

# A HISTORY OF THE DUNEDIN PUBLIC LIBRARY

By Kathleen A. Smuz  
Head of Reference & Adult Services  
2021

The year 1895 saw many remarkable events: The Sino-Japanese war ended. A German scientist, Wilhelm Roentgen, discovered x-rays. In France, the Lumière brothers gave the world its first public showing of motion pictures. H.G. Wells wrote *The Time Machine*. Baseball legend Babe Ruth was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and volleyball was invented by a Massachusetts YMCA director.

Closer to home, Florida celebrated its fiftieth year of statehood. In February, the “Big Freeze,” coming hard upon the heels of another freeze six weeks earlier, damaged citrus groves and caused many farmers to abandon their land and return north. And on April 26, the Dunedin Public Library was created – the first library in Pinellas County.

The library owes its beginnings to a group of wealthy Midwestern yachting enthusiasts who regularly wintered in Dunedin. Christopher Bell Bouton of Chicago decided that Dunedin needed a library, and graciously donated some two hundred books from his personal collection for that purpose. Finding a home for the fledgling library presented little trouble since Mr. Bouton’s brother, Nathaniel Sherman Bouton, owned a building which had been erected in the 1880s in Edgewater Park and which housed the Dunedin Yacht and Skating Club. The building’s first floor contained the Club’s meeting room and private apartments; the second floor housed a large room that was used for dances, parties, and roller skating.

On April 25, 1895, Nathaniel Bouton deeded the building to a board of trustees with the stipulation that a portion of it should be used as a public Library and free reading room. These facilities would be located on the main floor, with plans for a school room to serve the winter residents’ children. The second floor would continue to be used for lectures and entertainment, Mr. Bouton specifying that “no use of the Hall or building shall be permitted inconsistent with the moral and social good of the community.” The first library board was composed primarily of members of the Bouton and Malone families, with the proviso that these members were to be trustees for as long as they accepted the trust.

Soon known as Library Hall, the building was the site of an annual community Christmas party for many years in the early part of the twentieth century. Dunedin residents would later fondly remember the enormous Christmas tree that graced the Hall and the presents given to each child, as well as the square dances held there each Fourth of July.

The Dunedin Library Association was duly formed and charged with the responsibility of running the library. Staffed by volunteers, it was open on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons with Charlotte (Mrs. Henry) Grant as supervisor. During World War I, management fell to Mrs. Clarence B. Collins and her daughter, Miss Louise C. Collins.

In 1920, when the collection had grown from its original two hundred books to over two thousand volumes, the Dunedin Woman's Club took over the running of the library and installed Belle Carlton (Mrs. S. Arthur) Davies as the first librarian, in which capacity she served until 1936.

The 1927 land bust, coupled with the Great Depression, eventually made it too costly for the Woman's Club to continue overseeing the library, and in late 1934 representatives of the Club approached the Dunedin City Commission with the proposal that the city take over library operations. On February 19, 1935, the Commission voted to assume responsibility for the library. Library Hall was deeded to the city, and on April 1 the transaction became official. The following year, Belle Davies went out on sick leave and was temporarily succeeded by Lois (Mrs. Thomas F.) Parnell in the role of acting librarian. In 1940, Madeline C. (Mrs. Walter S.) Salt was appointed librarian, in which capacity she served until January 1943, when Mary (Mrs. William Lovett) Douglas was selected to oversee the collection of seven thousand books. The book budget was a whopping \$100 per year!

The library continued to be housed in Library Hall for another 20 years with very few changes. In 1941, a large tower was added to the Hall so that Civil Defense League volunteers could provide 24-hour watches for enemy war planes and submarines during World War II. Spotters were expected to phone in descriptions of every plane that flew over.

By the mid-1950s, even with a staff of just one full-time librarian and one part-time assistant, it became apparent that the collection was outgrowing its snug home in Library Hall. After much discussion, the city set aside \$10,000 toward the construction of a new facility. As head librarian, Mrs. Douglas and her husband spear-headed a highly successful fund-raising campaign that garnered

an additional \$11,000 in public contributions and in 1956 a new library was built at the corner of Virginia Street and Loudon Avenue, on the grounds of what had formerly been Dunedin Elementary School. Sadly, the old Library Hall was demolished not long after.

Mrs. Douglas retired in 1957 and was succeeded by Annie Elizabeth (Mrs. W. Dwight) Niven, who served as supervisor until 1959, when she was officially appointed library director. The library's collection continued to grow steadily and to attract the increasing interest and use of more of the community. As a direct result, the Junior Service League of Dunedin (then called the Dunedin Community League) became the driving force behind the creation of the group known as the Dunedin Friends of the Library, Inc., in February 1962. The Friends, whose purposes include financial support and promoting the library's interests in the community, produced a history of the library in 1964 and have remained a strongly active group to this day.

1962 also saw the library become a "thoroughly modern" enterprise with the installation of an electric materials charging system. No more hand-written checkout ledgers and no more date stamps attached to the end of a pencil! The charging system, which was quite sophisticated for its time, ensured that fewer errors occurred at checkout and sped up the entire process.

At about this same time, it once again became apparent that the library and its collection of 18,000 items was outgrowing its quarters. Earnest discussions commenced regarding the necessary funding and possible sites. In the end, the Dunedin City Commission pledged \$55,000 toward the building of a new library, and the Friends organized a fund-raising drive that netted an additional \$10,000. In May 1964, the new library opened at the corner of Main and Grant Streets.

In January 1965, Katherine (Mrs. John L.) Young briefly served as head librarian while Mrs. Niven was appointed director of public services, although she continued to serve as staff librarian until her retirement in 1972. She was slated to be succeeded by Mrs. Elizabeth Bradley in January 1973. However, the appointment of Mrs. Bradley never took place, and in February 1973, Mrs. Lucy Eddy was named library director. She served in that capacity until July 1974, when she was replaced by Miss Sydniciel Shinn.

One of Miss Shinn's first priorities was to find a new home for the ever-growing library. In just 10 years at the Main Street site, the collection had grown to

38,000 items; the staff now consisted of 12 full-time and 5 part-time employees.

After intense negotiations with the Publix supermarket chain, the City of Dunedin was able to lease space for the library in the Publix-owned Douglas Shopping Center on Douglas Avenue. Interestingly, this same site had been considered more than 10 years earlier, but had been rejected as unsuitable! Now the library would move into a leased space recently vacated by a W.T. Grant store. The city would eventually purchase the entire shopping center for one million dollars. Over 100 people attended the grand opening on December 13, 1976. The former library building on Main Street would eventually become City Hall.

Two years after moving into its latest home, the library became the fortunate recipient of a special collection, courtesy of the late Dr. John A. Mease, Jr. Dr. Mease, a well-known and much-beloved physician, was active in the local chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution and had a deep interest in family history. At his death, he bequeathed his collection of genealogical books and records to the library, and on September 11, 1978, the Mease Memorial Genealogy Collection was formally dedicated. Members of the Caladesi Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution lent their support to the maintenance of the collection and continue to offer genealogical help to library patrons to this day.

During the next decade, the library was able to expand both its collection and its services. The children's department became more active, offering story times, puppet shows, and other family programs. A weekly film series was launched, and the Great Books and Great Decisions discussion groups began meeting at the library. Circulating art prints were added to the collection. In 1985, the library began lending videotapes. A security system was installed in 1988. By the end of the decade, the collection had expanded to almost 90,000 items – a far cry from the original 200!

A change of command occurred in March 1988 with the retirement of Miss Shinn. The following July, Julia J. (Mrs. Raymond) Noah, a 10-year library employee, was appointed library director.

The 1990s saw tremendous changes and challenges for the library. In 1990, the library became the sole beneficiary of the estate of Franklin Chase Milliken, a retired lawyer who had passed away the previous year. Described as an “education buff,” Mr. Milliken had been a frequent library visitor, spending

many hours reading and browsing. At his death, he generously left \$1.3 million to the City of Dunedin to be used for the benefit of the library. Concern over the disbursement of the estate led to the foundation of the Library Advisory Committee, whose members were given the task of recommending to the City Commission how the monies involved should be spent. The board continues to act as a liaison between the library, the City Commission, and the community, and advises the Commission on all library matters.

Another significant event took place on October 1, 1990, with the establishment of the Pinellas Public Library Cooperative. The Co-op had long been a dream of many librarians throughout the county who sought to promote true interlibrary cooperation and equal free access to library materials for all citizens of Pinellas County, especially those living in unincorporated areas that had hitherto been without library services. 12 county libraries including Dunedin participated in the Co-op, with Clearwater Library joining in October 1994 and the newly-created East Lake Library following in 1999. Cardholders from any Co-op library may use any member library and its materials at no charge.

On October 1, 1992, the library entered the age of automation. Book cards and electric charging machines vanished, to be replaced by flashing computer terminals and gleaming light pens. Eventually the entire library - card catalog, checkout, reference, cataloging, and acquisitions - went online. Patrons were now able to view the holdings of 15 member libraries throughout the area, including public, academic, and corporate institutions. An increasing number of CD-ROM products were added to the library's collection, enabling patrons to research such diverse topics as telephone numbers, poetry, maps, and periodical articles of every description.

In July 1994, the reins of command were exchanged when Mrs. Noah retired and was replaced in October by Wendy (Mrs. James P.) Foley.

Growth, a constant theme in the library's history, once again necessitated new facilities. By its centennial year, the library collection had grown to 98,000 items, circulating over 427,000 items annually. The staff and a portion of the collection moved into temporary trailers while a new 38,000 square foot facility was built on the existing site on Douglas Avenue at the cost of \$3.5 million, which included monies from the Franklin Milliken bequest. For the first time, Internet and word processing computers would be available for public use, making the worldwide web freely available to Dunedin's residents.

The new library opened on September 3, 1996 and was an instant success -- so successful, in fact, that within four years, a study was commissioned to examine staffing levels, which had not increased despite the fact that the library had doubled its former size and had extended its hours to include seven days a week. In March 2000, the City Commission voted to allocate \$117,000 to address the staffing shortfalls, bringing the number of staff to 35 employees.

In May of the same year, Mrs. Foley resigned and was succeeded by the head of the reference department, Barbara E. (Mrs. Donald J.) Skubish, who served as director until her retirement in December 2002. After a nationwide search, Anne M. (Mrs. Timothy L.) Shepherd was chosen in September 2003 to lead the library forward.

The world was turning faster than ever, and Dunedin Library was eager to keep up with and meet the ever-growing, ever-changing needs of its patrons. Under Mrs. Shepherd's guidance, in 2004 a beautiful butterfly garden was created in the front courtyard, and continues to this day to be maintained by the Dunedin Garden Club. It was also Mrs. Shepherd who spearheaded the drive to reconfigure the library's interior to make better use of existing space and adapt to newer technologies. A seven-month renovation was completed in September 2005 at the cost of \$700,000, allowing for the creation of a separate area for teens, relocation of the reference desk, and a more user-friendly arrangement of the fiction, nonfiction, large print, and new books collections.

In response to increasing demand for easier library access for residents in the northern portion of Dunedin, a branch library was created in the city's new Community Center. Named honor of the group that funded it, the Friends Branch Library opened in January 2007 and carries popular materials for adults and children.

Free wireless access was made available in 2008. The library began to offer free access to various online databases covering an ever-widening area of subjects and interests.

A change of leadership occurred in December 2010 with the resignation of Mrs. Shepherd. The following March, Phyllis L. (Mrs. Nick) Gorshe, head of the children's department, became the new director. One of the first accomplishments of her tenure was to oversee the finishing touches to the upgrade of the library's playground, made possible by funding from the City of Dunedin, the Friends of the Library, the Dunedin Rotary Club, the Dunedin Youth Guild and Casa Tina and friends, in the summer of 2011.

In May 2013, the library unveiled the first of its many Little Free Libraries, decorated boxes that serve as a free book exchange – residents may take a book and/or leave one for others to enjoy. Promoting both literacy and art, over a dozen of these Little Free Libraries encourage reading among residents who might not have regular access to the library.

In the autumn of the same year, the Nan and Tom Moffatt Reading Room was unveiled at the main library. Funded by a donation from the Nan and Tom Moffatt Charitable Trust, this serene, glassed-in area provides a space for solitary reading, studying, and thinking, and was named in memory of the Moffatts, long-time library volunteers and supporters.

Traditional library services remained strong, but the library also sought to provide new and innovative offerings to its patrons. In October 2013, a seed library was launched, the first of its kind in Pinellas County. With the goal of providing the community with the education and resources for growing, harvesting and saving seeds, the seed library soon became a success; as many as 3700 packets have been checked out annually. Throughout the remainder of the decade, other items were added to the circulating collection, including ukuleles, museum passes, and Wi-Fi hotspots.

2020 brought the COVID-19 pandemic and a new set of unique challenges for library staff. Although the building was closed to the public for six weeks, staff continued to work behind the scenes through telephone reference and virtual programs. When the library reopened in June with safety protocols in place, curbside pickup was offered, and became so popular that it was added as a permanent service. Whether closed or open, library staff remained consistently dedicated to providing superior assistance, print and online materials, programs, and services to the Dunedin community.

The passage of more than 125 years brings growth and change in any era, but perhaps never more so than in the years since Dunedin Library was founded in 1895. Since then, the world has seen a multitude of innovations – progress from the horse and buggy to the self-driving automobile; from the first shaky flight at Kitty Hawk to the first steps of man upon the moon and his residence aboard the International Space Station; from the printed page to the computer screen and hand-held devices. Beginning with that small collection of 200 books that has now grown to nearly 123,000 volumes, the library has seen its share of changes as well; electronic technology and new material formats have expanded the dimensions of the library's collections and services. Both staff and patrons have come and gone over the years, but while the names and faces

may change, one thing has remained constant: the vision. From the time Christopher Bouton first shared his private collection with the citizens of Dunedin to the present day, Dunedin Library has sought to educate, to entertain, to enlighten, and to inform, all with a focus on excellence. May that spirit of dedication and community service remain unwavering as the oldest library in Pinellas County strides confidently toward the future.