



**A Brief History  
of Libraries and Learning  
in Chelmsford, Massachusetts  
1655 - 2000**

**By Cliff Choquette**

## THE COLONIAL ERA

Following the incorporation of the Town in 1655, the Rev. John Fiske came from Wenham to be the first pastor of the Church of Christ in Chelmsford. A graduate of Immanuel College in England, it is through his work that a lot of early colonial church history is available today. Shown on the inside cover page is his Catechism for Chelmsford's children. After his death, the Fiske private library was appraised at 80 pounds British. He kept a personal Notebook" \* from 1644 to 1675.

The early ministers of New England were men of thorough education and culture. They prized their private collections of books. Some collections were passed down within families; some donated to newly formed schools. John Harvard, founder of Harvard College, left his 320 volume library to the College. They wanted their people to be literate so that they could understand, by reading, what was being preached.

In 1647, the General Court made a free school compulsory. Chelmsford reached the time for fulfillment of this requirement in 1696, when the first record of a teacher was appointed, as follows: "Sanuel Fletcher is Apointed to be a scolle master by order of the selectmen. Thomas Parker, Clarke."

With the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution in place, the Colonial Era came to an end.

\* Available in Reference Department

## **THE CHELMSFORD SOCIAL LIBRARY**

In 1793, the Rev. Hezekiah Packard was ordained pastor of the Church of Christ in Chelmsford. He loved good books. On January 6, 1794, he and 78 Chelmsford residents signed an agreement to organize a library. The agreement read thus: "Every attempt to improve the minds and morals of men is laudable and praiseworthy. Every exertion to entertain and instruct persons of different ages and ranks, and to induce a relish for useful learning and moral science deserves the patronage of the wise and good". Rules were made. A membership fee of \$ 2.00 was set. Annual dues were pegged at .25 cents. The first purchase was for 93 books. Moral, religious and philosophical works predominated. The collection was kept at the homes of the librarians. Moved about frequently, the collection grew enough to merit a more spacious location. A room in the Town Hall was chosen. There, the Social Library remained for about a century. The library was incorporated under the name "Proprietors of the Social Library in the Town of Chelmsford".

## **THE FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF CHELMSFORD 1893-95**

The proprietors of the Social Library had voted May 8, 1893, to donate their collection of 1846 volumes to what was to become a "free public library".

While the books remained in the Town Hall, discussions were on-going concerning a new location for the collection. Public spirited citizens were actively interested. Mr. J. Adams Bartlett donated a parcel of land to the Town. The cost of grading it was undertaken by Capt. C.E.A. Bartlett. Mr. Amos Francis Adams financed the construction of a new building on the Bartlett land, the cost about \$30,000. The building was dedicated May 8, 1895. In 1896, the library name was legally changed to the Adams Library. By the year 1900, 270 cities and towns, including Chelmsford, were classified by the Commission as having "libraries owned and controlled by the towns and free for circulation to all the people".

## **THE ADAMS LIBRARY ERA**

The new library was the talk of the Town, stocked with a variety of collections. The State had donated \$100. worth of books; the Commissioners \$50. worth. The 1846 volumes from the disbanded Social Library; the complete collection of the Chelmsford Agricultural Library and the South Chelmsford Library collection were now stacked in the Adams.

The dedication took place on May 8, 1895. A gala event, dinner was served to 500 guests seated in a large tent on the grounds. There were speeches and music by a band from Dunstable. A great day for Chelmsford!!

In 1917 the Trustees made a statement that is worthy of the present time:

### **WHAT THE ADAMS LIBRARY SAYS TO THE PEOPLE OF CHELMSFORD**

"I am the storehouse of knowledge in Chelmsford.

"I am opportunity.

"I am the continuation school for all.

"I hold within myself the desires, hopes, theories, philosophies, impressions, doctrines, culture, attainments, experiences and sciences of all ages.

"I am a house of wisdom and an institution of happiness.

"I am supported by the people for all the people.

"I offer you the opportunity to know all there is to know about your work

"I am for those who would enjoy fiction, poetry, philosophy, biography, or learn more about farming, business, trade or science.

"I have books for all trades and tastes, all needs and creeds.

"I am free to the public to profit from and enjoy.

"I am in the care of those whose duty and pleasure it is to help you profit by me.

"I open my doors as a public mental recreation ground for your leisure hours.

## **DECADE OF THE '20'S**

Annual Budget: Adams Library - \$1500. North Library - \$1000. The Finance Committee recommended appropriations for the Adams \$2000; North Library \$1200.

In October, 1929, a world-wide financial panic took place resulting in an economic depression that lasted more than a decade.

## **DECADE OF THE '30'S**

One had to live through the Great Depression to really understand how difficult it was just to keep a family housed, fed, clothed, for children to be properly educated and to find employment enough to survive those terrible years. The unemployment rate for 1933 had rocketed to 24.9%! The library was a popular place to read newspapers because one need not have to buy them.

## **DECADE OF THE '40'S**

The Trustees reported "The chief problem is how to keep the library up to date, how to meet the demand for the newest books by the increasing number of borrowers, and at the same time keep within our appropriations"

1941. On December 7th Japan made its attempt to destroy the American naval fleet at Pearl Harbor. The Red Cross had the use of the Library's George Memorial Hall twice each week for the making of surgical dressings. In 1944, President Roosevelt signed the landmark legislation commonly known as the "G. I. Bill of Rights". The cost for books was zooming. In 1947, the number of returning military personnel to civilian life peaked at nearly 18,000,000!! Veterans would need employment, housing, medical care and treatment, education and job training and other benefits. Needless to say, America's schools and public libraries were not prepared for this avalanche of needed services headed their way. Lastly, Town Meeting voted yes to acquire and convert the home of the late Stewart MacKay into a library according to his will.

## **DECADE OF THE '50'S**

In 1950, circulation of library items was 21,422 from Adams and 10,450 out of MacKay. Circulation was increasing noticeably because of greater use of library books in schools and new residents using library privileges. The entire heating plant in the Adams was replaced. There were extensive alterations at MacKay. A Regional Bookmobile system was proving valuable, circulating 4,970 items. By 1959, increasing population was making greater demands on library services. At the end of the decade, the Library was open on Saturdays. Circulation from the Adams was 42,943 and from MacKay 10,148.

## **DECADE OF THE '60'S**

Because the library's per capita support in 1960 was less than the years immediately preceding, it did not qualify for a State aid grant, about \$3000. Our per capita library support was 99 cents. The minimum standard established by the American Library Association was \$3.50. Chelmsford was undergoing rapid and continuous growth. Public needs and demands were greater than the present finances permit. In 1963, a complete renovation was made of the ground floor at MacKay. In 1967, a limited delivery service to nursing homes was begun. In '68, a Town Meeting voted yes to appoint a committee of 5 for the purpose of proceeding with the selection of a site for a new library and construction. The Committee decided that expansion of the present buildings was valueless because there would be no space to expand parking facilities. An agreement was reached with a School Committee whereby the library group could obtain 4 acres of land from the School Committee (at no expense to the townspeople). An application made for State funds was unsuccessful. The Library Needs Committee continued its work by engaging the services of a library consultant and continued to negotiate with owners of private properties.

## **DECADE OF THE '70'S**

Federal Census for Chelmsford - 31,258 persons; double that of 1960.

At a Special Town Meeting a motion was made to transfer from surplus funds \$114,000 to acquire the properties of The Scoboria family and Thomas Tevlin, said land to be used for Town Library purposes. Motion was defeated. The Needs Committee and its consultant considered the above properties suitable for a future library building. Two public meetings were held to acquaint citizens with the factors involved in selection of this site. The Article was defeated on a voice vote.

The highlight of 1974 was a Special Town Meeting's approval of funds to construct an addition to the Adams. The need was considered acute. Work was scheduled to begin in the Spring of 1995. The Needs Committee, after determining that a critical shortage of shelf space would exist at the Adams by early '75, requested from the Town \$98,000. for construction and equipping an addition to the Southerly side of the Adams. Nashoba Tech students, under supervision, would participate in the project. The Article was approved. However, this brought opposition from certain trade unions. The plan was scrubbed. Attention went back to the Scoboria-Tevlin properties. A Special Town Meeting approved the purchase.

In 1976, after almost 2 years of planning, the Scoboria property was converted into a Children's House with room for technical services and administrative offices. In 1977, in the face of an austerity-minded town budget, the Trustees decided not to request funds to renovate the Carriage House. The Trustees committed Trust funds to supplement contributions from the Friends and donations from the public at large. Renovation began in the Fall of '78, providing a meeting facility seating 50 people and kitchen facilities. At the end of the decade, the library won 2 State-wide awards; one for a public relations effort, the other a Library of the Year award for "Unique use of two private buildings to provide space for library activities".

## **DECADE OF THE '80'S.**

1980. The renovated Carriage House was opened to the public in September. Because of financial cutbacks, automated library functions became a necessity. The employees experienced increased workloads, frustration and constant change in 1981. The Friends financed a great deal of library equipment. In 1983 the Assistant Director's position was eliminated, a part-time Community Services Specialist hired. During 1984, the amount of missing books caused a study to be made for a theft detection unit. The A. F. Tait painting was discovered in a library storage area. In 1986, a Special Town Meeting voted \$50,000, for a library site feasibility study.

The next year, the Trustees, a Selectman and four community residents formed a Committee to work on a plan for an expanded main library. A Trustee moved that the Town vote to authorize the Selectmen to acquire the Bartlett Street property for construction of an addition to the Adams. However, the project was not exempted from Prop 2 1/2, thus the erasure of the plans.

At the end of the decade the Librarian reported that "planning for the future in yesterday's facilities remains a constant challenge for Trustees and staff. With no building plan in the immediate future, we must keep the collection pared and continue to offer less than adequate service within these constraints".

## THE DECADE OF THE '90'S

1990. Due to budget constraints 13 part-time library assistants were laid off in July. Volunteers helped to plug the gaps despite the fact that this was not their role. Maintenance problems abounded: rotted shingles, ceiling leaks, water damage, termites, leaking pipes, cracked walks were some of the problems. There was a critical lack of handicap access, shelving, seating, study and work spaces.

In 1991, the library sustained a second year of budget cuts. The library was disqualified for State certification. The Head of the Reference Dept resigned after the position was reduced to part-time.

The Library Site Committee recommended a piece of school owned property on Old Westford Road. In 1992, there were long waiting lists for popular items. A User Survey gave library staff the highest rating; the facilities lowest. Hundreds of library items were missing. A security system was finally installed, aided by State funds. A Long Range Development Plan was completed in 1993. Goals were presented at a town-wide forum. The Town bought the property at 10 Bartlett Street, funding partially offset by sale of the Tait painting and money from the Library Endowment Fund. The Trustees appointed a Library Building Committee and the Library Endowment Committee planned a year of fund raising events.

In 1994, an open house was held at MacKay to celebrate the public opening of its handicapped ramp access. At a Town Meeting in April 1995, Senator Lucille Hicks discussed the proposed library funding and stated that Chelmsford was in an excellent position for grant funding. In the Fall of 1995, voters rejected a prop 2 ½ exemption for the library project. The Town Manager advised the Trustees "to reduce the scope of the library project and live within the existing means of the Town." In October, a Special Election was held in which voters turned down a \$6.7 million dollar exemption for the expansion of the Adams Library. This was the first time the Friends engaged themselves in a political action effort.

An Article was introduced for a vote to authorize the design, construction and equipping of a new library facility to be constructed as an addition to the Adams Library. Town officials would apply for State funding. The motion carried. The Town Manager moved that the Town vote authorizing the borrowing of \$281,254 for the library land acquisition. The motion carried unanimously.

1996. The Town Manager reported - "After 25 years of efforts to expand the Adams Library a plan was adopted and funded to enlarge and improve this historic building to meet demands for more space and resources, and handicapped accessibility. The project was made possible in large part by an award of \$1.8 million in a State library grant. The project was supported by the Town through a referendum vote in December 1996".

1997. The Selectmen reported - "A 2nd project in which the Board generally had a strong interest was the commencement of construction of the new addition to the Adams Library. With the Spring of 1998, this is a project which the Board and the Library Trustees are proud to help bring to the Town".

Bids and awards were completed in 1997. The Adams collection was moved to the gym at the Town Hall. Both the Children's and Carriage Houses were sold and removed to other private locations. Mello Corp., of Taunton, Mass., was chosen as the general contractor.

The Library Endowment Committee prepared plans to initiate a major capital campaign of \$500,000 for enhancement of the new library building. Ground was broken in the Spring of 1998. Completion was scheduled by the early Fall of 1999. There were some delays but the new facility opened it's doors to the public at 12:00 noon February 29, 2000.

## **THE FRIENDS**

In 1962, the Library Board of Trustees suggested that a Friends of the Library group be formed. Since that time, the membership has solidified and experienced growth in a number of ways. One of the first fund raising events was an annual book sale. Since 1982, when that sale grossed over \$4000, the revenue has grown to over \$34,000, a record expected to be broken before long. The Friends group has pumped several hundred thousand dollars into library support programs. Added to this is countless hours of volunteer service. With the Friends, the name of the game is volunteerism!

In 1987, Articles of Incorporation, with a Constitution and By-Laws were framed and adopted by the members. Later on, application was made to organize the group into a non-profit entity. Approval was gained from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Today, the Friends organization is one of the largest in Chelmsford's history. Well over a hundred people have volunteered to serve in programs such as membership recruitment, publicity, book sale, literacy, outreach, community meeting room events and volunteer control.