

Connecticut's Library Heritage

Westport Public Library



George Wagner

Director: Maxine Bleiweis; **Original Building:** 1986; **Addition:** 1998; **Architect:** (addition) Herbert S. Newman and Partners; **Collection:** 198,000 volumes; **Size:** 51,160 square feet; **Population:** 24,172

The present day Westport Public Library has traveled only one block from the original site of "The Westport Reading Room and Library Association," but it has traveled what seems like light years in sophistication and demand from its users. Founded in February 1886, the Reading Room was open Monday through Saturday in the evening after supper. Borrowing was limited to Tuesdays and Thursdays in order to stretch access to the collection of 962 volumes.

In 1908, Morris K. Jesup donated the construction of a brick and stone library building, now referred to as "the old library" on Post Road East. The Town of Westport initiated an annual appropriation of \$1000 to the newly incorporated Westport Library Association and elected three directors to the library's executive committee.

As Westport changed from an agricultural and trading community to a haven for artists, writers, and theater and film personalities, so did the nature of the library change to include unique resources in the arts. Especially notable was the Picture File, a collection

of over half a million photos and clip-pings, most of which were contributed by the community's artists and illustrators.


By the early 1980s, the library had clearly outgrown the original building and its 1950s addition. The New York firm of Gwathmey Siegel was selected to design a new library building on a controversial site, the former town landfill adjacent to the Saugatuck River. The resulting building proved to be as controversial as the site, with many in the community vocally opposed to the modern design. The building presented acoustical challenges, with a barrel vault ceiling that magnified voices and children's enthusiasm throughout the library. Inadequate space had been provided for expansion of the collection. Nevertheless, the library was near the top of the list of the state's busiest libraries, with circulation topping 500,000 in the early '90s.

In 1995 the library selected the firm of Herbert S. Newman and Partners to design an addition to the building and to renovate existing space. The following year, the capital campaign received a jump-start from Joel Smilow in the form of a \$1 million challenge gift. Construction turned out to be more challenging than anticipated when it was discovered that the building was settling unevenly. Consequently, most of the books were sent to

storage and minipiles were driven to bedrock to stabilize the building. When collections and users returned in June of 1998, the library had gained a two-story stack wing for an expanding book collection, quiet reading rooms with spectacular views of the river, and more flexible spaces throughout. A separate new audiovisual center boasts over 13,000 choice selections of videos in a room bordered by neon signs. The Children's Library gained in space and new furnishings, adding a special alcove for toddlers. New furnishings were designed to provide warmth. Even the exterior brick was stained a warmer red. And there is a coffee bar near the main entrance to greet people with the aroma of coffee and to encourage them to linger.

Preparation for technology was another goal of construction. The library now provides thirteen public Internet terminals, with several others dedicated to online and CD-ROM reference products. There is an "Office Stop," offering five workstations with software for small businesses and individuals.

Library users have flocked back to the building expressing their accolades. Since the building reopened in June 1998, records have been set in attendance (over 1,500 a day this summer), circulation (over 578,000 in the first year), children's program enrollment, and Friends memberships.

Visit the Westport Public Library at the Librarians meeting on Thursday, October 21 at 9:30 AM. Those involved in the design and construction will be available to answer questions. 

George Wagner is assistant director of the Westport Public Library.

Connecticut Libraries solicits articles, news, opinions, and photographs about matters of interest to the state's library community.

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**Deadline: Second Thursday
of the month.**