

Connecticut's Library Heritage I

Woodbury Public Library



Elaine Wyden

Director: Elaine Wyden; **Original building:** The former Parker Academy, constructed in 1851; **Library addition:** 1980; **Renovation:** 1997; **Architect:** Felix Drury Associates, New Haven; **Contractor:** Dart Building Systems, Prospect; **Project cost:** \$269,187; **Collection:** 65,000 volumes; **Population:** 8500; **Re-dedication:** October 19, 1997

The early history of library service in Woodbury can be traced to 1772 and evolved through a variety of organizational forms until 1850 when the Woodbury Library Association was incorporated and taken over by the town. An 1851 catalog listed some 200 volumes (now approximately 65,000) and stated the rules. Books were to be drawn on the first Thursday evening of each month, and three-cent fines were levied for turned down pages or ink spots. In 1880, a catalog introduced a

new classification, "Novels." Book collections were variously situated throughout the town until 1902 when a two-story building in the Greek Revival-style, once a private academy (Parker Academy), was deeded to the town for sole use as a public library. By 1979, the facility had become drastically inadequate for the town's needs, and a long-awaited building project was implemented, culminating in the complete renovation of the existing

building and construction of a two-story addition of 10,500 square feet, bringing the total space to just over 12,000 square feet.

Intended to serve the community's needs for twenty years, it rapidly became apparent that increased demands for a wider range of library services and materials, a growing population (now estimated at approximately 8,500) and the introduction of computers were making it next to impossible to maintain high levels of service without significant renovations. By June of 1993 the library had contracted with architect Felix Drury for a space analysis and a building renovation program. A variety of plans were developed and after a number of revisions; a final plan was submitted to the state. In 1995 the library was awarded a State Public Library Construction Grant

for \$69,842 to which the town added \$157,158. Additionally, the library trustees applied \$42,187 from existing library trust funds for a total project cost of \$269,187 including furnishings and equipment.

Some of the significant changes resulting from the renovation include overall improved access for the handicapped, a new entrance located closer to the library's parking lot, (which operates with automatic sliding doors, an important feature benefiting everyone, but especially older and infirm users, as well as parents with infants and young children), a vastly improved circulation desk, a new stand-alone reference desk, an office for behind-the-scenes circulation staff functions, improved lighting and comfortable seating, an area for new books that permits some face-out shelving, and comfortable, ergonomically designed computer stations—including some that are wired to permit users to "plug-in" their own laptops. A designated area has been designed with teenagers in mind, and while it is an improvement over the past, crucial overall space limitations keep it inadequate to the real needs.

The renovation took some four months; during most of this period virtually all library operations continued in makeshift arrangements. The library staff was both inventive in determining how best to function, and most important, everyone displayed incredible patience and good humor while living through the inevitable noise and dust. It must be noted that this latter applied to our users, as well. Woodbury citizens have repeatedly ranked their library number one in satisfaction and approval in surveys that evaluate town services and departments. This has been further borne out by *Connecticut Magazine's* ranking of our town (within our population category) as number one in the category of "culture and leisure," based almost entirely on the library. Closing the building for only four weeks to allow removal of old carpeting and installation of the new, interior painting, relocation of stacks, and installation of new furniture and lighting, the library re-opened to the public in July 1997. A festive,

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