



# Beacon *on a* Hill

Carnegie Library of McKeesport  
remains a vital part of the community.

By JENNIFER BROZAK



**M**ore than a century ago, members of the Women's Club of McKeesport banded together with a primary goal: to create a public library for their city. To achieve their goal, the club's secretary, Odessa Moore Crabtree, wrote to steel magnate Andrew Carnegie in New York, asking for financial assistance. It was widely known that Carnegie—once the richest man in the world—was a proponent of free libraries, and had donated to the formation of public libraries in other cities.

Carnegie responded in kind, offering to contribute \$50,000 to build the library, on the condition that it would remain “free to all the people,” according to *Western Pennsylvania History* magazine. As part of his gift, Carnegie insisted that the City of McKeesport find a suitable location for the building and dedicate \$3,000 a year to its maintenance.

To meet Carnegie's requirements, the Women's Club enlisted a few local businessmen to help find a location and drum up support for the project. One of those men, James Evans, who was the president of the National Bank of McKeesport, donated 2.5 acres of land, which was part of his family's 75-acre estate, at the corner of Carnegie and Union avenues.

The project's commission found an architect in William J. East, who had opened his solo architectural practice in 1898. East designed the imposing structure in the form of a “T,” with a two-story tower at the north end of the building. At the top of the curved staircase were two meeting rooms, one of for the Women's Club and the other for the library's board. On the first floor, East included an adult reading room, children's room, lecture room, and a central circulation desk with an intricate dome directly overhead.

The construction of the impressive Romanesque sandstone structure was completed a few years later. The Carnegie Library of McKeesport opened its doors on July 15, 1902, with 3,000 books and librarian Emily Kuhn at the helm. Today, 114 years later, the library boasts a collection of more than 110,000 books.

The library's newest director, Judith Gaydos, took over in June. She says that the library serves approximately 5,000 patrons, not including its branches in White Oak and Duquesne. And despite the proliferation of technology, McKeesport citizens still find plenty of value in their local library.

“We are certainly busy,” she says. “We still have plenty of people coming in to read and checking out multiple books.”

Not surprisingly, Gaydos says that funding and lack of space are the biggest challenges facing the library's future. The library now has more than 40 computers and an ever-growing collection of books, DVDs and books on CD. Employee workspace is limited, and, because of the building's open floor plan, is anything but private.

“With the building being 114 years old, of course they never could have predicted how much space we'd need,” she says. “I mean, who knew about technology back then?”

The library maintains a host of regular programming. There are monthly story times, Lego and K'nex building sessions and pre-kindergarten classes for children. Adults can partake in the library's cooking, knitting and book clubs, computer assistance classes and numerous seminars.

In November, the library introduced “Aim High,” a program sponsored by Penn State of Greater Allegheny that encourages teens and tweens to make good choices. This January, the library also will participate in a pilot program through United Way, which will provide free tax preparation services to low-income residents.

Andrew Carnegie provided no endowment beyond his initial \$50,000 donation, so funding the library's programs and maintaining the building remain an ongoing challenge. Fundraisers are always in motion, says Gaydos. The library is currently in the midst of raising funds to repave its parking lot, and is hoping to reach its goal of \$50,000 to complete the project. Eventually, the library would like to raise money to repair the “rickety steps” that lead up to its third floor, which is currently unusable.

Despite its modern-day challenges, the library has persisted because of its people, adds Gaydos.

“We have a great staff that works well together, and many conscientious volunteers who are so important and necessary to the success of this library,” she says.

“We've been around for 114 years and we're still going strong.”

For more information about the Carnegie Library of McKeesport, visit [mckeesportlibrary.org](http://mckeesportlibrary.org) or call 412.672.0625. ■

