

CARNEGIE OR COMMUNITY LIBRARY?

By

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Andrew Carnegie, the iron and steel tycoon and philanthropist of an earlier age, spent 56 million dollars to build libraries all over the world.¹ He made his first library contribution in 1886 in his hometown, Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and later in the New York City locality, but as time progressed he expanded his donations to include areas all over the English-speaking world. After he sold his properties to the J. P. Morgan Company in 1901 for over 250 million dollars in bonds, he gave his money away as systematically as he earned it. The ten year period from 1901-1911 could well be termed the "Carnegie Age of Philanthropy," as his research and educational grants became intensified. This is the period when Augusta became involved with Mr. Carnegie, and asked for his assistance. What began in 1899 as a simple request for an appropriation to the Augusta Library grew into a complex and heated civic issue that boiled for nineteen years.

Between the original developments of 1899 and 1900 and the formal dissolution of the effort in 1917, Augustans were involved in a civic conflict concerning the Carnegie issue. From all extant evidence, it appears that most of the debate on this matter was done among the members of the Library Association and not the public or the officials of Augusta. The historical account of the Carnegie issue will raise some interesting questions as to why Augusta never received a Carnegie Library. Answers to these questions may eventually be found in places not yet discovered by the researcher. The bulk of information pertaining to the Carnegie matter was extracted from the **Young Men's Library Association Minutes** and newspaper accounts. The available data confirmed one important fact: throughout the eighteen years, many citizens of Augusta supported Carnegie's offer. Efforts to direct the plan through proper channels were tried several times but the record leaves no trace of what actually happened. A chronological account of the Carnegie issue reflects its irregular nature.

¹This is a revision of a paper Mr. Bindler prepared for a history course under the direction of Dr. Calvin Billman at Augusta College in 1969.

The first mention of Andrew Carnegie came in December of 1899. At this time a member of the Young Men's Library Association (YMLA) suggested that a request for an appropriation to the library be sent to Carnegie, but after a discussion on the matter it was decided not to do so. About this time various members of the Y.M.L.A. had heard of Mr. Carnegie's philanthropic donations elsewhere, and were hopeful Augusta might also benefit. One fact that might have helped inspire the Y.M.L.A. was that use of the library was not great, and there was a lack of funds for the support of the library.

The Y.M.L.A. had been founded in 1848 and operated under a deed of trust since 1853. It was not the first library association in Augusta, however. As early as 1827 a group of men had incorporated themselves into the "Augusta Library Society."² Nevertheless, it was the Y.M.L.A. that first administered Augusta's library facilities as an organized, well-defined body. This group's proceedings were researched by the writer, who was fortunate in gaining access to the reports of nearly every meeting the association held in the years 1899-1917. In the report, all references to "minutes" concern those of the Y.M.L.A. unless otherwise specified.

Inasmuch as Carnegie only gave donations to libraries offering free service, the Y.M.L.A.'s modest annual fee of \$1.00 technically disqualified it for funds. In January, 1900, the library board appointed a committee of three to open negotiations with the Carnegie organization. The slowness of communications and the great amount of time needed to conduct normal business matters were clearly evident in Augusta's initial efforts to communicate with Mr. Carnegie in New York.

Mr. J. A. North was appointed to confer with one of the Trustees with a view to communicating with Mr. Carnegie. In the next month it was reported that papers had been sent to Mr. Carnegie in New York and also that a telegram was sent to Col. D. B. Dyer in New York in the hope that he would call on Mr. Carnegie in the interest of the library. The Augustans, having presented their case, now hopefully awaited a favorable reaction from Andrew Carnegie.

On April 19, 1900, Mr. North reported to the Board that the papers forwarded to Mr. Carnegie had been returned, with a letter from his private secretary, stating that "Mr. Carnegie had responded to so many similar solicitations lately that he could do nothing for the Augusta

library at present".³ Rather than let the issue cool for the moment, the Association decided sometime between the above date and February, 1901 to send Mr. North to New York at the expense of the Association to talk with Mr. Carnegie about a donation. Mr. North told of his visit on March 14, 1901 to an excited throng attending the monthly Board meeting. "Mr. Carnegie, through his secretary, refused to do anything for the library, unless the endorsement of the Mayor and City Council should be secured", he reported.⁴

It was reasonable to assume that the library supporters in favor of getting aid from Mr. Carnegie, would attempt to interest city officials in the effort as quickly as possible. But the reasonable course of events became muddled in "red tape"; various internal conflicts within the Library Association itself contributed to delay. At times this conflict can be evidenced by lengthy discussions that took place at the Board meetings, although the great majority of them were not elaborated upon in the minutes. One explanation may be that the secretary who recorded the minutes felt no need to mention these discussions for the record. This is certainly plausible, particularly when considering that generally the minutes were of uniform length.

As time passed, however, it became clear why the library was not handling the affair as efficiently as it could have. There was generally a minority of Board members on hand who felt apprehensive about accepting any of Mr. Carnegie's offers too hurriedly.

However, the Carnegie issue again became a lively topic early in 1903 when the **Augusta Chronicle** announced on January 28 that the wealthy philanthropist had made a specific offer to Augusta.⁵ Carnegie offered to build a library costing \$50,000, stipulating that Augusta set aside \$5,000 annually for support and that a suitable site be selected. He also specified that public library service be free. This was the usual policy which had been approved in Norfolk, Charlotte, New Orleans, Atlanta, Chattanooga, Montgomery, Nashville and Louisville and elsewhere.

Mr. Carnegie never visited Augusta himself, nor did he send an aide to look over the city. The negotiations were conducted by James Bertram, Mr. Carnegie's secretary, and Hugh C. Middleton, one of the Board members.

In the subsequent week Carnegie's offer became the "conversation piece" of the city. This week may well have been the high point of the

library issue although it persisted for many years thereafter. If the **Augusta Chronicle** reflected the pulse of the citizenry, then the vast majority of the city's inhabitants favored the plan. The editorial section of the paper endorsed acceptance of the grant many times.

Issues of the **Augusta Chronicle** for January 28 through February 3 reveal some of the pros and cons. Those favorable to the acceptance of the Carnegie plan ran along the following lines: A new library would be a great ornament to the city and would be educationally beneficial to the citizens, not to take advantage of this opportunity would deny progress and great public benefit for the city's future.⁶

Those opposed to acceptance of the plan argued that the city could not afford such a venture, that the money could be better spent for other purposes, that a library was not necessary in the first place, etc.

The cohesive force binding together those in the minority was a spirit of fierce independence. In the present researcher's opinion, the underlying motive for those who opposed the library was that they did not want to accept "charity" from a wealthy outsider to make their city a respectable one. Rather, they desired to see Augusta as a product of native brains, enterprise and labor, not to accept the "crumbs off a rich man's table." The assertion of this independent spirit was often hidden behind economic rationale or other considerations.

This independence could not be viewed as a factor that other Augustans did not have, but must be treated in terms of degree. Those who were receptive to the Carnegie issue did not lack the virtuous independent spirit that was being demonstrated by those who wanted no part of Carnegie, but it was shown in a different manner. Perhaps the great pride these citizens had for their city, and a great desire to improve their city, carried greater weight than the factor of non-indigenous assistance. These Augustans, surely wanted their city to reflect the abilities and labor of their people—but in a sense deriving help from one who offers it was not sacrilegious because it improved the common lot of all. Thus we can look back on Augusta in the early twentieth century and perceive how the citizens' pride and love for their city happened to create friction rather than harmony in one instance. Indeed, in this particular case, speculation could be made that the resulting disunity ultimately contributed greatly to the fact that Augusta never did acquire a Carnegie library.

The **Augusta Chronicle**, in mentioning the relative merits of the Carnegie offer, pointed out that to support a public library in Augusta worth \$50,000.00 a year would necessitate the spending of only two-hundredths of a mill in taxes (.00023). In practical terms this means that a person assessed at \$25,000.00 would pay only \$1.00. Besides, they reasoned, all would get free books from the library.

Most of the print devoted to the Carnegie issue in the newspapers quoted replies from those who favored the plan. The **Augusta Chronicle** went so far as to say that even at the expense of denying the city some desirable and needed public improvement, the terms of the matter should be complied with immediately. A representative quote from Mr. D. J. Sullivan exemplified one type of attitude: "I am not only in favor of the city's accepting this, but I wish we would take \$100,000.00 from Mr. Carnegie and erect a still finer building, which he would doubtless give us if we would spend \$10,000.00 a year in support. I would be for this and a still finer library."⁷ While Mr. Sullivan's enthusiasm might have been over optimistic, his basic contention was accurate. Carnegie was not concerned with the amount of money he donated, but only that the city accepting the donation must pay the standard maintenance cost, which was ten percent.

Until January 31, 1903, the Trustees of the library had remained silent on the entire matter. On that day several members of the Board of Trustees announced their opposition to the Carnegie offer on the grounds that "they did not believe in free public libraries and also that the city was not in condition to support the library."⁸ Following the publication of this news, several trustees voiced claims that they must accept it on behalf of the city regardless of their individual views as taxpayers.⁹ They pointed out that the trust under which the Board operated did not specifically state that the library must be public or free, nor did it stipulate that it should be a subscription institution, as it was at the present time, so that the library could be run as a free affair just as well as by subscription. At that time there were eight Trustees, and they were still considering the matter. The **Augusta Chronicle** emphasized the importance of the Trustees' final decision with this statement: "Probably the salvation of the enterprise for Augusta hangs on their decision."¹⁰

Much of the discussion concerning the Trustees pertained to the legal basis for the City-Trustees co-operation which would be required if the Carnegie plan were to be accepted. All library property was held

under the original trust deed of 1853. Competent lawyers were quoted as declaring there would be no trouble in arranging the proper cooperative plan between the library and the city, and a contract could be drawn between the two parties with alternatives open to both. There was some question over whether the Trustees would retain the library property, or if they would transfer it to the city. A number of workable plans were outlined in the **Augusta Chronicle**, all of which would have the same effect: They would work for the mutual advantage of the Trustees and the city. Later, the legality of the Carnegie plan took on increasing significance within the Y.M.L.A. itself.

The **Augusta Chronicle** reported on February 1, 1903 that objection to Carnegie's offer seemed to be very small. The only objection was based on the fact that the city could not afford the expenditure at that time, but added that the city most likely would not have to use appropriations until the next year because it would take at least that long to complete the building.¹¹ It was also reported that the women of Augusta were taking a keen interest in the matter and that a favorable consideration of the proposal would be a monument to the city administration. It is interesting to note that the **Augusta Chronicle** had a panacea for every problem that cropped up regarding the Carnegie proposal. At one time they stated that the chief apprehension seemed to be whether the Board of Trustees would decide to turn over the library property or income to the city. If not, they reasoned, the \$50,000.00 building would have gone to the existing library. But even this had an added advantage—many people would then regard the library as having a more conservative management than if it were actually under the city government, because it would be kept out of politics.¹² As a last resort, if the Library Trustees were unwilling to cooperate with the city, the **Augusta Chronicle** suggested that the city accept the offer anyway, support the library from its own treasury and maintain it without other assistance.

In all the emotional fervor and controversy surrounding the Carnegie offer, it is reassuring to realize that the educational and practical benefits of the library were not completely neglected. The **Augusta Chronicle** quoted Mr. N. L. Willet on February 1, 1903 as follows:

"It is only in the South that the free library spirit does not obtain. In New England and the Midwest, built up by the Northwest, the free library is a necessity just as is the free church, and is the free school. It is these sections that dominate today our country intellectually, politically, in manufacturing and in wealth. The reason

I find for this is the mental stimuli and equipment therein, for there is the free library, and then in every state is a great university system. Here we have not in all the South a really great university. In this city we do not send as many boys and girls to college yearly as would a city of 5,000 there. We are indifferent to the claims of mind, which should dominate the material. There is no means here of higher education. A free library would stimulate us mentally, and would change, I believe, our ideals. As to cost, such things as these have no equivalent in dollars and cents."¹³

The **Daily Tribune** formed staunch opposition to the Carnegie proposal, and collected unfavorable opinions to thwart the plan. In an editorial of February 2, 1903, the **Tribune** presented a reply to Mr. Willet, quoted above. The essence of the newspaper's message was that libraries were not needed because they provided no necessary function, they were outdated, not economically feasible and their educational function had been taken over by the newspapers. The **Tribune** held the view that even those scholars who would be in most need of a library, would not use it because they would have their own libraries. Also, new books were judged as "the cheapest things that can be bought".¹⁴

A representative reply from the citizen opposing the Carnegie offer was issued by Hy B. King, who said "Augusta can assert its independence and self respect by declining the wardship of a rich man's bounty. Do not accept a piece of anybody's pension plan."¹⁵ Another voiced the sentiment that if Augustans were to borrow the money at the current rate of interest (three and one-half percent), and arrange a sinking loan fund of \$500.00 annually, in ten years the library would be their own and even the humblest citizen would feel a pride in it. Certain things were being overlooked by the proponents of the proposal, declared its enemies, such as that the plan would put the burden on coming generations who had nothing to do with the negotiations, that it was not right to put out taxpayer's money for these things, that there was no guarantee the \$5,000.00 maintenance cost would not grow, and so forth.

The first move against the proposed offer was made at the February meeting of the Board of Directors. The majority voted that the matter be referred to the Trustees with the understanding that while the Directors favored a free library, they were opposed to the Trustees turning the fund of the library over to the city.¹⁶ Although the **Augusta Chronicle** maintained the majority of the city were still in favor of the

issue, the **Daily Tribune** contended the majority opposed it. In an editorial on February 9, 1903, the **Daily Tribune** stated: "Andrew Carnegie is making a desperate effort, through local enthusiasts, to get our fair city in his steel grasp, but there is yet reason to believe that the intelligence and manhood of our people will frustrate Andrew's design upon us."¹⁷ Often Carnegie was accused of trying to immortalize his name by his philanthropic ventures.

Negroes were not barred from the Augusta Library, but they did not often enter it because of the "aristocratic atmosphere" associated with the wealthy clique that patronized the Library. Proponents of the Carnegie Library could counter with the fact that this condition was handled easily in other Carnegie Libraries throughout the South, in places such as Nashville, Chattanooga and Charlotte. More subtle attempts to persuade readers not to look on the issue with favor were attempted in later years. One, for example, was used by the **Daily Tribune** in 1904 when it ran a story headlined "Pilferings from Library," about an outbreak of thefts that had occurred in the library.

The library issue almost disappeared as a topic of public interest between 1903 and 1907. Occasional articles did appear in the newspapers on the matter. In the Y.M.L.A. during this time, internal problems pushed the Carnegie issue into the background. The library was becoming more financially unstable as time progressed. In 1906 the Board of Directors and Board of Trustees were engaged in negotiations over library income. The Directors sought more income to help them escape their financial doldrums, while the Trustees threatened to withhold all income because they were fearful the library would close down. The latter proved to be correct, for on August 1, 1906, the Augusta Library closed its doors for the first time in over a century.

Now the Y.M.L.A. busily engaged itself in reorganizing the library as it made plans to re-locate in some other building. Part of this reorganization consisted of an attempt to awaken the public spirit towards the organization of a public library. In the midst of this quest for public support, "the Carnegie Plan" came alive once again and renewed efforts were undertaken by the Y.M.L.A. In the annual meeting held April 9, 1907, all the Directors present voted in favor of accepting the offer. After the vote, an enthusiastic discussion was held to clarify the Carnegie issue, resulting in the formation of a committee to "devise a means of putting the matter in some definite shape."¹⁸ In May, 1907, the

Directors voted that this committee propose the Carnegie plan to the Educational Committee of the Chamber of Commerce. However, no more mention of this proposal could be found by the writer.

The library re-opened in July of 1907. Problems arose immediately regarding the legality of the situation. The Trustees were forced to apply to the courts for authority to transfer funds from themselves to the city as well as other measures. Following this, the Y.M.L.A. engaged itself in discussions attempting to find the best means to secure a guarantee from the City Council that they would act on the Carnegie offer. In May, 1908, the Directors assigned a committee to consult the mayor as to the proper time to confront the City Council. The consequences of this were evident in the year 1916, when the same committee made a very enthusiastic report about the Carnegie matter. They had held an interview with Mayor Littleton, who had agreed to help in every way possible, and suggested a meeting of prominent taxpayers to discuss the matter.¹⁹

The developments during 1908-1915 are for the most part unknown. A probable explanation is that since the library had moved into a new building, some of the luster of Mr. Carnegie's offer was removed. In any event, no evidence as to what became of the desired City Council meeting, if in truth one actually was held, could be located. The researcher investigated the "City Council Minutes" and could not find any mention of the Carnegie affair at all. If this is so, there is good reason to suspect the issue never left the meeting room of the Y.M.L.A., and that "red tape" hindered progress once again. Meanwhile, certain Y.M.L.A. members had corresponded with Mr. Carnegie, who was growing impatient with Augusta by this time. This was illustrated in July, 1916 when one of the Y.M.L.A. members announced that the offer was no longer open unless the city had something more definite to offer.²⁰

An analysis of the regular meeting of the Board of Directors November 2, 1916, makes it possible to infer what caused so much inaction on the part of the "Carnegie" advocates. The minutes read: "The old but ever new question of a Carnegie Library was again discussed and at the suggestion of Dr. Walton a motion was made and carried that Mr. Eve be appointed a committee of one to look into the legal side of the matter in connection with the use of the library funds with the cooperation of the city." This suggests that those concerned with the Carnegie plan could not unify themselves into a single faction. With a common approach to the legal procedure to be used, less confusion would have resulted.

After his investigation, Mr. Eve reported that the trust fund could be used in a proper way in respect to acquiring the grant. He concluded a lengthy discussion of legal clauses with an urgent request that the Directors and Trustees begin at once to enter into negotiations with the City Council and Mr. Carnegie.²¹ This was put in the form of a motion and passed. Mr. Eve and his committee were given full power to carry out the details. Now, if Mr. Carnegie approved, it appeared only a matter of time before the plans would be put into operation. The sense of desperation that was evident in the last meetings of the Y.M.L.A. seem to indicate that the enactment of the decision in Augusta would be a mere formality. A new turn of events brought the whole Carnegie affair to a conclusion. In a meeting held four months after that of the above, Mr. Eve reported that it was his idea that the Directors abandon entirely the Carnegie proposition. An Augusta merchant, J. B. White, had willed to the city a total of 240 acres of land to be used for public parks or cemeteries, and \$400,000.00 for city use. The only stipulation was that two-thirds of the city administration must vote in favor of the project.²² Augusta would now abandon the Carnegie effort and turn to the J. B. White legacy.

The Carnegie episode was an interesting one. The record is confused and complex; although no concrete results were produced it was not because of apathy. Augustans were involved and the issue was a lively one. A half century of effort finally culminated in the passage of a bond issue in 1954.

A new public library opened its doors in 1960.

FOOTNOTES

1. Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), p. 20.
2. Berry Fleming, *199 Years of Augusta's Library* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1949), p. 12.
3. Young Men's Library Association, *Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Directors*, meeting of April 19, 1900.
4. *Ibid.*
5. "Andrew Carnegie's Offer to Augusta," *Augusta Chronicle*, January 28, 1903, p. 8.
6. "Citizens Who Favor the Public Library," *Augusta Chronicle*, January 29, 1903, p. 8.
7. *Ibid.*
8. "The Library Movement," *Augusta Chronicle*, January 31, 1903, p. 2.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. "The Library All the Talk," *Augusta Chronicle*, February 1, 1903, p. 16.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. "Public Libraries Not Needed," *Augusta Daily Tribune*, February 2, 1903.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Young Men's Library Association, *Minutes of the Board of Directors*, meeting of February, 1903.
17. "We Can't Save Andrew," *Augusta Daily Tribune*, February 9, 1903.
18. Berry Fleming, p. 63.
19. Young Men's Library Association, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors," meeting of June 1, 1916.
20. *Ibid.*, meeting of July 13, 1916.
21. *Ibid.*, meeting of November 2, 1916.
22. Augusta City Council, "Minutes of Meeting of City Council," meeting of June 25, 1917. Augusta, Georgia.