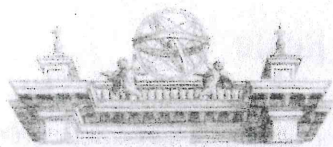


UP FRONT



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

Carnegie Free Library of McKeesport

Odessa Moore Crabtree and four friends met in December 1898 to found the Woman's Club of McKeesport "to promote intelligence and culture."¹ The City of McKeesport, at the confluence of the Monongahela and Youghiogheny Rivers, was home to the National Tube Works, American Sheet, Steel and Tin Plate Company, U.S. Iron and Tin Plate Works, and Firth-Sterling Steel Company.² Three railroads served its 34,000 residents and street railways made it possible to climb the hills to the south. So it's not surprising that the Woman's Club members felt the city could support a library.

To achieve this goal, the women wrote directly to Andrew Carnegie in New York

explaining their plans for carrying out this mission.³ Carnegie graciously responded showing interest in "your good work" but urging it to be "free to all the people." He suggested that if the city would agree to maintain the library he could not "resist the temptation to offer say \$50,000 [which] . . . should provide a suitable building, I think, and about three thousand a year would maintain it, perhaps less. Very Truly Yours, Andrew Carnegie."⁴

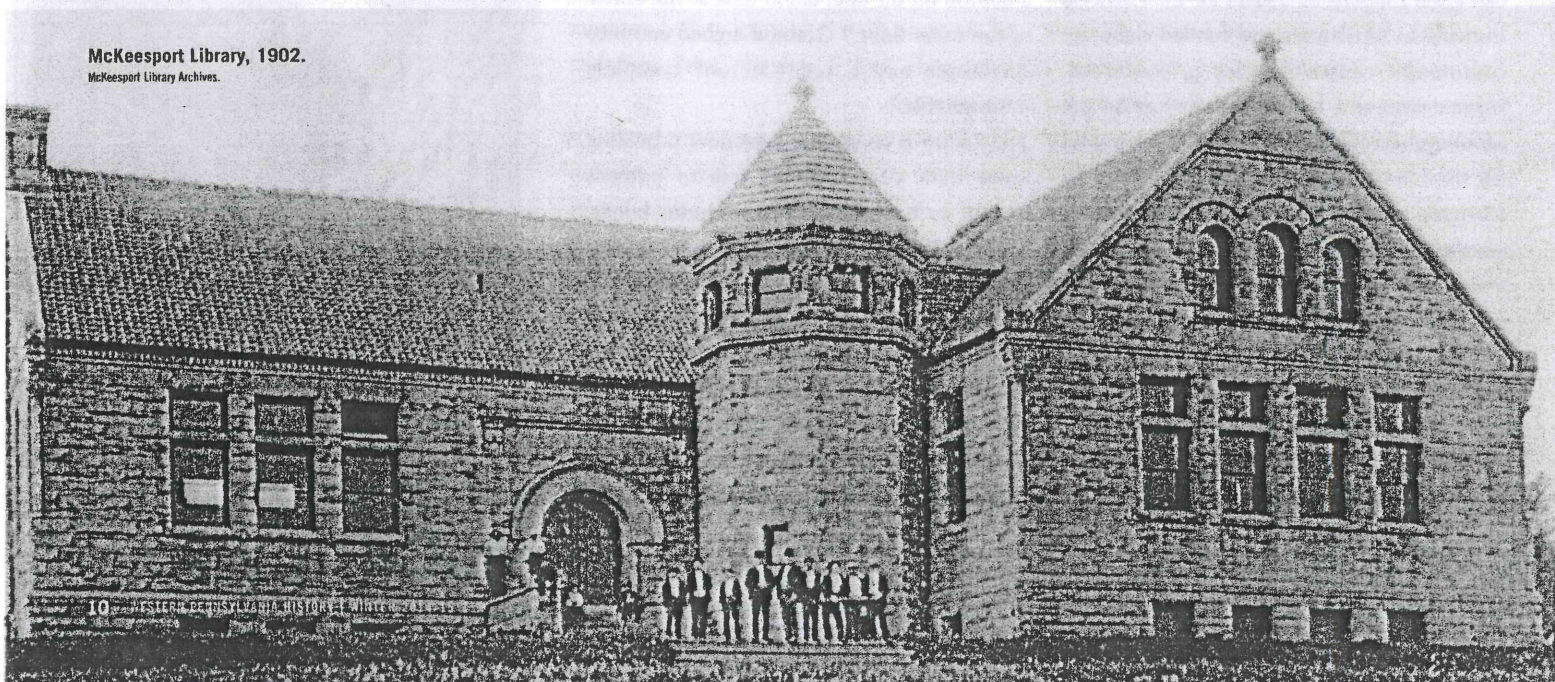
The requirements needed to fulfill Carnegie's stipulations were more than the small women's group could accomplish alone, so they convened a meeting of the local businessmen. Representatives of local banks and industries agreed to find an affordable or donated site; help change the city charter to allow city monies to be used for a library; and galvanize popular support to achieve these things.

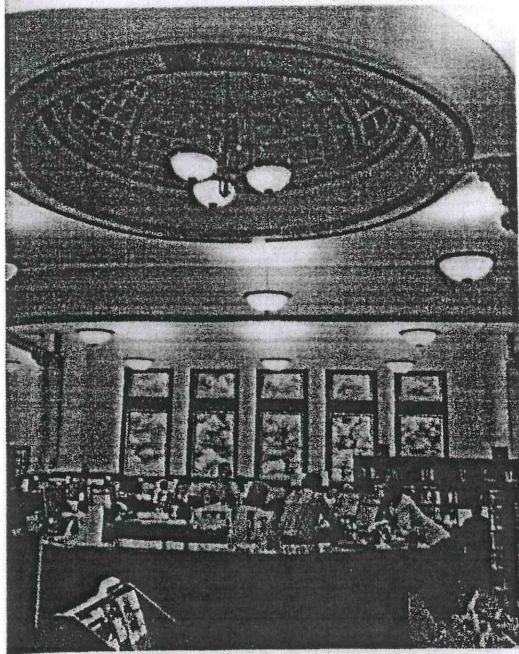
Within weeks, Carnegie approved a commission of 15 people and they consulted with William Nimick Frew, president of the Carnegie Institute and Library in Oakland about the details.⁵ James Evans, president of the National Bank of McKeesport, was named president of the library commission, Odessa

Crabtree, secretary, and James L. Devenny, treasurer. Within three months they had agreed to accept Mr. Evans' donation of 2-1/2 acres of his family's 75-acre estate at the corner of Carnegie and Union Avenues.⁶ Within 10 months they had secured the city ordinance allowing maintenance funding, and within a little over three years the library was open for business.

In April 1899, Frew and Carnegie's favored architect Frank Alden came to McKeesport to view the Evans property and "they at once decided in favor of this location.... Mr. Alden [was] highly pleased, saying that our Library would have a finer site than any one so far erected in the county."⁷ But unfortunately, his firm was in the midst of designing the expansion to the Carnegie Institute in Oakland and eight branch libraries, and couldn't provide architectural plans without payment. The only architect willing to submit his plans speculatively was William J. East (1863-1936). A Pittsburgh architect and son of a stationer, East trained in the offices of Bartberger & Dietrich, formed a brief partnership with Joseph Anglin, and then formed Bartberger & East in 1893. Around 1898 he opened a solo architectural practice,

McKeesport Library, 1902.
McKeesport Library Archives.





Dome over the circulation desk.
Modern photos by Lu Donnelly.

which is why he is the only architect listed in the minutes for the McKeesport Library.⁸

In 1900, Frew let the committee know that Carnegie “did not wish to inspect the Library plans, or dictate to McKeesport about the building.”⁹ While this sounds harsh, it was Carnegie’s standard procedure. He was busy negotiating the sale of his steel empire, and he delegated such details to his personal secretary James Bertram and trusted colleagues like Frew. Carnegie and Bertram ultimately systematized the library grants, choosing the recipients when they could complete the same stipulations that McKeesport had met and deciding the size of the grants according to each city’s population and tax base. Carnegie had given millions of dollars for the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh and funded elaborate community center/libraries in Braddock, Homestead and Duquesne, cities just up the Monongahela River from McKeesport, but he felt the branch libraries in general should be adequate, not elaborate. The average donation among the over 1,600 U.S. libraries was \$10,000 and the usual population requirement was 60-70,000 people. There was no requirement to name them after Carnegie or display his image in them, and only a third of them did.¹⁰

James Evans went to New York to inquire about Carnegie’s increasing the McKeesport grant to cover a music hall, but Carnegie

refused, saying music halls were too expensive to maintain, and Carnegie knew it would be difficult enough for the library to get their operating funds yearly from the city. He did specify that there be a children’s room, adult reading room, central circulation desk and a lecture room.¹¹

East chose a Richardsonian design as an homage to the New England libraries designed by Henry Hobson Richardson in the 1870s and ’80s, especially the Converse Memorial Library built between 1883 and 1885 in Malden, Massachusetts.¹² For McKeesport he designed a T-shaped, sandstone building with a two story tower at the corner of the T on the north elevation containing a curving stairway lit with square windows at the cornice line. He included two meeting rooms reached by the curving stair, one for the Woman’s Club and the other for the Board of the Library.¹³ A large lecture room in the basement had lower level entrances on the north and west elevations and windows on three sides; today it houses the children’s room in an updated configuration. A dome, now lit electrically from above, focuses attention on the circulation desk at the center of the main floor.¹⁴ Graceful arched entrance surrounds and a red tile roof complete the ensemble.

The library is constantly busy now, providing more than 40 computers free to patrons as well as books, videos, and audio books. The funding has always been problematic since many cities assumed that Carnegie had endowed the libraries, but he left no money beyond that used for the building. It has always been up to city taxpayers to support this vital civic resource. In 1995 Allegheny County voted its only self-imposed tax to fund local cultural resources, the Regional Asset District



Rosie

Westinghouse artist J. Howard Miller created one of the most iconic images of female empowerment. In 1942, Miller saw a photograph of a Michigan factory worker and used it as inspiration for “We Can Do It”—his legendary poster showing a Westinghouse Electric worker rolling up her sleeves for the Allied war effort. It became one of many pieces used by the War Production Coordinating Committee to recruit women into industries nationwide. Real life “Rosie’s” played a key role in Pittsburgh area factories. In this photo, Julie Bodnar inspects 155 mm shell casings at the Christy Parks Works of the National Tube Company in McKeesport. Read more about Rosie and WWII in the Spring 2015 issue.

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Russell Aiken U.S. Steel Collection.



UP FRONT

tax. It saved the local libraries from their deteriorating structures and has helped to keep them current. This has allowed the Carnegie Free Library of McKeesport to remain a beacon on the hill.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010) a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

¹ By 1910 they had to limit membership to fifty women, but none of the original five were still active. Odessa Moore Crabtree left McKeesport in April, 1901 before the library was finished.

² *Old Home Week: McKeesport, Pennsylvania*: July 3-9, 1910, p. 22. McKeesport's population grew rapidly from 20,711 in 1890 to 34,227 in 1900. By 1910 the National Tube Works employed 10,000 men and was the largest in the world.

³ The letter from Caroline E. Moore, Woman's Club corresponding secretary, was not available, only Carnegie's response was recorded in the Library Minute Book, Volume 1, p. 1. It is not clear whether Caroline Moore was Odessa Moore Crabtree's relative.

⁴ Library Minute Book, Volume 1, p. 1 quoting the letter from A Carnegie to Miss Caroline E. Moore, April 3, 1899.

⁵ Library Minute Book, Volume 1, p. 8: Meeting April 17, 1899 recorded Carnegie's telegram: "Matter referred to Mr. Frew as requested. Commission admirable. Carnegie"

⁶ The land was valued at \$25,000, part of the Library Manor plan on the Oliver Evans Estate. James Evans served as executor of the estate. Opening day was July 15, 1902.

⁷ Library Minute Book, Volume 1, p. 19: quotes a letter from O. M. Crabtree to A. Carnegie, June 8, 1899.

⁸ He briefly paired with C. Emil Muller, c. 1904-1906, and moved to Asheville, North Carolina in 1912. *The New York Times* obituary (5/4/1936, p. 19) states 1913. He died May 3, 1936. His birthdate is listed as August 1864 in the 1900 census and August 11,

1863 on his North Carolina death certificate; the *The New York Times* obituary claimed he was 71, which would make his birth year 1865. His wife, Evelyn, and only son John Ross East survived him.

⁹ Library Minute Book, Volume 1, p. 46, May 14, 1900.

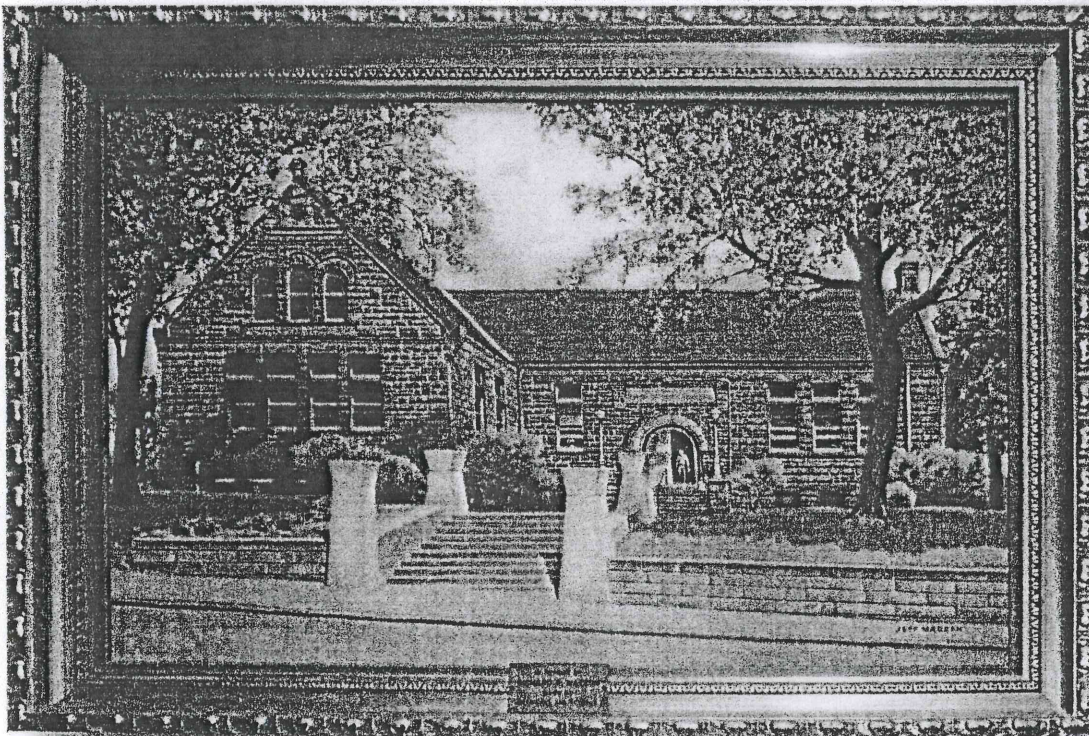
¹⁰ *Andrew Carnegie*, David Nasaw, 2006, pp. 590, 606 and 608.

¹¹ *Palace of Culture: Andrew Carnegie's Museums and Library in Pittsburgh*, Robert J. Gangewere, 2011, p. 111.

¹² *Architecture After Richardson*, Margaret Henderson Floyd, 1994, see pages 237-238 for a reference to the "notable" McKeesport Library, which she erroneously attributes to "George" East. Floyd's book on Richardson has illustrations of the Malden Library, pp. 163-167.

¹³ Today these upper rooms are used for storage, but the present director, Kelley Moten, hopes to restore them to use. Thanks to Michele Parrish for locating the Library Minute Book and Miles Richards for urging me to write about the library.

¹⁴ Ralph Alster Architects updated the library to be handicapped accessible c. 2007 with Swede Construction.



WILLIAM J. EAST
ARCHITECT
PITTSBURGH.

William J. East, library architect.
Notable Men of Pittsburgh and Vicinity, p. 363.

A painting by Jeff Madden of the south entry to the library hangs in the main reading room.

