

The Libraries in Charlestown

An Historical Sketch

by
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Earliest Libraries

In colonial times, there was no public library in Charlestown, only the collections of private individuals such as the one carefully assembled by John Harvard in preparation for his emigration from England in 1637. All of his library of 400 books was, upon his untimely death, bequeathed to the college that bears his name, becoming the core of that institution's first library.

Private Lending Libraries

After the Revolution, private lending libraries began to spring up. They were, similar to today's Boston Athenaeum, open only to their subscribers. The first of these in Charlestown was a reading room established in 1813 in Washington Hall, a large building containing meeting rooms built, appropriately, on the site of John Harvard's former dwelling. The location is now a portion of Harvard Mall. This was followed in 1819 by T. M. Baker's Circulating Library at 24 Main Street.

A year later, in 1820, the Charlestown Union Library was founded, deriving its support from three fire protection societies and the Library Society which provided a starter collection of 200 books. Subscriber shares were sold for ten-dollars each with an annual assessment of two-dollars. By 1828, the collection had grown to 2,500 volumes. The Union Library was temporarily located in the Town House of 1818 and, later, in a room of the Swan-Hurd House, a three-story brick building at the northeast corner of Main and Henley Streets. In 1842, the Union Library disbanded and sold its collection. (Curiously, many of the books ended up in the Hawaiian Islands, shipped there by a purchaser to aid the work of New England missionaries.) In 1851, the Mishawum Literary Association opened its Mercantile Library which had a large collection until the 1860's when it, too, dissolved and dispersed its holdings about the time a public library was established. The Bunker Hill Library Association, incorporated in 1854, maintained a reading room on Elm Street near High Street for many years.

The Charlestown Public Library

In 1853, a citizens petition for a public library was presented to City Hall but was not acted upon. Finally, in 1860, four of the trustees of the Warren Institution for Savings were discussing uses for the upper floors of their newly constructed bank building at the southeast corner of Main and Henley Streets when a public library was suggested. Approaching the City with the proposal, the four men offered to subscribe \$500 each toward the initial costs of the library. This time, the City acted quickly and favorably and on June 5, 1860 passed an ordinance establishing a public library for Charlestown, guaranteeing public funding for its care and support, and setting up a 9-member board of trustees to manage its affairs. In a short time, an additional \$2,000 was raised from public subscriptions, which the City matched. After a year and a half spent acquiring and cataloging books, purchasing furnishings, printing forms, hiring staff and making other preparations, and despite the distractions created by the start of the Civil War, the Charlestown Public Library opened its doors on the third floor of the Warren bank building on January 7, 1862. The library also had a meeting room for "lectures and other purposes connected with art and literature." The first use of the room was a series of lectures on "Brazil, Switzerland and Northern Italy" Rev. J. C. Fletcher.

In 1868, it was determined that the library had outgrown its space at the Warren bank building and that it should occupy space in the new elegant and domed City Hall facing City Square. Space on the second floor of City Hall was fitted up and the library moved there, opening it its new location on May 19, 1869.

A Branch of the Boston Public Library

Upon Charlestown's annexation to the City of Boston in 1874, the Charlestown Public Library became a branch of the Boston Public Library. As a result of the dissolution of Charlestown's city government, the library also inherited the furnishings of the mayor's office and city council chambers including six historical paintings hanging therein. (Three of the latter now adorn the courtroom of the Charlestown District Court in City Square, while the others are on display in the Charlestown Branch Library.) By a special provision in the Annexation Act passed by the legislature, initiated by the Librarian and Board of Trustees President, the collection of the Charlestown library was to remain within the limits of Charlestown to benefit those who had paid for it with their subscriptions and taxes. This fortunate piece of legislation kept the then-Librarian of the Boston Public Library, Justin Winsor, from removing the library's reference collection to Boston as had been his intention. The Boston Public Library's Board of Trustees later affirmed the privilege of all branch libraries to build and maintain reference collections of especial relevance, interest and utility to their patrons and communities.

In 1913, a new branch library was built on Monument Square to allow the demolition of Charlestown's old City Hall and its replacement by the current courthouse and municipal services building in 1915. The new library building had a children's room on the first floor, an adults room on the second, and a meeting room in the basement. It remained in use for over 50 years. It is now the home of the Bunker Hill Museum operated by the Charlestown Historical Society.

The present Charlestown Branch Library at the corner of Main and Green Streets was opened in 1970 in what was felt to be a more accessible and highly trafficked location. It contains a children's room and reading room on the second floor and a reading room and adults section on the first. The library maintains a specialized collection of books, photographs and documents related to Charlestown history which is accessible to researchers by special request. The historical collection does not circulate.

The Friends of the Library

The Friends of the Charlestown Branch Library was formed in 1953, becoming the second Friends group to organize within the Boston Public Library system. (The Jamaica Plain Branch Friends had formed the previous year.) The then-Branch Librarian, Mrs. Mary K. Harris, played a key role in encouraging the founding of the Friends. The initial membership of 85 lost no time in setting a tradition of support for the branch library and of programs for the community. Through generous contributions from members and the business community, the Friends presented the library with needed audio-visual equipment and sponsored three programs in the first year. This tradition of public giving and support continues to this day with the Friends underwriting purchases of needed books and equipment that fall outside city budget allocations. The Friends now schedule six evening programs a year, support the Reading is FUNdamental programs for children, send out a quarterly newsletter, and maintain the library's landscaping. The mission of the Friends remains today what it was in 1953: to serve as an advocacy and support group for the needs of the Charlestown Branch Library, its staff and users. Please join the Friends in this worthy endeavor.