

Centennial Research Digest:



From Association to
Public Library,
1883 to 1900

**The Pre-History of
Patchogue-Medford Library
(PML History in Summary Form, Part I)**

by Mark Rothenberg

From Association to Public Library, 1883 to 1900

1883 (Founding & Library Opening):

On May 19th 1883 an article by Rev. S. Fielder Palmer appeared in the *Patchogue Advance* calling for subscriptions to create a free association library. On June 12th, **Patchogue Library Association** was created. It elected a board, approved a constitution and by-laws, and made plans for a library. Its first officers were: Dr. J.J. Craven, President, George G. Gerard, Vice President, John A. Potter, Secretary, & E.S. Peck, Treasurer. In addition, it had 3 Trustees (John M. Price, Wilmot M. Smith, & Dr. Lawrence S. Edwards) and a Managing Committee of 3 (Rev. S.F. Palmer, Wellington E. Gordon, & Dr. S.W. Chapel). *Association membership* was set at \$5 (which gave you voting and borrowing privileges), *Subscriptions @ \$1* (which let you borrow books for 1 year). *Non-subscribers* could borrow books, but only if they first deposited the full value of the book and paid 10 cents daily for the length of the loan period (which ran from 1-3 weeks, depending on the book). Fundraising, to buy books and rent a library room, would occupy most of the Association's time, until superceded by a public library, in 1900. By July 13th, the collection (**about 250 books**) was housed in a **back room of Floyd A. Overton's shoe store** (where today's Colony Shop is located), with Mr. Overton acting as librarian. By August 18th, when the **library opened**, the collection had reached **635 books**, listed numerically in a printed *First Catalogue*. A **formal library dedication** was held in the Congregational Church on August 29th, which included a quartette and inaugural speeches by Rev. S.F. Palmer, Principal W.E. Gordon, A.M. Drummond (founder, U.F.S.D. # 24), Rev. Mason Gallagher, Rev. Edward Lord, W.M. Smith, and J.J. Craven. The library was reported as doing well in December.

1884 (Crises, Relocation, Survival, & Celebration):

Two crises rocked the library, early in the year. In *late January*, its Treasurer, E.S. Peck, CEO of the Patchogue & Suffolk County Bank (Patchogue's sole bank), was nearly lynched by around 500 angry depositors, when his bank failed. Town fathers—most of them library board members—saved him from that, then once again, from his attempted suicide. (J.J. Craven was first on the scene, followed by Drs. Chapel & Edwards.) Library board members were also prominent in Peck's financial and legal grilling, and in the establishment of a successor institution, the Patchogue Bank. (In fact, librarian Floyd A. Overton would become its new CEO, in August.) Mr. Peck was found innocent of ill intent, and let go on *April 9th*, by order of Judge John Reid.

Meanwhile in *early March*, Floyd Overton's young wife Lida, died. Between *April 27-May 3*, the library was ordered from his store. The board scrambled, relocating it to a **back room in George M. Ackerly's stationery store** (somewhere on Main Street, quite possibly in today's Ackerly Block, diagonally opposite the present library). In *late August*, F.A. Overton sold his shoe store to his brother-in-law, James L. Overton, and sometime between *September '84–November '85* **the library was transferred back to the shoe store** (initially occupying only *part* of a back room). The library celebrated its **1st anniversary** with a public meeting at the Methodist Church on *September 16th, 1884*. A quartette sang "*Tell Me Flora*" (from a popular play, *Floradora*). There was then a business meeting, followed by 2 speakers. Among other things, Rev. B.F. Reeve said, "*You have the library, but in order to be benefited, you must dive in. You must master its contents.*" Rev. Mason Gallagher, in his speech, remarked, "*Trade is not everything – character and intelligence are infinitely more important.*"

1885 (A Quiet Year):

The year passed relatively quietly, with the **2nd anniversary** celebrated at the Congregational Church on *November 8th*.

1886 (Heading into a Downswing):

1886 saw the expansion and sprucing up of J.L. Overton's shoe store, *including* the library, which now took up one or 2 comfortable reading rooms. In *February* the library had **669 books**, 69 subscribers, and an annual circulation of 1988. Over 100 new volumes were added in *June*, raising the total to **about 800 volumes**. A sign showing where the library was located within the store was added, subscriptions going slightly up, thereafter. But, **fundraising shortfalls were a continuing problem**, and a call to library support as a civic duty rang out in the *Advance* on *Nov. 6th*: "*You are letting one of your noblest and best institutions languish along, and leave it to a few devoted spirits to keep it from total extinguishment.... Come up to their help. For every penny you spend you get more than an equivalent.... If the people of the village would only take hold of this matter with the spirit and vim they should, the day would not be far distant when we could boast of having one of the largest and best selected libraries to be found in this county. That is what we hope to see.*" [Today, in 2000, Patchogue-Medford Library is recognized as one of Suffolk County's largest and best selected public library collections. It is also the sole state-designated Central Library for the county, for which it receives state funds. Its collections, staff skills, and leadership are recognized and respected among its 54 sister libraries in the county. Countywide Central Reference services are based there, in a partnership with Suffolk Cooperative Library System.]

1887, 1888, & 1889 (3 Dismal Years):

One fundraising effort after another, in these years, yielded poor, even negative results for the library. The last year was the worst. The board didn't even meet until *December 28th*, in 1889. Then, it elected no officers and conducted no business beyond approval of old minutes. Meanwhile, in *January 1889*, George Ackerly built a music store on S. Ocean Avenue (near the N. end, W. side), that was being hawked in *October* as a significant addition to downtown architecture.

1890 (Starting to Rally):

PLA met again on *March 21st*. **895 books**, 67 subscribers, and a balance on hand of \$30.36 were recorded. Jesse Mills presented the Association a check of \$100 to be used *only* for the purchase of books, the bequest of *Mary A. Roe*. The collection would grow, but the Association would

continue in financial straits. J.L. Overton was replaced by *E.S. Robinson* (a Main St. jeweler), as librarian, but there is no mention of a transfer of the collection. A committee (J.A. Potter, W.M. Smith, & W.E. Gordon) was appointed to investigate incorporating the Association (i.e., applying for a state charter); and a benefit concert failed to materialize.

1891 (Hope Springs Eternal):

On *January 26th*, the Patchogue Lyceum Co. was announced, formed to convert the former Congregational Church into the showplace of Patchogue, and it was to include a public library. On *January 30th* PLA showed a healthier balance, of \$110.04. The Executive (formerly Managing) Committee was ordered to spend \$75 on new books. **George M. Ackerly again became librarian, and the library was ordered transferred to a side room in his music store.** (The room rent was less expensive.) PLA's *Fourth Catalogue* appeared in May.

1892, 1893, 1894, 1895 (A 4½ Year Collapse):

March 9th, 1892 marked the **last meeting of the board until October 27th, 1896.** 75 volumes had been purchased, and catalogues were ordered to be printed (which may never have occurred). Treasury balance: \$0. Then, on *February 9th, 1893*, J.J. Craven died, still serving as President. He had lent the library his not only local, but international prestige. Now it was gone. From all accounts, his death dealt PLA a staggering blow. He was not replaced until 1899. On *August 3rd, 1894*, the *Advance* reported the New Lyceum (on Lake St.) now open, but still without facilities for a library. Then, on *October 25th, 1895* an article entitled, "*Patchogue Library*," reviewed the situation. The library was still in G.M. Ackerly's music store (which the anonymous author called "*unsuitable*"). Only 25 subscribers remained, "*...mostly young people, still drawing books.*" The author continued: "*A public library is an institution in which every villager is a stockholder to the extent of his pride in the institutions of his village.... There is hardly any similar institution which does so much good for a community at so little cost. One good book in a library will afford pleasure and profit to hundreds of people. ...There is no reason why Patchogue can not support a flourishing library. Our citizens should make it a matter of duty to help....*"

1896 (Partial Revival, Then Back in Limbo):

When PLA met on *October 27th*, it interrupted a 4 ½ year collapse. PLA was now in debt -\$135.15. Jesse C. Mills offered \$50 for a year's room rental in the New Lyceum. George M. Ackerly offered his clerk's services, free of charge. Both offers were accepted. **The next board meeting was nearly 3 years away.** The **Library was moved** (probably in **early to mid-November**) to the **West front room of the Lyceum** (on Lake St., N. side, diagonally W. of the old Carnegie Library building).

1897 (Still Cast Adrift):

In *March* the Library was reported open on Wednesday & Saturday afternoons. In *late November*, **Sorosis** a new organization appeared in Patchogue. It was an all-purpose women's organization (political-social-cultural-civic-literary-debating). It was led by the energetic Mrs. Wilmot (Elizabeth Mott) Smith, President, Millicent Sloat, Vice Pres., Marion E. Brundage, Secy. (who would soon serve in a major library role). On its Household Committee were a number of wives of library board members. (In 2 years' time Sorosis would lead the charge for library chartering, and succeed.) By *December 31st* the library had reached **1500 books**, but it is not known how much they were used.

1898 (Turning Point):

While the *January 21st Advance* reported a move by the library to incorporate under the State Regents (i.e., apply for state chartering), there is no indication of any follow-through. A *January* library benefit concert barely broke even, in contrast to Sorosis' *May & June* fundraising events (for its treasury), successful even in the midst of the Spanish-American War. The magnitude and swiftness of American success in that war did much to reinforce popular faith in public institutions. Then, on *December 19th* Mrs. Mary E. Craigie, Managing Director of Brooklyn Public Library, spoke in the Sorosis club room, explaining how 6 women created a well-functioning *public* library. She urged Sorosis to do the same for Patchogue. Influential men (present as guests) were put on the spot by Mrs. Smith, for their opinions. Rev. Gleason, Dr. Pullman, Judge Wilmot Smith (her husband), and John Potter were all highly favorable. Judge Smith said "*...he believed in a good item, not in the bargain counter, and moreover the library should be in a fine room on the finest street – he did not believe in*

putting a library on a back street." Mr. Potter spoke of the library's history "...and of its present bankruptcy – waiting only for one of the trustees to die and endow it, but they were holding on tenaciously." It was decided to form a library committee, ask the local Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) to do the same, and have both confer with the library board. WCTU dragged its heels, and was eventually not forthcoming. The initiative was squarely with Sorosis, by late 1899.

1899 (Passing the Torch):

The February 24th *Advance* reported Sorosis looking to "...enlarge its membership to 100 and build a fine club house having rooms for a public library on the ground floor." On October 9th the last PLA elections were held: Judge Wilmot M. Smith, President; Walter L. Suydam, Vice President; Nelson McBride, Treasurer; John A. Potter, Secretary; Executive Committee: Wellington E. Gordon, Edwin Bailey, Sr., & Mary A. Deery; Trustees: Jesse C. Mills, Fremont Hammond, & Joseph Bailey. Patchogue Library Association's final meeting was held on October 28th. Sorosis' proposal "...to take charge of the Books of the Library for 1 year..." and attempt to turn it into a public library, was received. Jesse C. Mills, seconded by Fremont Hammond, introduced the following resolution:

"Resolved, that the Trustees of Patchogue Library Assn. have an inventory taken of all the Books, Maps, Magazines, and fixtures belonging to said Assn., and that the Trustees of said Assn. are hereby authorized to loan to the Ladies of the Patchogue Sorosis all of the above property, to be kept by them as part of a free [i.e., public] Library for a term of one year, and after the expiration of one year, the Books and other property to be returned to the Library Assn.,

Unless a free [i.e., public] Library shall be established under the State Regents Law and a payment of a sum of money be voted by the people of the School District for its maintenance."

It passed unanimously. Sorosis voted to assume control of the collection in November. Around December 15th, the library was moved to Sorosis' club rooms. By December 29th there were 174 patrons, and 300 books had already been circulated.

1900 (The Library Goes Public):

"The Living Pictures," a well-advertised library benefit performance in 14 short acts, was sponsored by Sorosis on January 24th. On February 23rd, "The Public Library", a long article favoring the library's establishment and funding, appeared in the *Advance*. It quoted a man trying to raise 2 sons well on a "moderate salary", who said: "I encourage my boys to read. It keeps them off the streets and home where we know what they are doing. I like to have them read all the books they can get hold of. I can't afford to buy them books and they get them at the library...." Collection, contributions, and circulation were now all expanding. Sorosis board member, **Marion Brundage**, was the library's 1st **trained librarian**. Dewey Decimal Classification was introduced. In an interview (Feb. 23), Miss Brundage said, "...borrowers want books covering the widest ranges of reading.... All kinds of people make up the borrower's list, rich and poor, young and old, men, women, and children. That's the best feature of a free public library. It's for everybody." A benefit monologue by Lee Fairchild was held on April 4th, at Sorosis' club room. The Masonic Lodge held a library benefit supper on April 25th. On June 29th, library **circulation** was **40-50 books daily**. June 29th saw 3 articles in the *Advance*. "To the Tax-payers" (by Addie Edwards, library treasurer) described Sorosis' achievements at the library to date, pointed out the library's benefits; and that villagers presently paid taxes that went to maintain libraries elsewhere in the state, with no return benefit, which would be remedied by establishing and funding the library. It also pointed out that the state, at that time, matched local investments in books. The second article was a lengthier interview with the Librarian, Marion Brundage. The third, "Taxation and Free Library" (by Capt. E.T. Moore), was a call to vigilance against the library's establishment and its funding. It argued that road maintenance must take precedence over the frivolity of improving minds. It accurately predicted that the next request would be for a library building. On August 7th matters came to a public vote at U.F.S.D. #24's annual board meeting. The board made resolutions to establish a public library, to fund it @ \$600 per year, and to elect 5 trustees (as required by the state). Capt. E.T. Moore argued against the library's establishment, as waste, seconded by Vincent Worth, who said that the books in the library were worthless, and that his son read them constantly. State Supreme Court Judge (& PLA President) Wilmot M. Smith then rose and said, "...people, even poor people, did not refrain from smoking and drinking because of high taxes, and he could not see why they or their children should refrain from reading good books because of a little extra tax." He urged Patchogue to pull together, which

is what had always set them ahead of other villages in the area, and vote for the measures. Dr. Frank Overton, Dr. Wellington Gordon, and Walter H. Jaycox, then spoke in turn, in favor of the library and its funding. The **vote to create the library carried 54 to 17. The \$600 maintenance appropriation carried 58 to 33. Five library trustees were then elected: Mrs. Wilmot (Elizabeth Mott) Smith, Dr. Wellington E. Gordon, Dr. Frank Overton, Walter H. Jaycox, Esq., and Mrs. D. Gertrude Brundage.** The following day, *August 8th*, the new board held its first meeting, at the office of Walter Jaycox. Lots were drawn to determine the length of office of each trustee (Mrs. Smith, 1 yr.; Mrs. Brundage, 2 yrs., Dr. Gordon, 3 yrs., Mr. Jaycox, 4 yrs., & Dr. Overton, 5 yrs.). Elizabeth M. Smith was unanimously elected President for one year. Frank Overton became Secretary, and W.E. Gordon, Treasurer. [There was continuity from the old board to the new, and the Sorosis link was strong.] *"On motion, the secretary was instructed to apply to the Regents of the University of the State of New York for a charter of incorporation for the library."* A committee to appoint a librarian was formed (W.E. Gordon & Frank Overton). *August 10th's Advance* carried the statement: *"It was not the people of small means who tried to defeat the Free Library last Tuesday night.... They are willing to pay their small proportion of the tax for the great benefit received. To the credit of Patchogue, no backward step was taken when it was voted to make the Free Library a permanent village institution."* On *August 23rd*, the board met again. *An application for a library charter of admission to the University of the State of New York was formally signed and unanimously adopted."* On *September 12th*, W.R. Eastman, Regents Library Inspector, examined the collection, conferred with the board, and was pleased with the library's arrangement and prospects. At that time, *"...an application [was made] for a grant of \$200 from the Regents, based on the gift of \$400 worth of books by the old library association."* Next came **Patchogue Library's New York State Charter, effective at 3:30 P.M., December 20, 1900.**

The first hundred years of the **public library** under state charter, was now about to begin.

Special thanks: To the Long Island Advance
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Note:

Information contained herein is derived from sources in a documentary history of the library in progress, the current draft is over 300 pages in length, and includes some illustrations. Research is continuing and copyright permissions are being sought. The general work will be published, chronological section-by-section (e.g., 1883-1900, 1901-1914, 1914-1945...), and portions of which will be placed on the web. The text of this work is also the basis of the Patchogue-Medford Library Centennial Video.

Patchogue-Medford Library

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