



# BEDFORD PUBLIC LIBRARY

*The Cornerstone of the Community*

Bedford's library history begins over 225 years ago in 1789. The History of Bedford from 1903 mentions a document in the possession of John A. Riddle:

“At a meeting held at the dwelling house of Isaac Riddel, Innholder in Bedford, by a Number of Subscribers for the purpose of erecting a Library to be kept in sd Bedford held according to the appointment of sd subscribers on Thursday, the 28th day of May 1789.”<sup>1</sup>

The original books were all covered in leather and kept at the house of Deacon John Houston. The original thirty-eight subscribers were active in civic affairs and some of the names are familiar to us today from the names of roads in town such as: Zechariah Chandler, David Patten, and Isaac Riddel. The list of original subscribers and the catalogue of books was recorded in a leather bound accession book which chronicled the library books owned by the subscription library and their activities from 1789-1848. They were incorporated as the Proprietors of the Social Library in Bedford.<sup>2</sup> The 1903 history mentions that the accession book was removed to Ellsworth, Maine and destroyed in a fire there.

In 1980, the original accession book was discovered not to have been lost in the fire but located at the University of Michigan Library, Department of Rare Books. The university contacted the N.H. Historical Society and it was eventually returned to Bedford.<sup>3</sup> In 2006, the accession book was deemed of historic significance and it was preserved with funding from the Bedford Library Foundation and the Moose License Plate Grant Program. The accession book is periodically on display in the library in a custom designed case. Viewers can see the original leather book and the entries written in cursive longhand.

In 1872 another subscription library was started by George W. Goffe. A case for the books was placed in the church vestry and it was a free circulating library with about 150 books. The first librarian was Silas A. Riddle and the books were in considerable demand and the library was well patronized.<sup>4</sup>

Many towns in NH had begun to set up their own libraries similar to Bedford's, but in Peterborough, in 1833, the first Free Public Library in the world to be supported by the community was established. The library spirit proved to be so compelling that by 1849 a law was passed permitting towns to appropriate money for the purchase of

1-History of Bedford, New Hampshire from 1737: being statistics compiled on the occasion of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the incorporation of the town, May 15, 1900.. Bedford, N.H.: The town, 1903. p.570.

2- Ibid., p. 571.

3- Harris, Martha. 1980. Bedford Library Receives Rare Book. Bedford-Merrimack Bulletin, July 9.

4- History of Bedford, New Hampshire from 1737: being statistics compiled on the occasion of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the incorporation of the town, May 15, 1900.. Bedford, N.H.: The town, 1903. p.571.



books and the maintenance of a building for the use of its people. New Hampshire was the first state to pass such a law to establish libraries to receive financial support from the town and offer materials and service to the public without charge.

## **PUBLIC LIBRARY**

At the town meeting in March of 1892, Bedford accepted the provision of Public Statutes and voted to start a public library and elect trustees. The subscribers of the old library transferred 137 volumes to start the free public library. The library first opened in February of 1893 with Jasper P. George serving as librarian. The town report from that year lists all of the books available at the library including literary classics such as: *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Little Women*, as well as books on history, farming and animal husbandry. By the next year there were 321 books in the library and 151 people had used the library.

In 1910, the books were moved from the Presbyterian Church to a building owned by Mrs. Frances E. Woodbury, which she loaned for use as a library. It became known as the Woodbury Memorial Library. The building was formerly the home of Oliver Kendall built in 1846. Minnie King was the librarian in the new quarters until June 1922. Mrs. Frances Wiggin served as acting librarian in 1956 and was appointed librarian in June of 1957.

Mrs. Frances Woodbury left the building which she had loaned for a library to her niece, Martha Woodbury, in trust for the continuance of the library. When Miss Woodbury died in 1944, the library officially became the property of the town and was renamed the Bedford Public Library.

Originally, the library was open 5 hours per week and the total budget for the year was \$155.14. There was no running water and there was an outhouse. The library was heated by a wood-burning furnace. It wasn't until 1959 that the library had running water and a toilet.

## **GROWTH OF THE COMMUNITY**

In 1964 the population was estimated at 4,500. The Summer Reading Contest for Young People had 55 participants and 800 books read. The NH State Library offered the services of a "Book Mobile" for loaning books and Bedford was the highest borrower. The library was open three days per week from 2 to 5 and 7 to 9.<sup>5</sup>

In 1965 the voters appropriated \$500 to secure an architect to design a new library. The plan for a new brick colonial-style building was presented at the 1966 town meeting and voted down.

The following March the voters approved \$20,825 to design and construct an addition. This appropriation, together with a federal grant of \$13,751 paid for a two-story wing at the rear, twenty by thirty-five feet in size, and interior renovations.

The following year an additional appropriation was approved to complete a community room called the Bedford Room and install electric heat.<sup>6</sup>

Ten years later, in 1977, the librarian reported that as the town population has grown the library is greatly in need of more space. The town voted to raise and appropriate the sum of \$85,000.00 to design and construct an addition to the Bedford Public Library. The architect chosen was Michael Ingram.<sup>7</sup>

5- Bedford (N.H. :Town) Annual report for the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, 1964. p. 78-79.

6- Bedford (N.H. :Town) Annual report for the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, 1967.

7- Bedford (N.H.:Town) Annual report for the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, 1978. p. 72.



In 1988, Bedford was the first town library in the state to install an automated circulation system.<sup>8</sup>

By 1992, Bedford became one of the founding members of GMILCS, Inc. (Greater Manchester Integrated Library Consortial System) along with Manchester, Merrimack, Milford, Amherst, Hooksett, UNH Manchester, and the Shapiro Library at Southern NH University. That same year, a professional assessment was done and a recommendation made to construct a library of 20,000 sq. ft.<sup>9</sup>

In 1993, Article 6 of the town warrant was a proposal for a new library costing \$2.2 million dollars. The article failed. It was noted at that time that the Library Trustees pledged to raise a half a million dollars privately to “furnish and equip a new library”. The Bedford Library Foundation was established and started the Library Capital Campaign. In March of 1994, the new library was on the warrant again and the article passed. The Library Foundation exceeded their goal of raising \$500,000 with the help of over 1,300 donors. The new library construction began in 1995.

Although Bedford had a library for over 200 years, this was the first time the Town had a facility expressly designed as a library. During the transition, the old firehouse across the street operated as a temporary library during construction. The original section of the old library known as the Kendall House was moved to the lower area of the library property to be used by the Craftworkers’ Guild.<sup>10</sup>

On June 23, 1996 over 1,000 people attended the dedication of the new Bedford Public Library. The \$2.7 million building was completed on time and within budget. The architect for the project was Dennis Mires. “The new library blends traditional New England architecture outside with modern technology inside to create a public information center, rooted in tradition, yet designed and equipped for the 21st century. Clearly the new library is much more than a place to borrow books. It is the information center of Bedford. But, the new library is even more. It is the community center for Bedford: a place for citizens to come together, where lives touch other lives.”<sup>11</sup> Circulation soared 33% in the first year and over 1,000 new library cards were issued.

In 1997, the library designers were awarded a Gold S.A.M Award for Commercial and Municipal Projects.

The library celebrated along with the town the 250th anniversary in the year 2000 and installed a time capsule in front of the library to be opened in 2025.

In 2001, Frances Wiggin retired as Library Director after 44 years of dedication and devotion to the town. Shirley Barron was hired as the new Library Director and served from 2001 to 2005. Mary Ann Senatros, Assistant Director, was appointed the new Library Director in December, 2005.

In 2006, The Friends of the Library hosted a celebration to mark the 10th anniversary of the opening of the new library building. Bedford is one of the first libraries to participate in the NH Downloadable Audio Books Consortium making access to over 1,000 audiobooks available to our patrons.

In 2007, the Library meeting room use reached an average of 100 meetings per month. Wireless Internet access was made available and patrons are able to initiate their own requests for materials through the online catalog from anywhere.

8- Bedford (N.H.:Town) Annual report for the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, 1988. p. 40

9- Bedford (N.H.:Town) Annual report for the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, 1993. p. 42.

10- Bedford (N.H.:Town) Annual report for the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, 1995. P.36.

11- Bedford (N.H.:Town) Annual report for the Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, 1996. p. 2-3.



Materials available to patrons including books, DVDs, music and more reach 1.2 million items through the shared GMILCS catalog in 2008. The Bedford Library reached number one in the state of NH for the most participation of any community for the children's Summer Reading Program with 1,232 participants reading 21,674 books!

In 2010 circulation continued to soar and we had an average of 400 people per day visit the library for a total of 153,070 visits per year. Express check out units were donated to the library and e-books for download were available for check out. Municipal water was introduced at the library and a new fire suppression system was hooked up to the existing sprinkler system.

In 2011, we reached a milestone in circulation topping the 300,000 items checked out! A standby generator was installed making the library a warming location in the winter and a cooling location in the summer during emergency power outages.

Highlights of the next few years included: a weatherization project with insulation and roof replacement, a new website design [www.bedfordnhlibrary.org](http://www.bedfordnhlibrary.org), extending evening hours until 8:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and a new 3-D printer donated by the Foundation and Friends of the Library.

In 2016 the Geothermal HVAC system was installed and the Library bond paid off.

To honor the 20th anniversary of the new library, five enthusiastic library volunteers, many of whom helped with 1996 library project, installed a Memory Wall on the lower level of the library showing the history of the library. Please stop in to see it. It is stunning!

The Bedford Public Library is very fortunate to have talented and dedicated staff serving throughout its long history. Most importantly, now, just as 20 years ago when the new library was built, it is fortunate to serve a community which recognizes the value of an outstanding, free, public library.

