

1924 Fletcher Memorial Library 2024



A Centennial History



On a summer day one hundred years ago, a line of children from the Center School/Town Hall building in Hampton ferried the town's library from its old quarters to the handsome Italianate Victorian at 257 Main Street where town librarian Kate Thompson was waiting for them, ready to paste in the new library slips and fill the shelves.

Although Hampton had a library of one sort or another since 1865, the collection had been stored over the years in volunteers' homes or kept in locked wooden cabinets opened once a week for borrowers. A proper library building had been the dream of an earlier town librarian, Eliza Durkee, who willed her home for that purpose. Her nephew and executor, Austin Fletcher, decided a larger building would suit better. He purchased the present building as a memorial to her and to his mother, Harriet Durkee Fletcher, and created the Austin Fletcher Trust Fund to finance the library.

Although Austin Fletcher had been concerned to provide a large enough facility, for many years the library used only the three main floor rooms. These housed a modest collection, still largely preserved in the History Room upstairs.

The small size of the library holdings was not surprising. The population of the town in 1920 was 475, with summer people adding maybe twenty families. The Crash of '29, the Great Depression and

World War II all meant that there were many calls on town funds and community donations besides the library.

Despite its endowment, Fletcher Memorial library was clearly never an affluent institution. In 1961, the library board came up with an ingenious solution to their slender budget. They hired 52 year old Eunice Fuller to be the unpaid librarian in exchange for housing in the unused portion of the building. The contract required her to keep up the building, mow the lawn and shovel the walks, outrageous demands today but not unlike contemporary expectations for young public school teachers.

What no one anticipated was that Eunice would serve the town more than 38 years, as probate judge as well as librarian, retiring at 90. Unpaid at the library until her final years, she became one of the town's great characters: an independent, opinionated, practical book lover with a warm heart under a crusty exterior.



She ran the library her way, disapproving of book fines and locked library doors. Hampton residents were welcome at all hours to visit, relax, and gossip with friends. She was remarkable for her knowledge of readers' tastes, her resistance to modernization, and her many kindnesses. A skilled gardener, Eunice favored daylilies, some still thriving in the memorial garden on the north side of the building. She was devoted to the Boston Red Sox and setter dogs and for years a flock of elderly hens that never had to fear the stewpot.

When Eunice retired, ill with skin cancer, the library board appointed Louise Oliver, almost certainly the first Hampton librarian to be professionally educated in library science, to the still unpaid position. While willing to volunteer, Louise insisted that she and new assistant librarian Claire Winters, an experienced teacher familiar with school libraries, be paid a token dollar every year to stress that librarians should be compensated.



This point was made very firmly some years later after Louise fell ill with Lou Gehrig's disease. Gloria Langer temporarily stepped in as an unpaid librarian, but she convinced the board that the job must now be a paid position. With some financial help from the town, Linda Gorman was hired as the first paid librarian in 2005. In 1999, however, the important innovation was not financial but structural, namely the appointment of an assistant librarian. The new position would not only prove popular but increasingly vital as library duties became more

complex. The post is currently held by long time volunteer Sonja Larsen, who maintains the collection and orders most of the books.

Claire and Louise were friends who had each been previously named Citizen of the Year for services to the town. They were ready to modernize the library and called for volunteers to help. The magnitude of the task can be seen from their immediate wishlist: a toilet, a telephone, and a computer.

The need for the first was obvious: the sole bathroom was upstairs in Eunice's apartment, a fact the board did not realize until Louise asked them to price a portable toilet for the yard. The board promptly voted to install one under the front stairs, sparing the volunteers awkward trips across to the sometimes locked Holt Hall.

The telephone and the computer produced an even bigger change. They opened the world, enabling the library to join Interlibrary Loan. ILL was a true revolution for small and underfunded libraries, because it enabled borrowing from libraries around the state.

ILL meant that a student could locate an obscure author biography, the garden fancier could read up on herbaceous borders, and the fan of a popular series could borrow a novel Fletcher was missing. Patrons are now familiar with the heavy plastic tubs filled with books from libraries near and far, but they may not know that



Fletcher loans nearly as many volumes as it borrows, a testament to the quality of our collection.

Eunice remained in the apartment that had been her home for nearly four decades until her death in 2001. At that point, the library board took over the entire building, considerably increasing the available space. Fletcher Memorial had been maintained on a tight budget through difficult times but was seriously in need of an upgrade. At the dawn of the 21st century, the library board faced the task of turning a Victorian building with cosmetic issues and structural constraints into a thoroughly modern facility.

This proved to be an undertaking of many years that has drawn contributions from a number of talented craftsmen. The library has benefited from the woodworking talents of both Steve Russo and board member Wendell Davis; repair work from Stan Crawford and John Berard, painting from Randy Saylor, plus plumbing from Steve Dinsmore and landscaping and grounds work from Mike Chapel.

After taking over Eunice's apartment, the library was able to put in a second, handicapped accessible toilet downstairs. Thanks to a major contribution from Roger and Jeanette Hoffman in memory of Donald Hoffman, the sunroom got a major upgrade and became a venue for the reading group. Upstairs, three large and handsome rooms were designated for nonfiction books and a library office. The rooms were cleaned up and painted, with Wendell building new bookshelves.

One of the small rooms at the back, formerly the apartment bedroom, became a storage area for the Friends of the Library, whose annual book sales were for years the chief fundraiser for the library. There were several incarnations of these sales, some including "white elephants" and baked goods with venues including the library lawn, next door at Holt Hall, and, more recently, the Town Hall.

Lately, the book market on the internet and the ease of digital downloads have impacted the library's sponsored sales. Now Book & Bake coordinators Sue Hochstetter and Regina DeCesare find that baked goods and gift baskets often bring in more revenue than books, which in another change, are



sold along with DVDs and audio books. Currently, the largest single source of extra revenue is the Fall Harvest Festival.



The final renovations downstairs involved the dark and frankly shabby children's room. It was repaired and painted and immeasurably brightened by Ruth Halbach's colorful murals. Outside, the Eunice Fuller memorial garden that Anne Christie designed was taking shape.

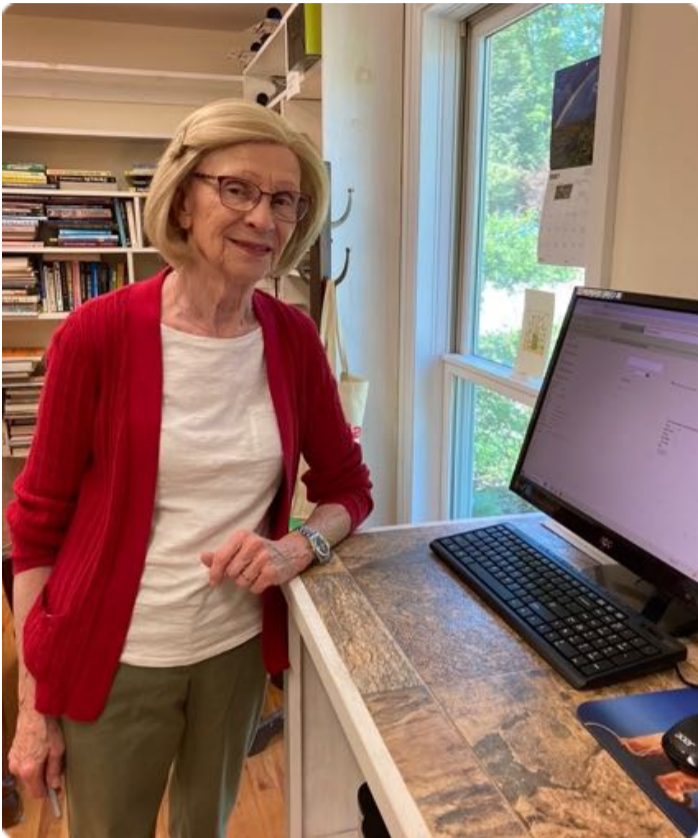
With the interior brightened and the checkout desk up to standard, the library board began a big and successful fundraiser to patch and paint the exterior. The library was soon sparkling with a fresh coat of white paint, but there was an unexpected consequence, as library treasurer, Ellen Rodriguez, discovered several years later when she began to receive messages from the IRS.

The library, secure in being a true non-profit, had never filed tax returns. Unfortunately, the successful fund drive made Fletcher appear to be turning a profit. Board chair Jim Ryan counseled patience and a closed checkbook, but there were some anxious consultations and a letter to our congressman before the matter was sorted. The library ever after careful about official forms, eventually, entrusting tax matters to a professional accountant.

Modernization brought other unintended consequences. As the library responded to public demand with more public computer stations, security became an issue in two ways. On one occasion Linda Gorman had to hustle after a patron who, interpreting library policy too broadly, "borrowed" a router. The library



also had to ask a teenaged IT expert to put a filter on the public machines to screen out pornography.



One significant non-digital change was the acquisition of a distinctly old fashioned, but essential tool, PW, the *Publisher's Weekly*. Subscribing to the weekly "bible" of the publishing industry may not sound very exciting, but it is how our staff alert patrons about a favorite author's new book and how Sonja Larsen, assistant librarian since 2005, can order interesting books months in advance. Incidentally, the reason Sonja knows what patrons want is because she regularly weeds the shelves and so knows which authors and subjects are popular. Only our local authors, considered a permanent part of the collection, escape her vigilance.

Within a few years, the library board had greatly increased the square footage available for books and smartened up the whole facility, yet, paradoxically, the library now seemed cramped. Long time volunteer and professional cataloguer, Lee Astin, was trying to repair books in an alcove at the top of the back stairs. Sonja was trying to unpack and sort books on the fiction room table. Volunteers were sick of hauling boxes of sale books up and down from the store room.

But there was a space available, and board chair Regina DeCesare spotted it. True, the old woodshed affixed to the rear of the building was in poor shape and inhabited by a vixen that had her den under the floorboards, but Fletcher board members had learned not to be fussy. Could the woodshed be salvaged? When an assessment by builder Paul Wakely was negative, the board, undeterred, decided to use the handsome bequest from Warren Stone to help rebuild the former outbuilding from scratch.

The result was a modern workroom, complete with a heat pump and shelving sufficient to hold a sales worth of donated and weeded books, plus a storage cupboard, computer station, sink and work counter. Weary volunteers gave a sigh of relief at the end of



precarious trips up and down the narrow and winding back stairs.

The new workroom was the big change in the physical plant in the 2010's. During this period the library also faced a big and expensive decision about book handling when it considered digitizing the collection. This was not to undertaken lightly. Digitization requires the transfer of card catalogue information, either by typing or scanning, to a company that produces unique barcodes for every title.



The bar codes are printed on peel off paper, and once received, every single book in the collection has to be taken off the shelf and given its proper label.

Board member Melanie Johnson, who had considerable computer expertise, argued that the change was inevitable and better done sooner than later. She was instrumental in getting the project

approved as well as in organizing the library's share of the work, which involved numerous volunteers, library staff, and local students. The library successfully funded the project with the assistance of a grant from the Savings Institute of Willimantic.

Also on the computer front, The Hampton and Scotland School Readiness Council donated a children's computer learning station for the Children's Room, one of a number of donations over the years to promote early childhood learning.

Another digital addition around this time was the library's website. Built by the library's then corresponding secretary, Janice Trecker, the website gave Fletcher a web presence and enabled patrons to search the catalogue on line and to check on library events and new book arrivals. The acquisition of a FaceBook account at the same time lets the library post photos of events and links to information of topical interest.

With digitization, a web presence and good computer access, Fletcher Memorial Library entered the modern era and began a rapid expansion of program and services. Handicapped access was





improved as part of a big project, again funded in part by the Warren Stone bequest, to provide good parking for the library.

Besides private donations, the project also received help from the town and from the Congregational Church which uses the parking area on Sundays. Maurice Bisson built the ramp from the lot at the rear entrance, making the entire lower floor accessible. Unfortunately, the Victorian structure has neither the space nor the strength to handle an elevator but the staff cheerfully brings requested materials from the upper floors for patrons with disabilities.

The parking lot, a rather prosaic necessity, did provide the occasion for perhaps the most romantic touch of the library, a certified butterfly garden. Board member Anne Christie, a landscape designer and gardener, was well aware of the threats to our pollinators. She proposed a small garden with many butterfly and bee friendly plants that would be an attractive amenity for the town and a demonstration garden for pollinator friendly planting.

Although there were some raised eyebrows at the thought of diverting book money to mulch, the charm of the idea prevailed. A fund raiser offered patrons the opportunity to purchase trees and shrubs for the grounds to memorialize loved ones, and a garden to





Anne's design was installed with yeoman work from Mike Chapel. Wrapping around the earlier Eunice Fuller Memorial Garden, the new installation is a lovely site for concerts and events.

The library also devised new programs. When Deb Andstrom arrived as librarian, she brought not just library expertise but a wealth of experience dealing with young children. The result was the popular Baby Story Time for infants up to 3 or 4 years and the Wednesday Story and Craft program for older children. She also instituted the popular Dr. Seuss's Birthday party and the annual Easter Egg Hunt, as well as starting a book club for adult readers.

Two other programs also debuted around this time. The Top Shelf Gallery made a virtue of necessity and located an exhibition space along the tops of the bookshelves in the two main adult fiction rooms. Since its inception in 2017, the gallery has shown 27 different artists, both amateurs and professionals, with works in acrylic, oil, watercolor, color pencil, printmaking and photography that greatly brighten up the shelving and complement the library's permanent collection of local artwork. John O'Brien has now ably succeeded Anne, the original director.

With the support of an anonymous donor and the Foster Family Foundation, recent summers have seen Music at the Fletch. Mark Davis, professional instrumentalist, teacher, and conductor, has secured a

line up of talented singers, instrumentalists, and bands each summer for free concerts in the garden or, increasingly with larger groups, on the porch.

When much else was shut down, Fletcher Memorial held at least one concert on the lawn with circles sprayed on the grass to indicate safe social distancing. Mark Davis performed nearly weekly in the butterfly garden during the restrictions of summer 2021, sharing guitar transcriptions of Bach's unaccompanied violin pieces as well as music from the classical guitar repertory.

The music and art programs, along with increased attention to children's services, were part of the library's drive to become a true community center. Anne, then board chair, proposed a function room that would be large enough for talks, meetings, art demonstrations, and acoustic concerts as the final piece of the puzzle.

After some discussions about feasibility, cost, and location, she drew up a design that preserved the look of the old sunroom but enlarged it enough to serve as a real community room. The generosity of Hampton citizens, topped up by a handsome gift from the Joan



Dupuis Memorial Fund for Children, raised the needed amount. The same Dupuis Fund kindly provided for the water feature in the garden, a trickling waterfall and pond that attracts frogs in the summer.

In 2019, Michael Barr Construction enlarged the old sunroom to create a space

closely resembling its predecessor but equipped with modern lighting, heating, and windows. Bright and sunny in winter, well shaded by trees in summer, it is a charming space, only unfortunate in that its

completion occurred so close to the pandemic shutdown. With the library's reopening it is again busy with performances, programs, the weekly Mah Jongg games, children's events, meetings, and concerts, but for many months it stood empty after Covid hit.

The pandemic had a major impact on every institution and Fletcher was no exception. The board, then led by Bonnie Cardwell, was considering mundane concerns like a new furnace, basement work, and a functional fire alarm system, all later secured, when they had to make the extraordinary decision to close the library.

All indoor programming was cancelled and a fine exhibition of color pencil drawings by Lula Mae Blocton went largely unseen. But the library continued the most basic tasks, lending and acquiring books, although Brodart, the main library book supplier was temporarily shut down and deliveries were slow. Patrons called or emailed requests to Deb and the staff, who placed the items in the pickup box at



the back door. Returns were via the new drop boxes, hardly an ideal situation but functional.

Four years later, Fletcher Memorial Library is again fully open for business and ready to celebrate its one hundredth birthday in fine shape. The building is sound, the computers and internet connections are fast, and the collection maintains a nice balance between the popular books of the moment and works

of lasting value, and includes two interesting special collections: the History Room and the Jamie H. Trecker Comics collection. The library attracts between 350 and 450 patrons a month. It is a careful steward of its endowment and the recipient of town support both official and private.

But one thing has not changed from the day the Center School kids were enlisted to transfer the books: a very great deal of the library's success has depended on its volunteers. Many people have contributed skill and experience, time and energy to the library, believing, as one volunteer says that "the library is for everyone" and that, even in difficult or divisive times, the institution can be a unifying focus of the community.

Hampton Authors

Esther W. Bates

Lula Mae Blocton

Jamie Boss, Sr.

Irene Q. & Richard D. Brown

Barbara Cairns

Alison Brown Davis

Joan Fox

Carolyn Gaines

Lawrence Goodheart

Janice Law (Trecker)

Jimmy Halloran

Dorinda K.D. Lundin

Marjorie Medary

Penny Newbury

Beth Powning

Janet C. & James O. Robertson

Jean Romano

Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez

Helen Scanlon

Edwin Way Teale

Jamie Trecker

Clarence Mertoun Webster

A. H. Wellewood (Bruce Bayne)



Photo credits

- Cover 21st century Fletcher Memorial Library
- 2 Earlier 20th century Fletcher Memorial Library, courtesy of Hampton Antiquarian & Historical Society
- 3 A very young Eunice Fuller, courtesy of HAHS
- 4 Upper left, Louise Oliver; lower right Claire Winters
- 5 Gloria Langer on right, with Sonja Larsen, left
- 6 History room; Halbach mural in children's room
- 7 Upper left, Assistant Librarian Sonja Larsen, lower right, Linda Gorman
- 8 Bookshelves in History Room; award- winning butterfly garden in full bloom
- 9 Easter Egg Hunt at the library; Deb Andstrom
- 10 Dr. Seuss Birthday Party in new function room
- 11 Mark Davis in garden concert; Hampton Harvest Festival
- 12 Regina DeCesare, Beth Desjardin & Sue Hochstetter at the Book & Bake
- 13 Lula Mae Blocton book signing & art demonstration; poets Maureen Korp & Christie Max Williams introduced by Anne Flammange
- 14 Frogs in butterfly garden pond

Written by Janice Trecker, with assistance of Regina DeCesare, Sue Hochstetter, Sonja Larsen, Anne Christie and Beth Desjardin

