

The Chatham Public Library - A Living History



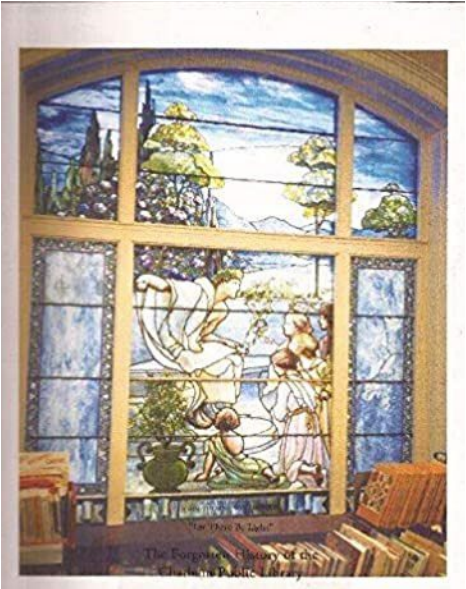
CHATHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY

11 Woodbridge Avenue, Chatham, NY 12037

518-392-3666

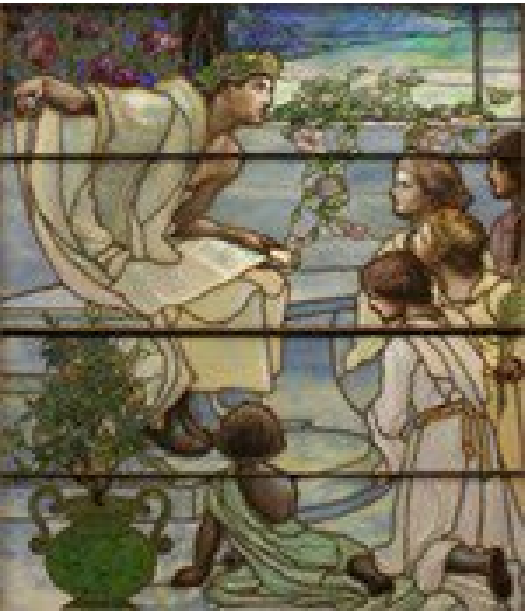
<http://chatham.lib.ny.us>

The Chatham Public Library is the only Carnegie library in Columbia County.



Further information about the history of the Chatham Public library can be found in Dominick Lizzi's book "Let There Be Light: The Forgotten History of the Chatham Public Library". 2008, available for purchase at the Library.

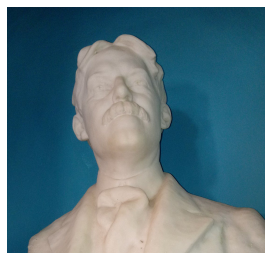
In 1908, Dr. John T. Wheeler died after many years of poor health. A memorial Tiffany window, entitled "Instruction" was donated to the library by his wife, Gertrude, in 1912. To this day, the window resides in a place of honor on the library's upper level.



Early History:

The origin of the Chatham Public Library dates back to 1905 when Theodore Roosevelt was President of the United States. This was the Progressive Era, when railroads crisscrossed the country and steel mills enabled vast production capability. Andrew Carnegie emerged during this era as a wealthy philanthropist, having sold his steel mills to J. P. Morgan. His story, and that of the Chatham Public Library, are intertwined.

Carnegie is quoted as saying “the man who dies rich, dies disgraced”. With that belief and his immense resources, he endowed 2811 libraries, worldwide, during his lifetime. He firmly believed that free access to books was the right of every person wanting to improve himself. This belief was a reflection of Carnegie’s own poor, immigrant childhood during which he worked 12 hour days and borrowed books from a local man’s private library in order to educate himself.



A Public Library is Conceived:

Two of Chatham’s early civic leaders, Dr. John Wheeler and William Howland, were staunch advocates of education. They met in 1870 and became friends. Wheeler was a physician and early school board member. Howland was a newspaperman, finding success as an editor and publisher. In 1901, and at the urging of Dr. Wheeler, Howland wrote to Carnegie requesting grant funds to establish a library in Chatham. His application proposed a library that would be connected not only to the local school system, but would also be open to the public year round. This concept sparked Carnegie’s interest and set Howland’s grant application apart from thousands of others.

Ultimately, a \$15,000 grant was awarded to establish a library in Chatham, NY.

Let There Be Light:

Construction of the library began in 1903, based upon the Beaux Arts design of James A. Ware, a noted architect. The library opened on September 27, 1905. Its original furnishings were purchased from The Library Bureau, a company owned by Melvil Dewey. Dewey helped establish the American Library Association (ALA) and created the Dewey Decimal System, which is still in use today at the Chatham Public library. Its initial collection included approximately 5000 books for the general public. The district librarian, Ella E. Wagar, was responsible for coordinating the library’s contents and furnishings.

