

A New History of Plaistow Public Library

In 1890, twenty-two Plaistow women met and organized a group that was called the Village Improvement Society. Among this society's goals was the erection of a new town hall, which was accomplished in 1895. A section of the first floor of this building was set aside for Plaistow's first public library, intended to include a reading room and a storage room.

On Saturday, January 2, 1897, Plaistow Public Library opened to the public with Miss Ethel Pollard as Librarian. (The Library was open only on Saturdays, and Miss Pollard was its sole employee.) On opening day, seventy-three library cards were issued to town residents eager to avail themselves of the Library's 267 books. The Library's budget was some \$115.

In its earliest years, Plaistow Public Library benefited greatly from the patronage of one Mr. Arthur G. Pollard. In addition to purchasing for Plaistow the very land on which Town Hall was built, Mr. Pollard made substantial gifts to the Library itself; among these: supplying the Library with its first catalogues in 1905, and donating a sum of \$100 the following year.

Between 1890 and 1940, the Town of Plaistow grew slowly, welcoming just 330 new inhabitants in the span of half a century. The Library accordingly evolved but gradually.

During World War I, the Library distributed circulars and posted soldiers' photographs. Starting in 1921, the Library opened two days a week instead of one, thanks to the generosity of the Men's Club of the Baptist Church. By the mid-1920s, the Library's book collection had grown to more than 4,000 volumes. (At that time, however, the Librarian lamented that "the advent of the radio" had lessened interest in reading.) By the mid-1930s, the Library was completely re-decorated, and its collection re-classified according to Dewey's system.

During World War II, plans to purchase new equipment and furniture for the Library were placed on hold. As the 1940s neared a close, the Librarian acquired a part-time assistant: the first permanent help afforded her office. The following decade marked the beginning of the Library's dedication to regular children's programming, hosting events such as "Story Telling Time" during each summer vacation. By the end of the 1950s, regular visits from the State Bookmobile supplemented the Library's in-house collection of more than 8,000 volumes.

Between 1940 and 1960, the Town of Plaistow doubled in size from some 1,400 to nearly 3,000 inhabitants. Meanwhile, the Library struggled to contain its ever-growing collection.

In 1963, some 127 members of the Plaistow community founded a Friends of the Library group "to assist the Trustees and Librarian in extending services where the library does not have time to do". These volunteers dutifully delivered materials to homebound patrons, repaired damaged books, and acted as chaperones for visiting elementary school students. In 1965, the Friends group incorporated the "Plaistow Library Building Association" in hopes of raising sufficient funds to move the Library. That same year, the Library installed its first telephone.

In 1966, a survey performed by the State Library recommended that a number of books be removed from the Library's holdings, given the facility's physical constraints. The following year, more than 1,500 books were discarded, but space remained limited. In 1969, the Friends group installed a book drop at the entrance of Town Hall, yet the Library's interior remained much as it had been for more than 70 years. The Library expanded in 1972 to include a small reference room, granting a modicum of flexibility. And yet, just two years later, the Librarian lamented in her report: "Shelving of books in their proper place has become impossible."

Then, in the mid-1970s, the Library at last strode into modernity. In 1975, the Library extended its open hours from 26 to 37 per week, in compliance with State requirements. The following year, the Town of Plaistow voted to purchase the A-Z Tool Company building for a sum of \$35,000. Library staff then spent much of that year preparing for their move down Elm Street, and when the new building opened in 1977, not one business day had been missed.

The new Library welcomed many improvements as it entered a new decade. In 1980, the Library purchased its first calculator and its first museum passes. In 1981, the "Old Book Room" was dedicated (to Ruth and Clif Cook), the second floor was renovated (to provide some meeting space), and patrons received their first library cards. In 1982, an Apple computer proved popular during its two-week loan to the Library. And in 1983, the Library purchased its first copier.

In 1984, Laurie Houlihan rose to the position of Librarian, and changes at the Library continued apace. (One of the first under Laurie's leadership was her assumption of the title "Director".) In 1985, the Library again increased its open hours, extending them from 37 to 51 per week. The next year, the Library acquired its first books on tape and VHS films. And then, in 1987, the Library added both one more person to its staff and one more day to its business week, expanding its total availability to the public from some 250 to more than 300 days per year.

The early 1990s were, thereafter, difficult for Plaistow: a reduced budget forced the Library to close on most summer Saturdays. Nevertheless, the Library completed a collection-wide automation project during this time, allowing all items to be circulated via computer.

In 1995, Plaistow celebrated the 100th anniversary of Town Hall, and soon thereafter, 1997 marked the Library's own centennial. Since 1897, a collection of fewer than 300 books had exploded to include over 30,000. Just as the Library had outgrown its original home, it was by this time again running out of available space. Fortunately, Plaistow approved the purchase of land for a new Library building in 1998, and construction work began the following year.

On May 15, 2000, the Library as we know it today first opened its doors to the public. Since that day, the Library has endeavored to keep pace with the public's technological needs and expectations. In 2002, the Library debuted its first website; in 2005, it implemented wireless broadband access throughout the building. In 2007, the Library joined the NH Downloadable Books Consortium, and in 2009, it created its first accounts on both Facebook and Twitter.

Between 2010 and 2011, three long-serving members of the Library's seven-person staff retired, leaving behind them an incredible legacy totaling 100 years. Having just co-founded the Southern New Hampshire Library Cooperative alongside Sandown and Atkinson's libraries, we intend to continue to serve our patrons and the Plaistow community to the best of our ability.