

20 WEST GATE – CORNISH LIBRARY
S.F. Peters, 1914



For more than three-quarters of a century, subdued classical detailing and an attractive riverbank setting have enabled this otherwise utilitarian building at 20 West Gate to display a dignified and solid sense of purpose as a public refuge from daily hustle-bustle and a place for self-development and recreation.

The Cornish Library thus remains a fitting legacy to its benefactors, American industrialist Andrew Carnegie and the 1913 members of Winnipeg City Council who recognized the benefits of accessible, well-supported public libraries.

This recognition had not always been evident. Common to the history of libraries in western cultures, early local book collections catered to a limited clientele. The Red River Settlement's 2,000-volume library, established by the Council of Assiniboia in 1848, opened only on Saturdays and served wealthy residents. Membership in Winnipeg's first circulating library, set up in 1881 by the Manitoba Historical Society, also was small.

Nonetheless, the MHS collection moved to the basement of City Hall in 1888 and obtained its first annual municipal grant. Both the holdings and demand for service quickly grew, making it imperative that the City provide a new facility dedicated to library use. Aided by the provincial librarian, Winnipeg secured a philanthropic gift from Andrew Carnegie and proceeded in 1903-05 to build a public library at 380 William Avenue. Its popularity soon led to construction of a substantial addition, followed by the deposit of rotating book collections at drugstores, schools and other local centres.

In 1913, City Council again approached the Carnegie interests, obtaining funds for two permanent branch libraries -- St. John's in the North End and the Cornish Library at one of the entrances to Armstrong's Point, an upper-class residential district on the north bank of the Assiniboine River.

These branches, which opened in June 1915, reflected the influence which the Scottish-born Carnegie (1835-1919) exercised over library design in North America. After successfully investing in railroad, oil and steel enterprises, Carnegie began distributing his fortune to various educational, cultural, research, and peace projects, including the development of some 2,500 public libraries in the United States, Canada and other English-speaking countries.

His gifts were used only for buildings, not books. Recipient communities were expected to contribute the library site and devote the equivalent of 10 per cent of original capital costs to annual maintenance. Over time, building designs also required the approval of James Bertram, Carnegie's personal secretary.

Bertram's initial concern was to ensure that funds were not committed to exterior ornamentation at the expense of book shelves, furniture or other amenities for library users. By 1911, however, he had developed a model for the ideal Carnegie library, based on a simple, one-storey rectangular plan with classical exterior detailing and six optional interior arrangements. His floor plans emphasized ample space for books, reading areas for adults and children, and lecture rooms.

This concept departed from the typical, privately funded library which appeared in the U.S. in the latter 1800s, influenced stylistically by the Romanesque Revival designs of Henry Hobson Richardson, and functionally organized to restrict public use. Children under 12, for example, usually were denied entry; on-site reading facilities often were limited and uninviting; and librarians had to retrieve requested books because users did not have free access to the collections.

Plans for the Cornish Library by Winnipeg architect S. Frank Peters were consistent with Bertram's model. The solid, red brick structure with contrasting smooth-cut stone highlights was rectangular in shape, one storey in height, and well-lit by numerous large windows.

Built for about \$30,000 by the National Construction Company, the library extends from a raised concrete foundation to a slightly hipped roof with wide wooden eaves embellished by modillions. Dominating the symmetrical front (northeast) facade is a centrally placed entrance porch with two large, Tuscan Order stone columns; a stone entablature inscribed with the building's name and construction date; and a heavily eaved pediment. At the rear, overlooking greenspace and the Assiniboine River, is a larger projecting central section, its pediment highlighted by a round opening with keystones. Further relief is provided by stone sills and three stone belts which wrap around all four facades. One course forms a continuous sill below the basement windows; a second marks the division between the lower level and main floor; and a wide third belt, carved in appropriate places to convey a keystone effect, extends between the main windows and eaves.

Patrons enter the library through a pair of wooden and glass doors. Off the vestibule, stairs lead to the basement lecture room, washrooms and staff room, and up to the main-floor collection and reading space. Interior finishes include oak and walnut trim and two green-tiled fireplaces.

Architect Peters was born in England, but moved to Canada at an early age. He studied civil engineering at the University of Toronto, practised in Ontario for several years, then opened a Winnipeg office in 1892. He was joined by his brother, W.A. Peters, a decade later. Among his projects were the Ashdown Warehouse; London, F.W. Alloway, McClary, and Miller and

Richard blocks; and a branch of the Bank of Montreal in Fort Rouge.