

**“ . . . the example Mr. Carnegie has set:”
The Philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie**

Chuck Backus

Chuck is a graduate student in the Historical Administration program. This paper was written for a course on the Emergence of Industrial America with Dr. Lynne Curry. This paper won this year's Lavern M. Hammand Graduate Writing Award.

In *Books and Blueprints: Building America's Public Libraries*, Donald Oehlerts examines the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie and states, “Numerous families had built libraries in their hometowns throughout the country before 1890. Carnegie's library building program was just a continuation of a trend on a grander scale.”¹ If Mr. Oehlerts is correct on this point, it is only at the most superficial level. Rather, this study will attempt to show that Andrew Carnegie, already a pioneer in “big business,” was also a pioneer in “big philanthropy.” In addition to making charitable gifts to communities with which he was associated, Carnegie, in a marked departure from other philanthropists, expanded his field of giving to communities where he had no ties. This new manner of giving took the form of a philanthropic machine, constructed on a business model. The primary focus of this paper will rest upon the Carnegie Library program that reached hundreds of communities. This paper will attempt to identify the roots of Carnegie's philanthropic efforts and to define the evolving concept of his giving. To this end, the paper will consider the following points:

To what extent was the Homestead Strike of 1892 a motivational factor for Carnegie's philanthropic deeds?

How did the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie differ from that of other, earlier givers? What formative effects did Carnegie's efforts have on later expressions of corporate giving?

¹ Donald Oehlerts, *Books and Blueprints: Building America's Public Libraries* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 61.

Roots of Carnegie's Giving

There are some clues in Carnegie's early life, which shed some light on his generosity. Personally, I think his early life in Dunfermline when he was surrounded by a family of political radicals was certain to have made a great impression on him, being barred from Pittencrieff Park because of his families agitation and political leanings left him with the desire if he ever had enough money to buy the Park for the people of Dunfermline. In Allegheny gaining access to Colonel Anderson's library gave him the realisation that there was no better use for surplus money than to give libraries.²

The “rags to riches” story of Andrew Carnegie is a part of the collective consciousness of this nation. As a young immigrant from Dunfermline, Scotland, who rose from mill boy to millionaire in the United States, Carnegie's was a tale better suited to the pages of a Horatio Alger novel than the streets of a Pennsylvania coal town. Carnegie rarely spoke of his love of libraries without acknowledging his debt to Colonel James Anderson of Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Carnegie was a “bobbin boy” in the textile mills of Pittsburgh whose imagination and leisure hours were enriched through reading. Anderson's practice of opening his library each week to the working boys of Allegheny allowed the young Carnegie access to the books he so treasured.

When I was a working-boy in Pittsburg, Colonel Anderson of Allegheny—a name that I can never speak without feelings of devotional gratitude—opened his little library of four hundred books to boys. Every Saturday afternoon he was in attendance at his house to exchange books. No one but he who has felt it can ever know the intense longing with which the arrival of Saturday was awaited, that a new book might be had . . . it was when revelling in the

² Derrick Barclay, Curator, Andrew Carnegie Birthplace Museum Dunfermline, Scotland, 8 October 1999, correspondence with the author.

treasures which he opened to us that I resolved, if ever wealth came to me, that it should be used to establish free libraries, that other poor boys might receive opportunities similar to those for which we were indebted to that noble man.³

While still a young man of thirty-three, Carnegie wrote what Carnegie Birthplace Museum curator Derrick Barclay refers to as the “St. Nicholas Hotel memorandum.”⁴ This memorandum, found in Carnegie’s papers after his death, indicated his desire to retire from business to devote himself to education and public works. It can be viewed as an indication of Carnegie’s commitment to the paternalistic view of philanthropy prevalent during the Victorian era in the United States. This paternalism can be found in early library philanthropists such as wealthy Massachusetts and London financier George Peabody (1794 – 1869). Peabody characterized his efforts as “a debt due from present to future generations.”⁵ Other such benefactors detailed in Kenneth A. Breisch’s study of Henry H. Richardson would include Albert Crane, Oliver Ames, and Elisha Slade Converse.⁶

Paternalism fit Carnegie well. Had events not transpired as they did, it is reasonable to assume that Carnegie could have happily concluded his career as a paternalistic philanthropist. But this was not to be the case.

The Effect of the 1892 Homestead Strike on Carnegie’s Giving

As the tight-fisted employer he reduces wages that he may play philanthropist and give away libraries, etc.⁷

³ Theodore W. Koch, *A Book of Carnegie Libraries* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1917), 8.

⁴ Derrick Barclay, 8 October 1999.

⁵ Franklin Parker, *George Peabody: A Biography* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 59.

⁶ Kenneth A. Breisch, *Henry Hobson Richardson and the Small Public Library in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1997).

⁷ *The Saturday Globe*, Utica, New York, 9 July 1892.

A discussion of the intricate role Andrew Carnegie played in the Homestead Strike of 1892, while fascinating, is well beyond the scope of this paper. What does fall within these parameters is a consideration of the Homestead Strike as a motivational factor for Carnegie's philanthropic deeds. It must of course be noted that Carnegie's library philanthropy began in Dunfermline, Scotland in 1881, fully eleven years prior to the Homestead Strike.⁸ As such, it is pointless to consider the Homestead Strike as chief impetus to Carnegie's library benefactions. However, thoughtful analysis reveals the libraries that Carnegie donated to the Pittsburgh area and particularly the Homestead Library were pivotal in Carnegie's philanthropic efforts.⁹

Although he was a skilled and experienced businessperson well prepared for the contingencies of labor relations, most scholars agree that Carnegie was caught completely off-guard by the violence which erupted at Homestead. Carnegie was the workingman's friend whose rise through the ranks had given him a special empathy with those he employed.¹⁰ It must also be understood that those now employed in Carnegie's steel mills were ethnically a much different group than those who had worked side by side with him as a young Pennsylvania mill boy. Charles Schwab, the post-strike superintendent of the Homestead Mill, wrote to Carnegie in 1896 to warn that the company had been forced to "draw on foreigners for our skilled mechanics."¹¹ Changing immigration patterns were bringing to the workplace employees with backgrounds far different from Carnegie's Scottish roots.

⁸ George Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), 76.

⁹ While a significant aspect of this work, it must be recognized that even within the confines of its limited focus, many of the complexities surrounding the effect of the Homestead Strike cannot be properly analyzed to the degree they deserve.

¹⁰ Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to all: Carnegie libraries and the transformation of American culture, 1886-1917* (Dissertation. University of California, Berkeley, 1989), 83.

¹¹ Van Slyck, (Dissertation), 86.

The public image of Andrew Carnegie had suffered significantly during the Homestead Strike of 1892 and his reputation was in jeopardy. By establishing a library in Homestead, Carnegie could be seen as hoping to reestablish himself as a benevolent paternal figure in his steel towns. Events would play out differently.

Andrew Carnegie divided his library benefactions into two distinct phases. He referred to these, doubtlessly with humorous intent, as his “retail” and “wholesale” periods.¹² The retail phase ran from 1886 to 1896 and affected six communities: Allegheny, Pennsylvania (1886); Johnstown, Pennsylvania (1890); Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (1890); Fairfield, Iowa (1892); Braddock, Pennsylvania (1895); and Homestead, Pennsylvania (1896). Fairfield, Iowa is an obvious anomaly in this list, and begs for explanation. Carnegie’s contribution of \$30,000 can be attributed to a personal request from Senator Joseph F. Wilson who was at the time president of the Jefferson County (Iowa) Library Association.¹³ The five remaining communities are Carnegie Steel communities. In these cases, Carnegie offered a charitable donation for the construction of a total of thirteen libraries and in each community, a civic center. That the benefactions deal with communities associated with Carnegie ties in well with the concept of paternalistic philanthropy outlined above. That so many of the libraries are *branch* libraries is an issue we shall address now.

Bringing books to people was obviously a concept near to Carnegie’s heart. As mentioned previously, this can be traced to his acknowledged debt to Colonel Anderson. In constructing branch libraries, Carnegie seemed intent upon avoiding the imposing and massive library structures of Henry Hobson Richardson in favor of a more domestically scaled building, located nearer the working class members of the community.

However, the Homestead Strike had left its mark on Carnegie. His workers had betrayed him. A look at the floor plan (Figure 1) of the Lawrenceville branch library, the first of Pittsburgh’s branch libraries, reveals that upon entrance to the library, one may gain access to the main reading room simply by

¹² Bobinski, 15.

¹³ Bobinski, 78.

entering the door to the left (labeled C). To enter the children's reading room, one simply turned right (D). Once inside the reading rooms, the patron could enter the radial stacks through doorways (A) or (B).

But this situation would be the subject of alteration. The following extended quote sheds interesting light on the Lawrenceville floor plan. (Emphasis has been added).

The Lawrenceville Branch, the first to be opened, was planned to house 20,000 volumes on the same floor as a general reading room and a children's room, **and it was required that every part of this floor should be visible from a central delivery desk.** The card catalogue is built into the rear of the circular delivery desk, and with the drawers facing towards the book-stack. By having the bookcases radiate from the delivery desk complete supervision of all the rooms on this floor is obtained. In order to operate this branch on the free access plan, **it has been found advisable to close the doors C and D on either side of the delivery lobby and have the public enter the stack-room through the registering turnstile F (which moves only in one direction), and to enter the reading room through the doors A and B. The only exit from any of these rooms is through the turnstile E.** Thus, between the supervision of all readers while in the building and the necessity for their passing out immediately in front of the delivery desk, **there is comparatively little danger of books being carried off without being charged.**¹⁴

After examining the floor plans of more than one hundred Carnegie libraries, one can find only one additional structure (Brooklyn, New York) that indicates the existence of turnstiles in its floor plan. Nothing in Charles Soule's monumental work on library design comes close to the concept

¹⁴ Theodore Wesley Koch, *A Book of Carnegie Libraries* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1917), 127.

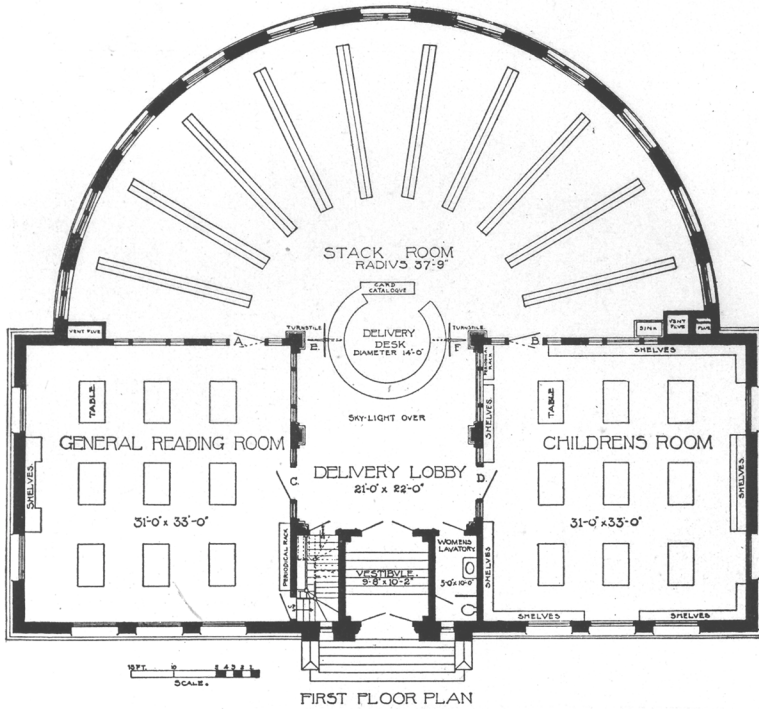


Figure 1: The Lawrenceville Branch Library in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. From Theodore W. Koch, *A Book of Carnegie Libraries* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1917).

of turnstiles.¹⁵ Yet, each of Pittsburgh's branch libraries was so equipped. Analysis of the floor plans of these libraries shows an evolutionary process in which the doors that were kept closed at Lawrenceville were simply omitted from later Pittsburgh branch libraries. In her excellent and indispensable work on Carnegie Libraries, Van Slyck draws a conclusion similar to my own.¹⁶ While she does not, on this particular point, specifically site a source for her information, she notes the closed doors, turnstiles, and routes of accessibility at Lawrenceville.

In 1895, Washington Gladden, the minister of the First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio published an article entitled "Tainted Money." While not mentioning Carnegie, or any other philanthropic entity, by name, the article proposed that by accepting money realized in an unethical manner, institutions expressed *de facto* support for the unethical behavior. Progressivism had raised its head and struck at Carnegie's heel. Almost immediately discussion of philanthropy changed. No longer was the charitable act of the donor the central issue. Now the focus was on the ethical value of the gift.

Dedication of the Homestead Library is the final page in Carnegie's "retail" phase. It also draws to a close the period that Van Slyck considers to be Carnegie's paternalistic period of philanthropy.¹⁷ The year was 1896, and at that time, there were 971 public libraries in the United States having 1,000 volumes or more.¹⁸ In 1897 no libraries were offered, or built by Carnegie. However, in 1898, Andrew Carnegie would re-emerge with a new type of giving that would shape philanthropy in the century to come.

¹⁵ Charles Soule, *How to Plan a Library Building for Library Work* (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1912). Soule notes "The problem of branch libraries has come into prominence recently, especially since Carnegie has made so many gifts in this direction." Yet the problems discussed are those of location, economics of service, number of books to be housed, and an admonition for "absolutely open access."

¹⁶ Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890 - 1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 107-109.

¹⁷ Van Slyck, (Dissertation), 116.

¹⁸ Bobinski, 7.

A New Type of Giving

It is not at all likely that you have ever heard of Charleston or of Coles County of which Charleston is the County seat.¹⁹

The “wholesale” phase of Andrew Carnegie’s philanthropy had begun. Rather than attempting to restore his paternal status by buying favor in the communities he had fed, he reshaped his philanthropic efforts along the lines of a model he understood well: big business. In reconstructing philanthropy, Carnegie’s largess was to be no longer a beneficent outlay, it was simply a *commodity*. There would be no more examination of his own community of influence to find the most deserving of his “family” members. The family had grown too large and unruly. Now his philanthropic efforts would deal with those with which he had dealt so successfully with in business: consumers. If the consumer wished to obtain Carnegie’s product, that consumer would come to him and meet his price. The consumer would shoulder all the petty infighting and exhaustive groundwork. Here, for the world to see, was Carnegie’s business acumen at its most brilliant.

There is elegance to the procedure Carnegie established for obtaining a library. First the community sent a letter to Carnegie requesting a library. This request received a written response from Carnegie’s personal secretary, James Bertram. Typical of the response is the following:

Dear Sir:

Mr. Carnegie has considered yours of Aug. 23, and if Charleston will furnish a suitable site and pledge not less than twelve hundred dollars a year for support of library, Mr. Carnegie will be glad to give twelve thousand dollars for a Free Library Building.

Respectfully Yours,

Jas. Bertram, Sec’y.²⁰

¹⁹ Charles S. Wiley, President of the Charleston, Illinois Library Board, 23 August 1901, to Andrew Carnegie. Charleston, Illinois, Carnegie Library Correspondence, Microfilm Reel #5.

The letter required that the community provide only two things: A suitable site for the building, and a signed agreement committing the mayor and trustees of the community to providing an annual support fund of at least 10 percent of the building grant. The site was to be free of any debt, and large enough to allow addition to the library in the future.²¹

Yet, for all its simplicity, note how much the new system encompassed. In less than fifty-five words, the tone, timbre, and five key criteria of the transaction are established within the familiar framework of big business. Although the system was to be refined, and on occasion abused, it was none the less a system from which Carnegie would not stray.

The first important element to note is that, as in any good business deal, all arrangements were made in written correspondence. On only the rarest occasions were requests for an audience granted. Transactions occurred in writing, thus allowing an undeniable permanent record to exist of all dealings between the consumer and Carnegie's new philanthropic machine.

Second, Carnegie's initial site-specific action was a *response* to a request. The consumer, not Carnegie, had recognized a need for the commodity. There was no need to expend capital in a search through every hamlet and town for an appropriate donee. The consumer approached Carnegie. No need to worry about whom did or did not want a library. If the consumer desired the goods, the consumer came to Carnegie.

Third, the consumer arranged the actual location for the finished product. Carnegie's fortune was not spent securing plots of ground in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, Dickenson, North Dakota, or Osawatomie, Kansas. Such speculative work was now left to the consumer. Carnegie's money and effort was spent producing the product he valued, the library. Carnegie correspondence files are filled with examples of communities asking for money to purchase land, or to clear the debt of a particular plot of ground. There are also accounts of

²⁰ *Charleston Daily Courier*, Charleston, Illinois, no date. Circa mid-October 1901.

²¹ Oehlerts, 63.

communities asking Carnegie to intercede on this or that side of a local debate over a site. In virtually all instances, Carnegie's philanthropic machine remained distanced from such issues.

Fourth, the community was required to make a financial commitment to maintain the library. This offered Carnegie a simple guarantee that a consumer committed to the same goals would grasp his philanthropic hand. Again, the Carnegie archives show numerous examples of communities attempting to amend or circumvent this stipulation. The concerns voiced in these letters are valid. An unwilling mayor or an unruly town council could not be swayed to support the library. Local or state legislation did not allow for a library tax. The Carnegie machine was not deterred. A letter was sent to the community explaining that if a library were truly desired, then the community's voice should be heard through the ballot. New mayors and councils could be elected. New legislation could be passed.

Finally and perhaps most indicative of his business genius, Carnegie removed the most capricious element from the new philanthropic machine: himself. A trusted lieutenant, James Bertram, carried out the actual arrangements for the transfer of the commodity. Correspondence from Carnegie himself to library communities is virtually non-existent.

There are additional revelations in the new philanthropic machine of Carnegie's creation. Not least of these is the simple formula devised for determining grant values to communities seeking libraries, and the amount of the pledge required from the community.

The files kept by James Bertram on each community requesting a library were arranged alphabetically. Within each file, the contents were arranged chronologically. Each file begins with a printed form that obviously served as a sort of checklist. The word LIBRARY at its top was followed in order by the following rubrics: *Town*, *Population*, *Correspondent*, *Date of Application*, *Amount*, *Promised*, *Drafts Authorized*, and finally *NOTES*. Time after time these checklists reveal that the amount promised to each community was simply reached by

multiplying the population by two.²² The pledge required was simply ten percent of the promised gift.

This is philanthropy for a massive audience. The family model is replaced by the model of big business. Vague promises are replaced by documentation. The paternal benefactor evolves into a partner with an active recipient. Gone is the intensely personal involvement by the benefactor in the micro-management of the beneficiary dealings and in its place we find procedures demanding efforts from the beneficiary. Hyperbole is replaced with figures and statistics. Rhetoric vacates and confirmable assets take its place. Whims of the benefactor give way to the pre-determined logic of the machine.

Although flawed and impersonal, it was a system stunning in both its simplicity and its adaptation to the task at hand. At the time of his death in 1917, Carnegie's library program had accounted for the construction of 1,679 library buildings in the United States.²³ The system prompted Mr. M. Smith to remark:

If our millionaires desire to benefit the greatest number in the best way, so as to help them to be self-respecting, to earn what they receive, and to learn something while thereby are earning it, there can surely be no better way offered than to follow exactly the example Mr. Carnegie has set, not necessarily, however, building libraries all the time, for there are plenty of other things to be done, and money of which are even more beyond the reach of individuals. It is our belief that the good which Mr. Carnegie will accomplish by giving money as he has will in the long run be far greater, will reach more people, will elevate the community as a whole to a higher degree of intelligence and appreciation, and will leave a more lasting memorial in the hearts of his countrymen than if he had take the same amount of

²² Carnegie Library Correspondence, Microfilm Reel #5. Please note that it is not as though this author has made some here to fore unknown discovery. Numerous Carnegie authors, Bobinski and Van Slyke among them, have noted the same formula from various sources.

²³ Bobinski, 20.

money and with it endowed either schools, hospitals,
or churches.²⁴

The passage of time would add an element of prophecy to Smith's words. Philanthropic corporations would indeed follow the example Mr. Carnegie had set. The Carnegie model of philanthropy would become a standard for large scale giving. Functioning Carnegie libraries still dot the landscape, many wearing the built additions that their benefactor had recognized as inevitable. Others, retained for their architectural significance, survive through adaptive reuse within the communities that had requested them.

It has been the intent of this paper neither to justify nor to vilify the philanthropic efforts of Andrew Carnegie. The innocence of Carnegie, the inspired youth in Colonel Anderson's Allegheny library contrasts too strongly with the complexities of Carnegie the steel-fisted strike-breaker at Homestead to allow such a judgement. Rather this work has sought to understand the significance of Carnegie's reinvention of philanthropy. As such, this author can only marvel at pioneering efforts of a resilient and creative business giant.

²⁴ M. Smith. "Andrew Carnegie as an Architectural Educator." *The Brickbuilder* 10 (March 1901): 46.