(Bookmobile service resumed in 2020 with the “Library2Go” vehicle.) In 1974, another addition to the side of a firehouse created the small 1,500 square feet Southwest Branch at 9010 Ridgewood Road. In 2,000, the branch was expanded to 5,373 square feet.

**Significant Dates**

1855: “Association” library founded
1864: Young Men’s Literary Association founded. They hire 15-year-old Ellen Gale as their director.
1872: YMCA turns collection, rented space & library director Ellen Gale over to the City to found the first public library in Rock Island. Nov. 25, 1872: Rock Island 1st public library to open after the passing of the Library Act. Dec. 15, 1903: Grand opening of the first permanent building at 401 19th Street.
1909: Library offers branch services in schools
1910: Library’s Children Services Dept forms
1937: Director Ellen Gale retires after 65 years with the public library (and four previous years with the private library.) She is the longest serving director in the nation.
1946: Ornamental roof trim removed
1955: Renovation of Main Library
1956: Reference Service begins
1957: 30/31 Branch added to fire station.
1974: Southwest Branch added to fire station.
1986: Main Library renovated and expanded to 30,000 square feet
1989: Milan-Blackhawk Area Library District established; contracts with Rock Island to supply library services.
February 18, 1999: 30/31 Branch closed for construction

October 11, 1999: Expanded 30/31 reopens
December 11, 1999: 30/31 grand reopening
June 19, 2000: Books move to trailer at the Southwest Branch
April 2001: Southwest reopens
August 2001: SW Grand reopening
September 2006: Main closed for renovation.
October 2, 2006: Main reopens. Community open house held
October 25, 2006.
April-October 2015: Exterior stonework & roofing restoration project at Main (now referred to as Downtown) Library
September 2019: Bookmobile/ outreach vehicle purchased with a RI Public Library Foundation gift.
December 14, 2019: 30/31 closed to prepare for sale of building.
January 6, 2020: Library2Go starts regular routes as a materials and outreach vehicle.
August 7, 2020: Sale of former 30/31 building officially closes, transferring ownership to the American Doll & Toy Museum.

Rock Island Library Directors
1872-1937 Ellen Gale
1937-1948 Elsie Schocker
1948-1968 Anne Benner
1968-1972 Betty Kohler
1973-1978 Leonard Meinhold
1979-1982 Charles Perdue
1983-1998 James Warwick
1998-2012 Ava Ketter
2013 - Angela Campbell

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Photo resources: Rock Island Library special collections
1855  
The first library in Rock Island is established in 1855, as a private “Association” library. Subscriptions and donations from local business leaders funded the library, with members paying an annual $3 fee to check out materials. This effort ended after two years.

1865  
The privately funded “Young Men’s Literary Association” starts a library. To provide more revenue, the YMLA sponsors lectures with well-known speakers, such as Clara Barton and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

1872  
Following the disastrous Chicago fire, the State of Illinois authorizes communities to assess taxes to provide public libraries. The YMLA board turns over its entire collection, rented space, and its library director, Miss Ellen Gale, to the City for the purpose of opening a truly public library. The Rock Island Public Library opens on November 25, 1872, making it the first Illinois public library to open after the Act’s passing.

1872-1903  
Library facilities consist of rented rooms, the first of which is a 24 x 48 foot space in the Mitchell and Lynde Building just north of 2nd Avenue at 17th Street (now a bank).

1901-1903  
With space at a premium, the library board decides the library needs a permanent home, and construction begins in 1901 at 401-19th Street. The new Rock Island Public Library opens on Dec. 15, 1903. Local newspapers call it “Rock Island’s Temple of Literature.” Much funding came from two Rock Island businessmen, Frederick Denkmann and his brother-in-law Frederick Weyerhaeuser. Both became giants in the American lumber business.

1985  
A large addition brings the Main Library to 30,000 square feet, adding more space for stacks and a mezzanine level. The renovation sought to restore the authenticity of the original building by:
- Reopening the skylight dome with ornamentation underneath,
- Refurbishing and replacing original oak doors and brass door fixtures,
- Restoring the marble foyer to its original look, and
- Moving the elevator back to a central location.

2006  
The Main Library receives a cosmetic remodeling, including new carpeting, paint, construction of new Circulation/Reference Desks, offices and a computer lab.

2015  
A seven-month stone restoration and roofing project at the Main Library, funded by a Rock Island Capitol Improvement Project (CIP) project grant, restores the stability of the building’s exterior stonework.

Branching Out  
In 1909, Rock Island Library began branch service to public schools, maintaining collections there to provide students with library services. A year later, the library established a full-fledged Children’s Department in what is now the Community Room. In 1957, a small room added to a City firehouse created the 30/31 Branch at 3059 30th Street. The branch would later fill the entire firehouse in 1999.

School branches were replaced by a new Bookmobile in the 1960s. From the late 1970s to Dec. 30, 1982, the library had a small branch at the Martin Luther King Center. The bookmobile service discontinued in December 1990.