

# Chelmsford Library - 186 Years Young

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

Story hours for the children, special musical programs, circulation of paintings and recordings, micro-filmed records, children's plays, current magazines by the score - these are only some of the services provided by the public libraries in Chelmsford in addition to their fundamental responsibility of maintaining thousands of volumes for circulation. Our libraries are not unique in this respect: such programs are usual in libraries that are keeping up with the times. But 'twas not always so. A look into the 186 year history of circulating libraries in Chelmsford will attest to the vast changes that have taken place in nearly two centuries.

It was only 63 years, a relatively brief period in New England history, after Benjamin Franklin had opened the first subscription library in the United States, that the Rev. Hezekiah Packard, the fifth minister of the First Parish Church (1793-1802), and a group of citizens organized the Social Library of Chelmsford in 1794. (Mr. Packard built the large house at 16 Westford Street that is currently undergoing restoration.) He reported, "Having communicated my intention and obtained a sufficient number of subscribers, on the 6th of January, 1794, a meeting was called and the society was organized." The articles of agreement were signed by 78 persons. This was, of course, before the advent of free public libraries so membership was granted to those who could raise \$2.00 to join plus annual dues of 25¢.

History tells us that "of the first 93 books purchased, but twelve could be classed as fiction. Moral, religious, and philosophical works predominated, relieved by a few volumes of poetry, or of voyages and travel." By 1820 the collection had been expanded to 350 books including, from the original purchase, "Rees' Cyclopaedia" which was reported to have been "the most valuable and expensive work ever printed in this country." Many of these books, as well as Rees' Cyclopaedia and some of the Social Library's original records, are now in the collection of the local Historical Society and can be examined at the Society's Barrett-Hyam Museum.

The first librarian in town was Oliver Barron who kept the books in the local tavern that he operated. As each new librarian was named, the collection was moved to the librarian's house. -- Think what the Town could have saved on library buildings and upkeep if that custom persisted today. Of course there might be fewer librarians competing for the available positions. -- Next the books spent a year at Simeon Spaulding's, then several years at the parsonage, and a long time at the house of Captain Caleb Abbott. After that the librarians change frequently and finally no suitable place for the books was available so they were put in storage. Sometime later a room was fitted up in the Town Hall to serve as the library.

In 1893, after the State had passed enabling legislation, the voters of the Town authorized the establishment of a free public library and appropriated \$200 for it. The State donated \$100 worth of books and the Library Commissioners added \$50 worth. As a result of this action, the Proprietors of the Chelmsford Social Library voted to disband after serving the community for 99 years and presented their 1846 volumes to the new library. There were at that time at least two other private libraries in town, the Chelmsford Agricultural Library and the South Chelmsford Library. Both of these organizations gave their complete collections to the new group.

The Free Public Library, as it was then known, opened to the public on October 7, 1893. Three years later, the Town voted to change the name to the "Adams Library." This change was made in appreciation of the donation of the new library building to the Town.

As a sort of parting gesture, the centennial of the founding of the Social Library was held at the Town Hall on January 6, 1894. The program included an historical address by the Town's historian, Mr. Henry S. Perham, with additional remarks by several dignitaries including Governor Greenhalge. A poem, written especially for the occasion by Mrs. M. L. Emerson was read by Mr. George A. Parkhurst, grandfather of the present writer.

When the number of volumes in the Free Public Library increased appreciably, it became evident that the accommodations at the Town Hall were inadequate. Serious consideration was given to remodeling the 1802 Schoolhouse located in Forefathers' Cemetery when a few public spirited citizens became interested in a new building, constructed specifically for a library. The site of the present Adams Library was selected and Mr. J. Adams Bartlett, who lived at No. 4 Bartlett Street, donated part of his land. The cost of grading was borne by Capt. C.E.A. Bartlett whose residence was at 15 Bartlett Street.

Mr. Amos Francis Adams, a native of Chelmsford and a descendant of one of the incorporators of the Town in 1655, financed the construction of the building at a cost of approximately \$30,000.

The dedication of the new library took place on May 8, 1895 and was a gala event. Dinner was served to 500 guests in a tent on the library grounds and was followed by a speaking program. Music was supplied by the Dunstable band. The formalities, as reported, were somewhat different from what we should expect were we to attend such a function today. We are told that "the citizens, with the invited guests, assembled at noon and, after inspecting the new building, marched in procession under the lead of the marshal, E. H. Shaw, to the tent in which the dinner was served."

In the 1920's a bequest from the Flint family made possible the construction of a sizeable addition known as the George Memorial Hall. The first floor was used as a meeting place and the upper floor provided space for the Historical Society's first museum. A few years ago, the Library trustees found it necessary to move its fine arts and children's collections into this addition. Since then the Scoboria property next door has been acquired for the Children's House.

One hundred years ago the five villages of Chelmsford were somewhat isolated from each other so the residents of North Chelmsford organized their own subscription library in 1872, known as the North Chelmsford Library Association. They purchased land and built a building on Gay Street in 1878.

In 1894 the sum of \$200 was appropriated by the Town in support of this library and the trustees voted to make their books available to the residents of the entire town. This library continued to operate until 1948 when the Anna C. MacKay Library was opened in the North village. The building had been bequeathed to the Town by Stewart MacKay, a former selectman, in memory of his sister, Anna.

While Chelmsford has undergone an almost explosive growth in the past two decades, the Library Trustees have done an outstanding job of keeping up with the latest developments in Library Science while expanding to meet the growing needs.

The "Institution and Regulations" of the Chelmsford Social Library (1794) stated, "Every attempt to improve the minds of men is laudable and praiseworthy. Every exertion to entertain and instruct persons of different ages and ranks, and to induce a relish for useful learning and moral science deserves the patronage of the wise and good." One hundred and eighty-six years later, our Library Trustees are successfully pursuing the laudable and praiseworthy aims of "improving the minds of our townspeople."