

History of the Conway Public Library

Article by David Emerson & Betty J. Parker



The Conway Public Library's original entrance flanked by today's sign

The Conway Public Library began as the Conway Village Library Association. The Conway Woman's Club and other interested citizens created this Association in 1895, providing library services to the community until the present building was dedicated on June 13, 1901. The Association passed its books, periodicals, and property to the Conway Public Library.

In 1900 Dr. Thomas L. Jenks' widow, Lydia, and daughter, Sarah, presented the town with an imposing library, topped by clock tower and bell. It was initially dedicated as the Jenks Memorial Library. The building was given in memory of Dr. Jenks, a successful physician, born near Conway Village. The sturdy foundation was once the Washington Boulder on Pine Hill in Conway. Photographs of this process may be seen on the wall above the fireplace in the main reading room of the library. The building was completed before the end of the year 1901, and cost about \$45,000. It officially opened on January 1, 1902.

The property upon which the Library sits was originally made up of four parcels of land. On July 11, 1900, Christopher and Sophia Wilder conveyed to A. Crosby Kennett, Elijah B. Carlton, and Sewell M. Woodson, Trustees, for \$1,000.00, two separate parcels of land to the north of their home. (The property upon which the Library sits was originally made up of four parcels of land.)

The deeds contain a mutual agreement that the owners of the Saco Medical building will not allow any building within thirty feet of the Library line, and the Library will not allow either a carriage road or further building between its west wing and the Saco property line, that area to be used for "lawn ornamental purposes." Finally, on May 9, 1901, Sarah Jenks reconveyed for \$1.00 all four parcels as one lot, together with the current building, to the Town of Conway to "...hold in perpetuity for the use and benefit of its inhabitants all of said parcel of land . . . with the buildings erected thereon as a Free Public Library Building and its adjoining grounds for a Library Park both under such rules and regulations only as the Conway Library Trustees may formulate and adopt."

Letter to the Inhabitants of the Town of Conway

The following is the letter to the inhabitants of Conway from Thomas Silloway, Architect, and Mrs. Lydia M. Jenks, Administrator, regarding the library:

10 Park Square, Boston, Mass.,
March, 1900

To the Inhabitants of the Town of Conway, NH,

Gentlemen:

As you are aware, it is proposed by Mrs. Lydia M. Jenks and Miss Sarah Elizabeth Jenks, widow and daughter of the late Thomas L. Jenks of Boston, a native of your town, and born within a few minutes walking distance of the site selected for the purpose, -- to erect and finish ready for occupancy, a Public Library Building, and on the usual conditions present it to the town. I think it well to make the following statement concerning the project, thinking it will be acceptable to the inhabitants who are so largely interested.



Conway Public Library's tower clock

It was the intention of Dr. Jenks to leave by will money for this purpose. He died intestate; but the heirs-at-law named propose to carry into execution what he anticipated. They are to erect an edifice every way modern and adapted to the purpose for which it is to be erected, having in view not only present requirements but also a reasonable anticipation of the wants of the future. It will be of brick and freestone on a granite base, with finishings of copper, and practically fireproof. It will be constructed with a tower for a clock and its bell, both of which will be first class for their purpose. The interior finish will be quartered oak, with the plaster work neatly frescoed.

In the designing the building I have made a study of many like edifices, and have incorporated the most desirable features of most of them in this design. The architecture is of a high grade Colonial style, and we trust will bear a severe criticism. The basement will contain the heating apparatus and fuel accommodations, room for general storage, men's toilet room, etc.

The principal floor will contain the main stock or book room, the delivery and conversation room, the large reading room, women's toilet room, and a room for a cabinet of curiosities, memorials, etc. There will be accommodations in the attic for storage of duplicate works, pamphlets, papers, etc.



Detail of fireplace in the Reading Room

It is the intention to begin work as soon as the ground will permit of excavation, and so to carry on the work that the building may be finished ready for dedication as soon as October 1, 1900.



Detail of oak ceiling molding in the Reading Room

A remarkably desirable site has been selected, and fortunately near the spot where Dr. Jenks first saw the light of day. Had the birthplace itself been even reasonably eligible, we are sure he would have had the building erected there.

By arrangement with the donors the grounds are to be properly graded, laid out, and finished as all work of the kind in good examples is done.

In closing I am able to say it is the intention of the heirs named, to have thorough work done, and such as will be not only a fitting and worthy memorial to Dr. Jenks, but also every way acceptable to the inhabitants of the town, and an incitement to others in the years to come to sustain and foster the work it has been their good privilege to inaugurate and begin.

Thomas W. Silloway, with Mrs. Lydia M. Jenks, Administrator

Recent Renovations & the Addition

In 1973, a children's room on the upper level of the library was furnished through the generosity of the Arthur O. Lucy family. The Nella Braddy Henney History Room, added in 1976, holds state and town histories for New Hampshire and Oxford County, Maine. A fund raising campaign in 1982 provided for a major renovation of the lower floor.



Conway Public Library, facing east, with the addition in the foreground

The Conway Public Library celebrated its centennial anniversary in 2001. On March 13, 2001, after ten years and five bouts with the ballot box, the article for the library expansion passed the necessary 60% majority for a bond. The addition expansion project was completed in 2003.



Tortoise and the Hare woodcarving on display in the Children's Room