



Looking @ Lenawee
By Jan Richardi

A Century-Old Cornerstone

Finally, it's November of 2007, the month and year I've been waiting for—my opportunity to write about the museum building (the former Carnegie library) whose cornerstone was laid on November 5th one hundred years ago. In 2003 I used this column to unveil the complex story of how the building was funded and how its placement was decided. All of that business took the better part of two years. From the location decision to the cornerstone laying would be another two years. Compared to all these lengthy preliminaries, the building itself went up in a relative flash, in not much more than a year.

Once it was determined that the Carnegie library would have a prominent location, next to city hall and adjacent to the YMCA, the next step was to find an architect. Interestingly enough, the architect for both the Tecumseh and Hudson Carnegie libraries (both completed in 1905) was not chosen, though he did submit a plan. Was it possible that the Adrian committee was looking for something other than the regulation one-story rectangle? At least one local editorial spoke out against erecting a “low, squatting building that would most definitely not be an ornament to the city.”

One might wonder why Adrian didn't think to ask Andrew Carnegie for funds until 1904, when both Tecumseh and Hudson had already secured Carnegie grants by March of 1903. Actually Adrian had made an earlier application to Carnegie, in July of 1902. The reply (a negative) took five months; in it the city fathers were reminded that Mr. Carnegie provided funding to towns that did not have “suitable accommodations.” Adrian, it was clear, already had a library located in its city hall, with a daily circulation averaging 180 books. What prompted the library committee to approach Carnegie again in 1904 was a bequest of some \$8000-\$10,000 to the city of Adrian, earmarked for library books. Clearly there was no room for more books at the city hall location. Since the library's lease with the city of Adrian would expire in 1910, it seemed a good time to seek out the beneficence of Mr. Carnegie.

By the end of summer 1906, Adrian had secured a total of \$25,000 from Carnegie. (How Adrian was awarded another \$5000 beyond the \$20,000 from late 1904 would take up an entire newsletter article. In short, Michigan Attorney General John E. Bird convinced Carnegie that Adrian's population was rapidly increasing, and many new buildings were going up—a post office, a high school, a YMCA—all at considerably more than \$40,000. Bird even begged Carnegie to visit Adrian.)

The architect chosen to design Adrian's library was Paul O. Moratz of Bloomington, Illinois. In his Carnegie libraries he favored the Richardsonian Romanesque style with its towers and turrets and use of sandstone arches. When a sketch of Moratz's design appeared in the November newspapers, the general opinion was that this would be a handsome building. With its half-circular lobby, its double entrances, and multiple towers, it looked more like a castle than a municipal building. Soon skepticism arose that so fabulous a structure could be built for \$25,000. Moratz assured everyone that it could. However, the dozen or so contractors' bids seemed to indicate otherwise. When bids were opened in February of 1907, all were too high. They ranged from \$25,438 to \$32,420 exclusive of mechanical, electrical, furniture, and architect's fees. Unacceptable bids would prove to be yet another setback for the construction of Adrian's library.

In the meantime the land at the corner of Church and Dennis Streets was being cleared. The house and mill there needed to be torn down. Fortunately, Knight's Mill was an old brick mill, so bricks on the premises could be cleaned and used in the new



construction. The city had already paid \$8000 for the mill property and another \$150 for the house, so it was unlikely that any more funds would come from that source. The man to see (again) was Andrew Carnegie. And the man to approach him (again) was Attorney General John Bird. Bird sent lengthy letters to Carnegie, now at Skibo Castle in Scotland. One implored Carnegie to send a representative to Adrian. The trip from New York was not long, Bird said, only about seventeen hours. And he would pay the expenses himself, if need be. If only the representative could take a look at Adrian, a “prosperous, growing city.” But Carnegie knew he had already increased his donations twice, and he also knew that “\$25,000 is about sufficient to erect a creditable library building for Adrian.” Nevertheless, Carnegie’s secretary James Bertram sent good news in July of 1907 that another \$2500 was on its way. Bertram also mentioned that Mr. Carnegie had no objections to funds being raised by local citizens. The city eventually kicked in another \$5000.

At the very end of August the contract was finally given to Adrian’s pre-eminent contractor C. F. Matthes. Aside from many homes, he had built the Lenawee Co. Savings Bank, the YMCA, the Gunsolus building across from the Y, the entrance building at Oakwood Cemetery, and many other fine buildings. What he had not built was the post office, a building much attacked in the press as costing too much and being too small. Neither did Matthes get the contract for the high school going up on Church Street. Slated to be built for \$50,000, its cost rose to over \$90,000 and it too was attacked as being costly and poorly constructed.

Although there were seven other library bids in the \$26,000 range, Matthes was the low bidder at \$26,056. The only other bidder from Adrian was the firm of Beck & Vogt, at \$27, 172. Wilcox Hardware would provide the heating and plumbing at \$2544. The total bill, which also included furniture, stacks, architect’s and contractor’s fees, would be somewhat over \$32,800.

Clearly C. F. Matthes was the man for the job. A *Times* editorial gives a glimpse into the kind of man he was:

Contractor Matthes may not make wages on that job, he may even lose money, but if he does, he will never say a word, or slight a single specification in order to get even. He will do the work as agreed, regardless of consequences and this is an important consideration to a multitude of people in this and succeeding generations.

The editorial went on to point out the significance of the library, a building ultimately more important than the high school. “Beyond doubt the library is more generally important and more continuously educational than the High School. The boy or girl who spends four years in the latter ought to spend fifty years in the library. . . . The Carnegie library should be the centre and the exponent of our literary progress.”

The high school building was completed in 1908 and razed fifty years later. The library, completed in 1909, remained the Adrian Public Library for the next 70 years. The building, now the home of the Lenawee County Historical Museum, is still going strong after nearly 100 years. Its cornerstone was laid on a rainy day in early November 1907. As you read this, approximately one hundred years to the day, imagine this scene of a half-holiday for all schools, factories and businesses; a big parade despite the rainy weather; numerous speeches at the site of the cornerstone laying, including five ten-minute speeches by notable citizens; a reading of the list of items placed in the cornerstone; and the Masonic rituals of consecrating the stone with corn, wine and oil. Space was at a premium, given the size of the building going up and the number of people involved in the ceremony. The large crowd of local spectators overflowed the lot and filled Dennis and Church Streets.

With the cornerstone in place and the construction well under way (by December 12th the sandstone sign “Public Library” above the first story was already in place), the long-awaited Carnegie Library for Adrian would soon be ready to become that very “centre and exponent of our literary progress.”