

History of the Eager Free Public Library

In the 1890s there was a strong movement in Wisconsin to provide free public libraries. Many communities established and built tax-supported libraries but most were supported by gifts of money and books from private citizens.

The city of Evansville formed a public library in 1899 and housed it in the high school building while the library board searched for a suitable location in a separate building.

When Almeron Eager died in 1902 he bequeathed \$10,000 to the City of Evansville for a public library. His will required that the city build a library, name it the Eager Free Public Library, and place his statue in the entry. However, there was so much public support for the library that the council did accept Eager's gift of money, but it was not until 1907 that the construction for the building began. The Eager Estate decided that the \$1,000 meant for the park should be put in the library fund.

There was some opposition from citizens who argued that the annual upkeep for the building and the library services was too expensive for the taxpayers. William H. Spencer, a former resident, wrote a letter to the editor of the Evansville Enterprise: "It is a painful surprise to learn that any one in my native town for any reason whatever, should oppose the establishment of a public library there. I can understand why a keeper of a bawdy house or of a gambling resort might be hostile to such a movement. They might say that their business flourished most where idleness, ignorance, rowdyism and general immorality were found most prevalent, but I cannot understand how any really intelligent person, who cares for the civic welfare should have any other feeling than that of profound gratitude for the splendid gift."

The issue of a site for the library was solved in the fall of 1903, when Flora Winston, a Chicago resident who had lived in Evansville and owned the lots at the southeast corner of West Main and First Street donated the lots to the City for a new library. A house on the lots was sold and moved to the rear of the brick building on South Madison Street, that now houses Creative Touch. The cost of the building, equipment, inner walks, grading and seeding amounted to \$13,626.91. The outside walks and curbing cost \$2,280, totaling \$15,906.91 Mrs. Eager and her daughter Gertrude contributed the additional money needed to complete the building as planned.

In May 1907, the first shovel of dirt was excavated for the new Eager Free Public Library. The architectural firm of Claude and Stark from Madison designed the building. They would design at least five more libraries that were nearly identical in Rochelle, Illinois; Detroit Lakes, MN; Tomah and Merrill in Wisconsin and Hoquiem, WA. Louis W. Claude, who is believed to be the principal designer of the building, worked in the offices of Louis Sullivan during the same period as Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Evansville Review kept citizens informed of the building's progress. When the brick for the new building arrived late in June, the masons went directly to work on the basement and walls. The iron beams, girders and truss frames for the library building were shipped in July and the masons were "consequently as busy as bees in swarming time." Dressed stone from the New Bedford, Wisconsin quarries was also on hand.

While the building was under construction, a life-sized statue of Almeron Eager was being prepared by sculptor Alice Cooper in Chicago. A death mask plaster cast was taken of Mr. Eager and the sculpture is based on this mask. When it was completed, the statue was placed atop a pedestal of Montello granite.

In April 1908 the public library rooms at the high school were closed for several days as school children helped carry the books to the new library.

The library was officially dedicated on June 9, 1908 when the Eager Estate handed the responsibility of the library building to the City of Evansville. The ceremony included the promise of \$1,000 support from the City

Council. The library became the center for cultural and civic events. The basement room with a built-in stage was used for meetings, recitals and lectures. In 1913, the beautiful grandfather clock was donated to the library in memory of Mrs. Eva J. Spencer, a charter member of the Women's Literary Club and active supporter of the library.

The building remained unchanged until the 1960s when the entrance steps were altered from an east-west orientation to an approach from the north. Flower beds were created from the brick work that had originally been at the front entrance.

In 1973, the basement meeting room was converted to a "Young People's Room." Plans for the remodeling began when Leonard P. Eager donated money given by friends in memory of his wife, Eloise Eager. The City Council supplied additional funds and the children's collection was moved into the remodeled room February 22, 1974.

The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. In the application, the building was described as a fine example of the Prairie School architectural style and the earliest existing example of Claude and Starck's "Sullivan-esque" libraries in Wisconsin. The firm's regional reputation for fine library buildings is based on the functional plan of the building, with open interior spaces, high windows above built-in book shelving and a useful basement.

A local history room was created out of a former storeroom in the basement in 1989. Leonard Eager donated the funds for remodeling and furnishing this room, as well as a gas fire log for the fireplace in the main reading room. The library board voted to designate the remodeled room as the Leonard Eager Reading Room.

In 1994, the Eager Free Public Library Board and the City of Evansville decided to make the public library building accessible to people with special needs. The 1908 building did not meet Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements because of the 13 stairs between the entrance and each of the two service areas. The restroom was not accessible and the oak doors were too heavy for children and others to open.

Mark Kraft, Architect-Engineers, Inc. of Madison was chosen as the architect for the remodeling project, completed in February of 1996. Contractors for the new addition were Wood Bauer & Raether, General Contractors; Schneider Quality Plumbing, Bradley Sheet Metal Works, and Portz Electric.

Two federal grants were received to help pay for the addition: a Library Services and Construction Act grant for \$65,355 and a Community Development Block Grant for \$156,075.

The City of Evansville also agreed to fund \$185,000 of the expected cost of \$406,000 for the remodeling which includes an elevator, two accessible restrooms, library service areas and meeting rooms. New furnishings and equipment for the library were funded through private donations.