need for more space to hold them. As a result, additional bookshelves were installed, the lighting was improved, the staff was increased, and the hours open to the public were increased to fifteen a week.

In 1960, the legislature passed a bill to grant state aid to libraries if certain conditions were met. Norton applied for this aid and has received it ever since. To meet one of the conditions, the Directors promptly increased the library hours to twenty-eight a week.

In 1962, the Board of Directors again responded to the pressing need for more space for books, reading space, and a children's room by hiring the architectural firm of Washburn, Luther and Rowley

to draw up plans to expand the facilities. The result of a \$30,000 fund-raising campaign, ably directed by Mr. Joseph Fernandes, was the renovation of the basement into a children's room. A small addition at the rear of the building housed lavatories, a stairway, and closets. An attic room was finished, furnished, and filled with historical collections of local and state interest.

The first full-time professional librarian, Miss Margaret E. Eden, was hired in 1965. This advance in library service was also a requirement for continued state aid. By this time, the doors were open to the public for thirty-eight hours a week and the collection numbered over 12,000 items.

As the town continued to grow, so did the pressures on the library. In 1971, a mezzanine was constructed which provided an additional 420 square feet of space.

In the following years, the Board of Directors began to consider purchasing a Bookmobile as a way to provide better service for the town. Expansion of the old building was again considered. Both of these ideas were discarded, however, because of the cost factor and the fact that they would not provide long-term solutions to increasingly cramped space and a very inadequate and dangerous parking situation. A new library on a different site was clearly needed.

On June 28, 1978, a Special Town Meeting was held and voters unanimously designated a property on East Main Street known as "The Hedges," as the future site for the new library. This site formerly belonged to the House in the Pines.

Two days after this vote, Margaret Eden died. She had been the town librarian for thirteen years. Her successor, Thomas Viti, began to work with architects from Interact, Inc. of Acton, MA. This firm had been selected from among ten firms to draw up plans for a new library building. Visits to other libraries and assistance from the Board of Library Commissioners in Boston resulted in a preliminary set of plans, and a search for non-town funds began. Unfortunately, Federal and State funding for new library construction dried up at this time.

In February of 1981, Hilding Hedberg became our third Head Librarian and almost simultaneously the effects of a new law, Proposition 2 1/2, were felt. One effect of this tax-limiting proposal resulted in the cutting of funds for the library by 30%. Plans for the new library building were placed on hold but were not forgotten.

The project was given a strong push forward by Jay Scherma, our fourth Head Librarian. Jay was hired in September of 1985. Since the search for outside money had failed, the Board decided to appeal to the Town. On May 19, 1986, at a Special Town Meeting, voters approved bonds for \$1,550,000 for a new building. A Building Committee was appointed by the Board of Selectmen and a tentative occupancy date was set for April of 1988.

Soon after this vote, the Balfour Foundation awarded the Norton Public Library a grant of \$1,000,000. Half of this money was to be used for "bricks and mortar" and the other half was to be used as an endowment to help maintain the facility. This grant enabled the Community Room to be retained in the library plans. Because of numerous delays, it soon became apparent that the April occupancy date was much too optimistic. The first major delay was due to problems in the bidding process. This resulted in the procedure having to be conducted a second time. Ground was finally broken on May 5, 1988, and the foundation was poured. Then work came to a halt for several months. Problems with the steel sub-contractor and design difficulties with the roof added almost a year to the project. Additional troubles came with the wallpaper, carpet, hot water, and fire detectors, to name a few. The final delay involved working out a suitable Operating Agreement between the Board of Selectmen and the Board of Directors of the library which would insure that the Library Directors would have complete control of the

new facility. After months of negotiations, an agreement was signed on June 27, 1991. As a result of these many delays, the building was not ready for occupancy until June of 1991, more than three years behind schedule.

During this saga, Jay Scherma resigned his position as Librarian and was replaced in April, 1990, by Robin Glasser. Under her able leadership, the contents of our 105 year old building were moved to the new building just two days after the Operating Agreement had been signed. The library doors were opened to patrons on July 9, 1991, about thirteen years after the site had been set aside and five years after voters had approved money for construction.

The new library, which is to be known as the Norton Public Library - L. G. and Mildred Balfour Memorial, is a one and a half story building that provides nearly double the capacity of the former library building. It can house close to 60,000 volumes and has ample room for expansion. The building is roomy and bright. This beautiful, new building will certainly serve the Town of Norton for many years.

(Parts adapted from "History of the Norton Public Library" 1967.)

Important Persons in Library History

Mrs. Eliza Baylies Wheaton



For more than 70 years, Mrs. Eliza Baylies Wheaton was a generous and munificent patroness of the Town of Norton. In 1834, she suggested to her father-in-law, Judge Laban Wheaton, that he found Wheaton Seminary in memory of his deceased daughter. In 1882, she financed the complete rebuilding and refurnishing of the Trinitarian Congregational Church to designs by the eminent Worcester architect Stephen C. Earle. In 1886, she commissioned Earle to draw up plans and donated, wholly at her own expense, the handsome brick and stone Norton Public Library building that still stands on Norton Common. For years she supported a number of poor families in town. In 1902 she donated the land on Main Street for the new Center School, which developed into the Norton High School. Whenever there was a project, she was eager to help.

Born Eliza Chapin in Uxbridge in 1810, she went to school in Boston. It was probably there that she met Laban Morey Wheaton, whom she married in 1829. She lived the remainder of her life in what is now the Wheaton President's house. A highly religious woman, a strong supporter of the Temperance movement, a firm upholder of the proprieties, and a remarkably adept manager of her business affairs, she was always a force with whom to be reckoned. Mrs. Wheaton died in 1905 at the age of 93 and is buried in the Common Cemetery.

The Town of Norton certainly owes Mrs. Wheaton a great debt of thanks for her many kind acts. Those citizens who patronize the Norton Public Library should be most mindful of her generosity. Because of her unselfish gift to the town, the library stood in a place of honor for well over 100 years. Even as we move to a new building, we will always remember that Mrs. Wheaton was very instrumental in helping us to achieve all that we have become.

Lloyd G. and Mildred Balfour

Lloyd G. Balfour was born in Wauseon, Ohio; attended public schools in Louisville, Kentucky; graduated from the University of Louisville and Indiana University Law School; and following brief careers in the fields of law and sales, he came to Attleboro, Massachusetts with the specific intent of founding a jewelry company that would have high standards for excellence of product and quality of its personnel. Mildred McCann Balfour grew up in North Attleboro, Massachusetts and studied at the University of Illinois. Lloyd and Mildred met around 1918 and they were married in 1921. Together they worked to build the L. G. Balfour Company into the giant that it became.



The Balfours lived in a log cabin on a working farm. Their home, located on Pine Street in Norton, was the scene of many gatherings of friends and associates.

There was another side to the Balfours, one that was rigorously safe guarded. They participated in many philanthropic deeds but with little fanfare. They were generous to many schools and hospitals; to many local students who could not have attended college without this support; and to distressed families needing support over the rough spots.

Lloyd Balfour died at his home on July 11, 1973, at the age of 87. Mildred survived him by a decade. Under the terms of his will, the L. G. Balfour Foundation, was founded. It is designed to help support the causes that Lloyd and Mildred supported during their lifetimes.

The people of the Town of Norton are grateful for the Balfour Foundation grant that has helped them to finance their new library building. The citizens of Norton will be ever mindful of the generosity of this fine couple.

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