

The Jewel of the Island: South Pasadena's Carnegie Library

by Steve Fjeldsted, Director of Library, Arts, and Culture | City of South Pasadena

South Pasadena can be considered an island of small town charm surrounded by an ocean of urban freneticism. Situated a mere 6 miles from downtown Los Angeles, it possesses an abundance of lovely homes on its shady streets. Although it's only about 3 and ½ square miles, South Pas possesses over 100 acres of parks and more than 21,000 trees, giving rise to its official designation as a Tree City USA and its nickname "The City of Trees." The quiet historical character of the small municipality is a testament to the dedicated preservationist efforts of residents in protecting the town's natural and architectural beauty.

Sadly, two of the town's most iconic structures are but faded memories. The nationally-known Raymond Hotel burned to the ground in 1895 and after being rebuilt was razed once and for all in 1934. The once-magnificent movie palace, the Rialto Theatre, erected in 1924, sits idly in disrepair. On the other hand, the South Pasadena Public Library, an expanded and remodeled version of the original 1908 Carnegie Library, has grown and prospered ever since. With its ownership change in early 2015 the Rialto is now expected to be renovated and reinvigorated in the next few years.

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) was a Scottish immigrant and self-educated tycoon who attributed much of his success to the private library he frequented as a youngster in Scotland. After making his fortune in steel in the United States, Carnegie provided funding for an astonishing number of public libraries. His incredible philanthropy, responsible for the building of 1,681 libraries between 1889 and 1923, fueled the growth of the public library movement in the United States during its most formative period. In all, Carnegie gave more than \$350 million to libraries and other noble causes, including, of course, New York City's legendary Carnegie Hall. During his travels in 1910, Carnegie praised the South Pasadena townsfolk while admiring their new Library.

In California alone, 142 Carnegie Libraries were built between 1899 and 1917. Of these only 85 are still standing and just 36 of these are still operating as public libraries. A total of 49 other Carnegie Libraries in the Golden State have avoided the wrecking ball. 21 are now museums and 13 are community centers, while the other 15 serve a variety of functions. One of them is used as an arts center, another houses a cable TV station, and yet another serves as a private residence.

The history of library service in South Pasadena actually goes back even further than the first Carnegie Library. In 1889 a free reading room was opened, only to be replaced in 1895 by another small room inside another building on Center (now El Centro) Street. In 1902 the Library Trustees wrote to Carnegie to request a grant to construct a library building and were unsuccessful. A \$10,000 grant was finally approved for South Pasadena in 1906. In response the City procured 2 lots on the corner of Diamond Avenue and Center Street which became Library Park.

Norman Foote Marsh (1871-1955), a local resident and one of the Southwest's most accomplished architects, was hired to design South Pasadena first Carnegie Library and Classical Revival-

styled plans were chosen. With his first partner Charles H. Russell, Marsh had developed the site plan for Venice, California, which was patterned after the canals of its namesake in Italy. Around the same time Marsh also played a lead role in designing the University of Redlands Library, Pasadena High School, both South Pasadena Middle School and High School, and many other noteworthy. The Center Street School, now the South Pasadena Unified School District Office, was also designed by Marsh and his colleagues.

By 1916 the South Pasadena Library had already outgrown its quarters and the Carnegie Corporation granted another \$6,000 for an expansion, enabling the addition of a sunroom and a basement auditorium. The Library was dismantled in 1928 and moved from the northeast corner of Diamond and Center Streets to its present location in the center of Library Park. But by 1930 the facility was yet again in need of increased space and Marsh was called upon once more. He and his partners D.D. Smith and Herbert J. Powell came up with a new architectural style for the renovation, this time in the then-popular Mediterranean Revival style. The full-blown makeover brought the balconies, arches, and the ornate wrought iron door, which still secures the main entrance to what has been the Library's Community Room since 1982.

The Library also commissioned a bounty of original artwork from talented sculptor Merrell Gage (1892-1981) who had grown up in Kansas. Gage later studied under Gutzom Borglun, the artist most responsible for the magnificent stone figures on Mt. Rushmore. After moving to Los Angeles in 1923, Gage taught at the prestigious Chouinard Art Institute, launched and run by South Pasadena artist and resident Nelbert Chouinard. For the 1930 expansion and remodeling of the South Pasadena Library, Gage created two dynamic, literature-themed sculptures now on display in the Library Park on the Oxley Street side. One shows the Mayflower sailing the seas and another portrays St. George slaying a dragon. Both sculptures figures are depicted leaping out of the pages of books.

Merrell Gage was a classicist who admired traditional American heroes like Walt Whitman, John Brown, and Abraham Lincoln. Gage also favored many of the great writers of the American West, and to honor them he crafted stone plaques that he emblazoned with the last names of the likes John Muir, Mary Austin, Joaquin Miller, and Bret Harte. The plaques are still visible along the roofline along the west, north, and east sides of the South Pasadena Library, as are two Gage crests which sits, along with his stone "South Pasadena Public Library" signage above the archway high above the Community Room front door. Gage's crest containing a tree image was probably intended to represent South Pasadena and his bear crest to signify California. Nearer the ground on the north exterior wall of the Community Room are Gage's friezes of literary scenes showing Hamlet, Hiawatha, Gulliver, and other time-honored characters from literature.

Perhaps Gage's most striking artwork for the Library was his large stone casting entitled "The Children's Hour" containing a brief excerpt from Longfellow's poem of the same name. The words border an image of a bearded father reading to his three daughters. "The Children's Hour" was accidentally cracked and broken during the construction phase of yet another expansion and remodeling of the Library in 1982. Fortunately the pieces were saved and the impressive artwork is currently being restored by an art conservator. In 2012 the reconstructed artwork will be displayed on the exterior wall of the south side of the Library above the brick patio. The 1982 Library expansion gave us the building footprint that we know today. At 24,500 square feet it is more than five times the size of the original Carnegie.

Merrell Gage went on to be appointed the Head of the Fine Arts Department at USC and was selected to serve on the Sculpture Committee of the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. He also sculpted many famous outdoor sculptures around the Southland, including the façade of the Los Angeles Times Building, the Edison Building, and the Electric Fountain in Beverly Hills which used to back up traffic for hours in the 1930s as motorists stopped to admire it. He was also the recipient of the Academy Award for a Best Live Action Short Film in 1955 for “The Face of Lincoln,” in which he fashions a bust of the president in only 30 minutes, all the while telling ‘Honest Abe’s’ life story without a single pause. The Lincoln bust can still be viewed outside the LA County Courthouse building.

In 1972 the South Pasadena Public Library was designated Cultural Heritage Landmark #10. Today, the facility also boasts even more world class artwork. A domed skylight from Judson Studios, California’s oldest and most storied stained glass company, glows colorfully above the Library’s main floor during the daytime, and the earliest remaining public mural by celebrated author and artist Leo Politi, is showcased in the Children’s Room. The same location now also displays a dazzling mosaic column completed by artist Jolino Beserra who was hired by the Friends of the South Pasadena Public Library.

What was once the main reading room of South Pasadena’s Carnegie now functions as the Library’s Community Room. It still bears many of the hallmarks of its glorious past such as its hand painted beam ceilings, stately leaded glass windows, and not surprisingly, a reproduction of a painting of Andrew Carnegie. The Community Room is now home to a popular series of Author Nights, an ongoing slate of children’s programs, the Restoration Concerts classical and jazz performances, and a whole host of meetings and other events.

Unlike so many other California historical structures that have been demolished in the name of progress, the South Pasadena Public Library has not only survived, it has continued to thrive and grow. The venerable institution is visited by huge numbers of users from all walks of life each day, not only because of the wonderful art and architecture, but also because of the dedicated staff and the outstanding collections of books and other materials. Like a unique, precious jewel the Library increases in value and appreciation each year. From the time of Carnegie’s first grant to the community more than a century ago, the South Pasadena Library has continued to shine while reflecting the values, needs, and dreams of the community. It sparkles even brighter each year.

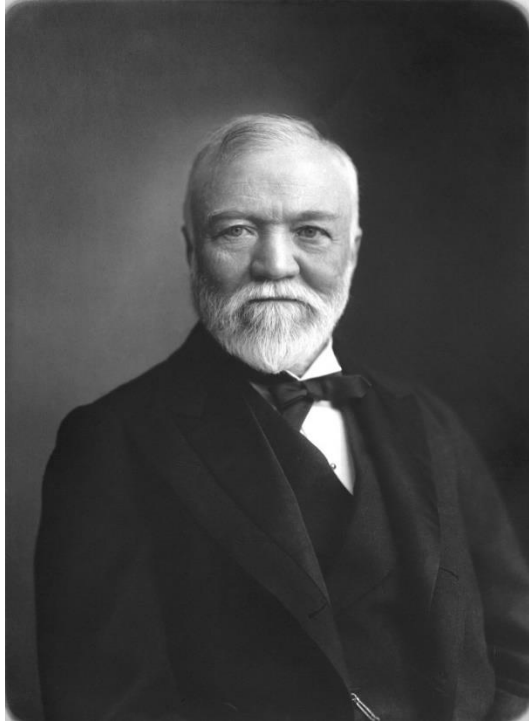


Figure 1 Andrew Carnegie, photo courtesy of the Carnegie Foundation

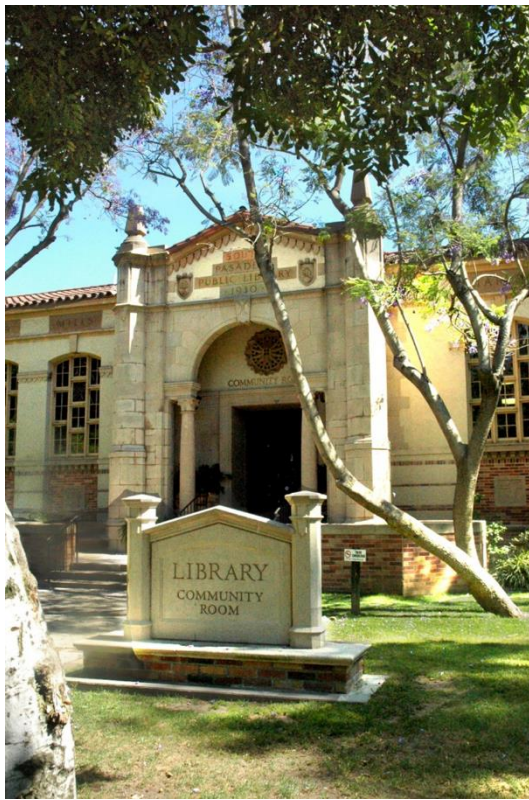


Figure 2 South Pasadena's Carnegie Library, photo courtesy of George Vieth/Daily Photo