

# Grand Rapids Public Library: Main Library History

## *A Brief Overview*

### November 13, 1871

Members of the Grand Rapids Board of Education agree to combine their book holdings with those of two other organizations – the Ladies Literary Association and the YMCA – to form a free public library in Grand Rapids.<sup>1</sup> The new library begins with more than 4,000 volumes.<sup>2</sup> The population of Grand Rapids at this time is approximately 16,000, and, “like other cities across the nation, Grand Rapids ha[s] a hodgepodge of libraries and book collections, but the system [stands] in unconnected pieces, awaiting the glue that would fit them together.”<sup>3</sup> Books are available in school libraries and through the Grand Rapids YMCA (established in 1866), for instance, but service is not ideal—and not always free—for patrons.<sup>4</sup>

### November 20, 1871

The Board of Education votes 12-2 to lease rooms (for \$400 a year) over H. Leonard and Sons dry goods store, which is near the corner of Monroe Ave and Pearl Street (the current site of the McKay tower).<sup>5</sup> The Board forms a library committee, which is advised by women from the Ladies Library Association and men from the YMCA.<sup>6</sup> Miss Frances Holcomb (a former librarian for the Ladies Library Association), is hired as the librarian for the Grand Rapids Public Library.<sup>7</sup> Her annual salary is \$500.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, patrons are not permitted to browse books (only the librarian can), and patrons can check out only one book at a time for 14 days at a time.<sup>9</sup>



*17 Monroe Ave: The first home of the Grand Rapids Public Library is on the second floor of H. Leonard and Sons dry goods store, seen here as the second building from the left.*

1 Olson, Gordon L. *A Free Library for Everyone: The History of the Grand Rapids Public Library*. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Public Library, 2003. 1. Print.

2 Ibid.

3 Olson, p. 6

4 Ibid.

5 Olson, p. 7

6 Olson, p. 7-8

7 Ibid.

8 Olson, p. 9

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### **December 21, 1871**

The Grand Rapids Public Library opens.<sup>10</sup>

### **1874**

The library moves to its second location – the second floor of the new Ledyard Building, which is at the corner of Ottawa Ave and Pearl Street – as it has outgrown the small rented rooms at 17 Monroe.<sup>11</sup> The new space allows for adequate shelving and a



*The Ledyard Building, circa 1874. The words "Public Library" can be seen on the second floor.*



*The third home of the Grand Rapids Public Library: the new City Hall.*

reception area where a librarian greets patrons and takes book requests. Librarians must know where books are located to retrieve them for patrons (who use a printed catalog for reference); there is no formal organizational system.<sup>12</sup>

### **September 26, 1888**

A city hall opens for Grand Rapids to accommodate the city's growth—the population is now 90,000.<sup>13</sup> In the gothic-style building, half of the second floor is set aside for the library; three rooms are equipped with shelves, desks, and tables, and a large stove is placed in the middle of the space to ease the winter cold.<sup>14</sup> The rooms hold the library's collection of 35,000 volumes.<sup>15</sup>

### **1891**

Lucy Ball, daughter of John Ball, is appointed head librarian. She studied with Melvil Dewey.<sup>16</sup>

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9 Ibid.

10 Olson, p. 9

11 Ibid.

12 Olson, p. 10

13 Olson, p. 16

14 Olson, p. 16-18

15 Olson, p. 16

16 Olson, p. 19

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### **1897**

The library committee votes to allow cardholders to circulate more than one book at a time and more than two books per week.<sup>17</sup>

### **April, 1900**

The problem of insufficient space sparks the idea that the library needs its own building. Although a municipal vote on a bond issue for \$125,000 to construct a new building fails (narrowly, with a vote of 6,717 to 6,333), the idea for ensuring the library secures its own home begins to gain support.<sup>18</sup>

### **1901**

Grand Rapids city attorney John Patton fuels the effort to raise funds for a library building, contacting Andrew Carnegie, one of the wealthiest men in the country, about the project; Patton secures from Carnegie a promise of \$150,000 in support.<sup>19</sup> However, around the same time, Martin Antoine Ryerson, former Grand Rapids resident and prominent Chicago citizen, also expresses interest in funding a new home for the library.<sup>20</sup>



*Martin A. Ryerson. His father, Martin Sr., married the daughter of Antoine Campau (Louis Campau's brother).*

### **February 23, 1901**

Martin A. Ryerson offers to spend upwards of \$150,000 on a new building for the public library. A property deed is obtained for the land at the northeast corner of Bostwick Avenue and Park Street in downtown Grand Rapids.<sup>21</sup>

### **July 4, 1902**

A cornerstone laying ceremony is held for the new building. Ryerson chooses an architectural firm from Boston to design the building (Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge).<sup>22</sup> Workers from the selected Chicago-based construction group use granite from Indiana and marble from Italy and the United States for the building. The central skylight and tall windows of the building make use of natural light, as electricity is not in popular use at this time.<sup>23</sup> The building is completed in the Beaux Arts style and contains six rooms

with space for 120,000 volumes.<sup>24</sup> The Ryerson building measures approximately 45,000 square feet.<sup>25</sup>

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17 Olson, p. 22

18 Olson, p. 23

19 Olson, p. 23-24

20 Ibid

21 Ibid.

22 Olson, p. 25

23 Ibid

24 Olson p. 28

25 Olson, p. 54



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### **September 1, 1903**

The first board of library commissioners takes office.

### **June 20, 1904**

The new building is open to the public, although the official dedication is postponed until early October.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Early 1900s**

Many significant events shape the early life of the library, including the following:

**1906:** The smallpox epidemic hits Grand Rapids; many businesses close, but the library remains open. To mitigate the risk of spreading the epidemic, books that are returned from circulation are treated with a special formaldehyde fumigation system.<sup>27</sup>

**1911:** The Grand Rapids Public Library experiences a circulation bump of 30% when more than 6,000 furniture workers decide to strike for 4 months.<sup>28</sup>

**1930s:** During the Great Depression, half of the area's 75 furniture companies close. As unemployment rises, library usage and circulation increases.<sup>29</sup>

**1940s:** During WWII, 10,000 new cardholders (between 1942-1945) begin circulating materials from the library, particularly as interest in learning more about Europe increases.

### **1956**

A recommendation is made by the Greater Grand Rapids Civic Study Committee to build a substantial addition to the library—one that would double its space—as overcrowding has become an issue.<sup>30</sup>

### **May, 1962**

The library commissioners adopt a plan to spend \$2.8 million on an addition and an update to the Ryerson building, planned by the architectural firm Robinson, Campau & Crowe.<sup>31</sup>



*Photograph of the Ryerson building, circa 1904.*

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26 Olson, p. 26

27 Olson, p. 36

28 Ibid

29 Olson, p. 40

30 Olson p. 53

31 Olson, p. 54

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### **May 25, 1969**

The new addition and updated Ryerson building is declared open to the public (although the addition was complete in the winter of 1967-1968).<sup>32</sup>

### **1980s**

Tough economic times in Grand Rapids means fewer hours, staff layoffs, fewer new materials, and the discontinuation of the bookmobile service.<sup>33</sup>

### **Fall, 2000**

After securing a capital millage in the fall of 1997 and addressing the needs of many of the other Grand Rapids Public Library branches, attention turns to renovating the Ryerson Building.<sup>34</sup> Temporary quarters—where staff would stay for two years—are taken in the Union Station Industrial complex near the intersection of US-131 and Hall St. SE (at 1100 Hynes Avenue SW).<sup>35</sup>



*Temporary home for the library: 1100 Hynes Ave.*

### **April 21, 2003**

A grand opening for the new Main Branch of the Grand Rapids Public Library occurs, as contractors—including the Owen-Ames-Kimball company—complete the renovations.<sup>36</sup> Marrying the original Ryerson Building with the newly named Keeler wing (named in honor of Mike and Mary Ann Keeler, who made a gift of \$1.2 million from the Keeler Foundation) proved to be quite a challenge: the two buildings are made of different materials, are designed in different styles, and do not even align perfectly.<sup>37</sup> The original atrium and skylight of the Ryerson Building are restored, and a large atrium joins the original Ryerson Building with the mid-1960s addition.<sup>38</sup>

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#### Photo Credits:

Pages 1-5: Grand Rapids Public Library Archives

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32 Olson, p. 55

33 Olson, p. 60

34 Olson, p. 70

35 Ibid

36 Olson, p. 72

37 Olson, p. 71

38 Olson, p. 71