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# Throwback Tulsa: Every 50 years, Tulsa builds or fixes up its main library

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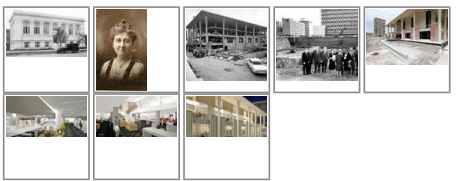
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Posted: Thursday, July 9, 2015 5:00 am | Updated: 5:20 pm, Thu Jul 9, 2015.

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The first public library building in Tulsa was the Carnegie Library, located on the northwest corner Third Street and Cheyenne Avenue. It opened in 1916 and was demolished in 1970. Courtesy



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By **DEBBIE JACKSON** World Sunday Editor And **HILARY PITTMAN** World News Researcher |  
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Alma Reid McGlenn, Tulsa's first librarian, stepped off the train in Tulsa on Jan. 18, 1913.

"After the cold and gloomy weather of Pittsburgh, the sunshine made Tulsa look like paradise," she recalled later.

McGlenn, an Ohio native who had helped organize a library in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was hired by the Tulsa Library Association at a salary of \$75 a month.

Two days after her arrival, McGlenn was organizing and cataloguing books for the makeshift library located in the basement of the Tulsa County Courthouse.

Early-day Tulsans had relied on a circulating library operated by First Presbyterian Church, which had a few hundred volumes. As the city grew, local leaders decided Tulsa needed a proper free-standing library.

Women's clubs and civic leaders mobilized. Mrs. John D. Seaman wrote a letter to industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie who had helped many small towns establish their first libraries.

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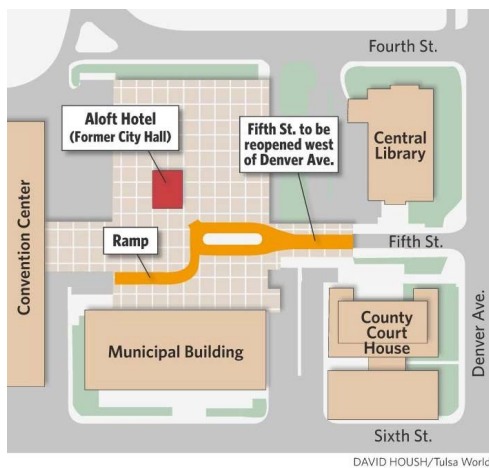
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"Tulsa is a town of 6,000 people and there is not a library in it," Mrs. Seaman complained to Carnegie in 1905.

Tulsa's population ballooned to 18,000 by 1910 with the Glenn Pool oil discovery. [Carnegie eventually pledged \\$55,000](#) to build a suitable library for the growing city, on the condition that Tulsa acquire a site and maintain the building.

A women's committee persuaded the City Commission to issue \$7,000 in bonds to buy the land and pay \$100 a month for maintenance.

In the meantime, Tulsa County commissioners had offered basement space at their courthouse to house a temporary library.

**'A library is not a luxury'**

A public "book shower" brought in 600 volumes and \$450 was raised to buy new books. Lumberyards, hardware stores and paint companies donated materials and local carpenters remodeled the rooms.

The temporary library opened on March 1, 1913, and was an immediate success. In her report on the first six months, Miss McGlenn noted that 1,480 library cards had been issued and total circulation exceeded 13,000 books.

**Related Documents**



**April 30, 1916, World front page**

The front page of the April 30, 1916, Tulsa World included a story about the opening of the Carnegie Library.

"A library is not a luxury, it is not for the cultured few; it is not for the scientific," she wrote. "It is for everybody, high and low, rich and poor, old and young.


"And the best proof of the value of our public library lies in the cordial support which has been given it in the six months of its existence, and in the future may it contribute to the fund of wholesome recreation that sweetens life and to the wider knowledge that broadens it."

**1915: Library groundbreaking**

Ground was broken on Aug. 10, 1915, for the new library on the northwest corner of Third Street and Cheyenne Avenue. Gov. Robert W.L. Williams laid the cornerstone on Oct. 9. It contained copies of the Tulsa World and the Tulsa Democrat, a history of the library, a 1915 gold dollar and the letter Mrs. Seaman had written to Carnegie in 1905 from Indian Territory.

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Classic in design and faced with Indiana Bedford stone, Tulsa's first library building was considered a beauty when it opened in 1916. Marble was used for the interior stairways, wainscoting and bases of the pillars in the 22-room edifice. Woodwork and furniture were of oak.

But by 1925, the library was bursting at its seams. For the next 40 years, the overcrowded, antiquated, library struggled to serve patrons, with the help of branch libraries and a bookmobile.

### 1965: Central Library opens

Tulsa County voters passed a bond issue on Nov. 14, 1961, for a new Central Library at Fourth Street and Denver Avenue. Designed by Charles Ward and Joseph Koberling, the four-story building was hailed as a model of contemporary architecture when it opened in 1965.

Asked what he was striving for, Ward replied: "To make the books themselves the dominant design motif."

In keeping with the space-age design, the exterior lights of the library were activated by an impulse from a U.S. communications satellite for the June 29, 1965, gala celebration.

What happened to the Carnegie Library? The former beauty was now described in the newspapers as an "Ugly Old Lady." It was demolished in 1970 and replaced by a parking lot.

As the 21st century dawned, Tulsans were again considering what to do about their main library, which was beginning to show its age. A proposal to build a new Central Library and fund improvements at branch libraries was [soundly defeated](#) in 2004.

Currently undergoing a [\\$50 million renovation](#), Central Library is scheduled to reopen in June 2016. The project includes replacing the mechanical systems, adding a parking garage and creating a new entrance on Fifth Street.

Mildred Thompson Ladner, former longtime book editor of the Tulsa World, published "Tulsa City-County Library 1912-1991," a history of the library system, in 1992. That beautifully written book was a source for this article.

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*Wayne Downing* posted at 11:19 am on Thu, Jul 9, 2015.



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I loved the old library at 3rd & Cheyenne. As a boy, I was amazed at the number of books crammed into the building. It was an amazing piece of architecture and should have been preserved, not demolished. I hope that the newly remodeled library at 4th & Denver will open the wonderful world of books for kids like the old library did for me.

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