
**THE BROWNELL
LIBRARY**

by
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SAMUEL A. BROWNELL LIBRARY

Who was Samuel A. Brownell? This question is asked by many newcomers as well as those not so new.

Mr. Brownell was born in Williston in 1856 and came to Essex Junction as a young man. His father owned considerable land in the Village. As the years went by the younger Brownell proved himself to be a particularly astute business man. He not only brought electricity to the Village but also ran a successful lumber and sawmill operation and later became the first president of the Essex Trust Co.

Essex Junction had had a library since 1897. The collection had been housed in any room which was available at the time. At one point the village applied to the State Department of Libraries for extra funds only to find that the grants did not apply to villages — only towns. The two libraries of Essex and Essex Junction then combined for administrative purposes, and the books were divided. But it did not work — distances were too great — so all ended in a few years.

In 1913 the library was moved into the Brick Hotel (Lincoln Hall) using two rooms which have since been made into one Conference Room for the manager, trustees, and public. To understand this, remember that in 1913 there was no such thing as Federal aid, in fact no one had heard of pollution, environmental control, or vitamins for that matter. Like all Vermonters, it was a case of do-it-yourself, with all sorts of entertainment, plays, dances, Fourth of July celebrations, teas and dinners. Money was raised to paint the entire room and add the shelving which made it look like a library. It is easy to understand the first treasurer's report which read, "*Library open for business in new room at Brick Hotel. There is no money in the treasury, and several bills unpaid.*"

Mr. Brownell watched all these "*goings on.*" By the early 1920s he had made up his mind. He would build and give to the Village a library in which the citizens could call their own. The land north of the Brick Hotel belonged to the Village. Mr. Brownell would add to it land for trees and planting, making a perfect spot for a library building. But first he knew he must find out more about libraries. He consulted with library people in at least three states and architects as well.

Essex Junction was quite a different place in those days. Many trains passed through the Village, all burning coal and belching black smoke and the streets were not paved. For these reasons the floor covering should be linoleum. Muddy tracks could be mopped away. The basement would be left unfinished. Someday, if the Village grew and the collection reached 10,000, stacks could be used. The outside would be truly a Vermont building; there would be brick from the Drury Brick & Tile Co., marble from the Vermont Marble Co. and even the foundation would be stone from the shores of Lake Champlain.

Mr. Brownell was well prepared for the meeting of the village people to listen to his proposition and vote on it. To an attentive audience he showed maps and plans. The Village must care for the building, inside and out, hire a librarian, and to the five members of the board voted by the village, he wished to add five more of his own choice. This would be a self-perpetuating board, but the two boards would act as one. His choice would be announced at the dedication. Needless to say, Mr. Brownell's gift to the Village was received with a resounding "yes" vote.

Mr. Brownell lived in a large white house, in what is now the parking lot of the Howard Bank. There were no buildings between his house and what is now the Federal Building. His daughter, Mary Brownell, also lived in town. His other children and their families visited him each summer, together with his niece and nephew, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Whitney.

The dedication of the new building was held on the lawn of the Brownell home. Mr. Clayton Freeman, a son-in-law, was the master of ceremonies and Guy Bailey, the president of UVM; was the principal speaker. Noise from the five corners was not a problem in those days. Mr. Brownell was not able to attend the dedication, but from an upstairs window he could hear all that went on. His son Cleon read the speech which his father had written and announced the names of the five member board he had chosen. They were: his daughter, Mrs. Clayton Freeman of Glenn Ridge, N.J., Allen Martin, Mrs. Dan Johnson, Harris K. Drury and Mrs. Henry Whitney, all of Essex Junction. As the guests listened to the ceremony they could look across the street to what was not the Essex Junction Free Library, but the Brownell Library. It was indeed a Vermont building: brick, marble and foundation stone. After the dedication guests were invited inside the building. Everything was in readiness. New books, tables, chairs, couches, lights and furniture for the children in the south end were all gifts of the Brownell children. Flowers had been arranged by Mrs. Mary Metcalf, Librarian, and the board. Books from the old library at the Brick Hotel had been arranged. An arched entrance to the alcove work room formed part of the west wall. At a later date a trust fund in memory of his wife,

Eliza Tracy Brownell, was established. Gifts from the Brownells and from village citizens made this a permanent fund, from the interest of which the children's book collection would benefit each year.

Historically speaking, the most important document in the library is an exact copy of the charter granted to the Town of Essex in 1763 and signed by order of George III by Governor Beuniug Wentworth of New Hampshire. The charter was given during the dedication and now hangs on the east wall of the reading room. Mr. W. F. Chapin found the document when settling an estate. It was a priceless gift to the new library. A complete account of the dedication is framed and also hangs in the library.

It had been a great day. Never were the people of Essex Junction so proud. It did seem as though everybody could now relax — they did — all but Mrs. Mary Metcalf and her most able assistant, Mrs. Bert Stone. The population was only 1,420 but plastic covers for books were years away, puppy dogs still loved children's books and there was always the enticing snow bank or mud hole, so work at the library went on: mending, binding, discarding and cataloging books.

No one anticipated the years ahead. Mr. Brownell died the next summer, then came the flood in November and rumors of recession followed. There were no school libraries at the time so only the steady flow of books from the Brownell Family and devoted village people satisfied the children and adults. Blanche Brownell Rosett and her daughter presented the library with the first bookcase which would hold the collection of Vermontiana in 1945. It fitted exactly the back of one couch. The Woman's Club, a combination of the Village Improvement Society and the Fortnightly Club, was extremely active in those days. Books donated by the club and memorial gifts, with a continuous donation from the Brownell children, took us through the lean years of the depression followed by the second World War.

After the war and twenty-six years' service, Mrs. Metcalf felt the time had come when she would like to be relieved of the extra duty. Her niece, Winona Stone, a graduate of UVM, left her job as an instructor at Barnard College in New York, to come home to be with her mother, Mrs. Bert Stone, and her aunt, Mrs. Metcalf.

Winona Stone, as librarian, continued the pattern set by her aunt. We remember her best for her devotion to the children. A book mark was mailed to each child on his or her birthday; when the children were out of school, the summer reading club was formed. Miss Stone made booklets for each child to tabulate every book read. A prize and one's name in the paper worked wonders.

Today many a parent remembers his first experience in the world of books with the encouragement of the librarian.

During the next twenty-five to thirty years, the books from the state library became our greatest source of reading material. The Regional Library in St. Albans was one of five, owned and run by the State Department of Libraries. Each library has a count of fifty to fifty-five thousand titles. The Regional Library has been moved from St. Albans to a new building in Georgia. The books were brought every few months, at first by bookwagons and later by bookmobiles. The books were enormously popular and helped swell the library circulation figures.

Now we were suddenly in the fifties and took a look around. We saw new schools, homes where there had been open fields or woods, roads which were paved. Pre-war and post-war children were school age and now library users. By the early 60's books covered tables, chairs and radiators. We were desperately in need of more room. The Lion's Club with Tom Rotunda at the head came to the rescue. The basement was the logical place. That basement! — dirty, dusty, and filled with years of old books, magazines and papers was finally cleared.

The Lions' first act was to hire the firm of architects, Freeman, French and Freeman, to draw plans for five extra rooms. These plans were later given by Freeman, French and Freeman in memory of Paul Raine. In 1962 five rooms emerged in the basement. One large room had shelving, a new ceiling, new lights, and floor covering. (This room later became the children's room with Mrs. Gracelyn Clark in charge.) One room was designed for books not often used but not to be discarded. Stacks eventually filled this room. A boiler room, and place for janitor equipment and toilet filled another area. The stack room remains the same and the large room now holds all past magazines, beautifully kept in containers especially made for that purpose. The Lions' Club, even though they had always from their inception given generously to the library, did certainly come to our rescue when we needed help. Plastic covers for book jackets appeared during these years. Books that had not been circulating suddenly became popular because the new jackets were colorful and attracted attention. There was a new and larger circulation desk and chair for the librarian, and the first book cart, also our first card catalogue conforming to professional standards. Several people from the Montpelier office sorted and discarded books and the children's collection was added to by the state children's consultant. Book cases were added in every conceivable spot.

Still the Village grew and grew and grew. Even adults had learned to whisper in the Reading Room but there was no doubt the village population had outgrown the library. Something must be done.

Our first move was a library survey in 1966 which polled the entire Village. Even though it turned out to be the windiest day on record and the sky was filled with the pink papers of the survey, the Boy Scouts delivered and reported on every paper. No one was asked to sign his name, but of the 45% returned the children's library received the most comments.

The rapid influx of new people in the surrounding county was a great asset to Essex Junction. Government, school and the library felt the impact of these new people, and on the whole there was better education, and enthusiasm for every type of government. The library in small quarters could not keep up with this influx of young families.

To form a Friends of the Brownell Library was an early move in 1967. The membership included borrowers from throughout the county. The purpose was to raise money for the library, provide books and as we called it — putting frosting on the cake. That frosting with all these young people turned out to be very thick and chock full of nuts. Every home was solicited. Brochures copied from an English library and book marks appeared along with book sales.

We had been talking for some time about crowded quarters, but it could not be put off any longer; an addition must enlarge the library. We fed information to the *Suburban List* and Ruth Page, then editor, included articles almost every week on library needs. As our first move, with the approval of Village and Library trustees, we applied in March for Federal help and were approved — we would have the money in June.

At about this time Miss Stone felt that the time had come for the library to have a trained librarian. Failing health and an increase in library users had brought on the decision. Ray Tucker had known Ethan Newton in college and watched him through his years as a library student and for ten years as head of the State Regional Library in St. Albans. Miss Stone knew him through the bookmobile. Mr. Newton accepted the post and came to us as librarian in June 1968.

We were still waiting to hear from Federal Aid. We waited until the last of September of 1967. At that time, (and it was an election year) both boards agreed that we could wait no longer. Like all Vermonters, they said "We'll do it ourselves." A year had been lost.

One thing that we were not prepared for was the cry, faint at first, but louder and louder, "Don't you dare touch that building," but by a telephone crusade and a good deal of help the bond issue was voted June 4, 1968. We barely squeaked through but we won.

A building committee, in the meantime, had been formed with Steele Griswold as chairman. All the "nitty gritty" meetings with village manager, trustees, and builders were carried out with dispatch. Soon a foundation, then walls began to appear; the village people could easily see that the addition would not detract from the original building and no more was heard from the anti-builders.

The staff never stopped working. Frances Mallett had come to us as Mr. Newton's assistant the October after his appointment. The stairway eliminated, a trap door and ladder led to the basement stack and magazine area; books, magazines, newspapers were everywhere; aisles for the readers left only elbow room for the staff. No one complained and our library never closed. In the meantime, Ray Tucker arranged for the children's books to be moved to upstairs Lincoln Hall with plank shelving supported on cement blocks donated by Richard Workman. A summer reading club was arranged through Hazen Wood, Superintendent of Schools, and Mr. Heyman, Principal, at the Hiawatha School with Polly Whitcomb and Fran Christensen in charge.,

The Friends of the Library took on the job of decorating the reading room: paint, carpeting, covering of sofas and the new curtains. The Woman's Club bought all the tables and chairs for the children's room. To name all the people who gave to the library would be impossible — everyone gave, from the smallest to the largest organization. When the new library addition was finally finished and dedicated on December 6, 1970, it had indeed become a village affair.

Each era, or decade, brings a change. Now with a union catalog in Montpelier, every book in every Vermont library is available to us. We have state and federal aid, but I still feel that it is the head librarian and staff who makes a library.

Perhaps a friend put it into words when she recently remarked, "I think Sam Brownell would like this library as it is now" — or the small boy standing with his mother in front of Mr. Brownell's portrait over the fireplace — whispering to his mother as he pointed to the painting, "Is that God?" It all started with Mr. Brownell's gift to the Village in 1926.

