



# Building the Rock Island Downtown Library: 1901-1903

## A Building of One's Own

Rock Island's first truly public library opened in 1872 in a 48-foot-long by 24-foot-wide room rented for \$150 per year. The room was on the northeast corner of the Mitchell & Lynde building on 17th Street, now the site of a bank building. The library opened with just 2,174 volumes and other materials, but by 1881, had grown to 6,404 volumes. 1881 also marked the year that head librarian Miss Ellen Gale and the Rock Island Library became "one of the founders of the first association of libraries in Illinois." The Conference of Western Libraries disbanded sometime after a successful 1884 meeting in Rock Island, but Rock Island and many other participants joined the Illinois Library Association in 1895. One of the conference topics was a paper on *"Library Buildings of Moderate Size."*

By 1895, years of outgrowing rented spaces and the growing use of libraries by children led to campaigning for a new building. By October 1899, the Rock Island City Council also agreed that a new building was necessary, and on April 6, 1900, the council



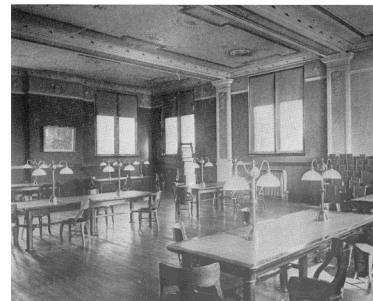
Miss Ellen Gale

approved the purchase of a parcel in Spencer and Case's Addition, at the southeast corner of 19<sup>th</sup> Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. With fees and other costs, the final purchase price came to \$8,878.88.

Based on initial specifications from the Drack and Kerns architectural firm, the City of Rock Island approved taxation in the amount of \$70,000, to be paid in \$10,000 installments over seven years. With the first installment used to buy property, and with the board not able to proceed until all funds would be in hand by 1906, plans stalled for several months.

## A Benefactor Comes Forward

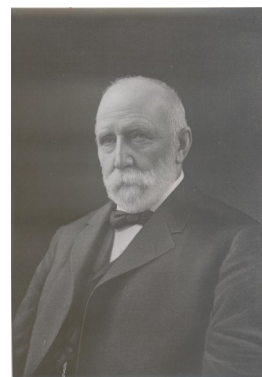
It's often assumed that the building is a Carnegie library\*, but it was the generosity of lumber tycoon Frederick Weyerhaeuser who made the building possible. In November 1900, Weyerhaeuser, who began his business in Rock Island with partner and brother-in-law Frederick (F.C.A) Denkmann,



offered a \$50,000 advance for a "fireproof library building, on the lot recently purchased, which will be an ornament to our city." His offer stipulated that 5 percent of his advance would be paid back out of taxes, and offered an additional \$10,000 donation for book stacks and furnishings.

Architect L.M. Drack, of

Drack and Kerns, was selected for the project, and bids were opened for construction. The lowest bid of \$58,147 by Collins Brothers did not allow for plumbing, heating, lighting, decoration or furniture. Weyerhaeuser then authorized the library board to use his



Frederick Weyerhaeuser

\$10,000 gift for actual construction costs. He pledged another \$2,500 in June 1901, which was matched by his former partner, F.C.A. Denkmann. By the time the library opened, Weyerhaeuser had donated \$17,869.32 out of the total cost of \$90,448.20. Weyerhaeuser continued his generosity, donating \$2,900 in September 1905 to buy a 30-foot strip of land adjoining the building lot on the east.

\* There is no official record of an application to or rejection from Andrew Carnegie, although a persistent rumor stands that he turned Rock Island down "because any town that has Frederick Weyerhaeuser need not ask a library from me."

## An Elegant Library Frieze

Construction began in September 1901, and by a year later, had reached the decorative frieze around the building. A frieze is a horizontal band of painted or carved decoration commonly found in classical Greek and Roman architecture.



The library board approved a list of 12 authors considered notable in 1903:

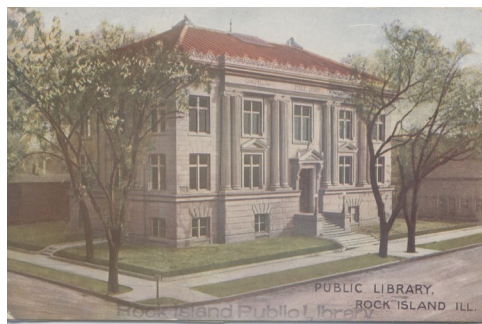
- Greek poet **Homer** (*The Iliad & the Odyssey*)
- American poet & educator Henry Wadsworth **Longfellow** (*Song of Hiawatha, The Children's Hour and The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*)
- American essayist, orator, poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo **Emerson**
- Roman poet **Virgil** (*The Aeneid*)
- French author Victor **Hugo** (*Les Misérables and The Hunchback of Notre Dame*)
- English playwright and poet William **Shakespeare**
- German poet, philosopher, playwright & novelist Johann Wolfgang von **Goethe** (*Faust*)
- Scottish poet laureate Robert **Burns** (*Tam O'Shanter, Auld Lang Syne, To a Mouse* and many other works.
- 19th Century Swedish poet Esaias **Tegner**

- Italian author Alighieri **Dante** (*the Divine Comedy*)
- American author Nathaniel **Hawthorne** (*House of the Seven Gables, The Scarlet Letter*)
- American military historian and U.S. Naval Academy founder George **Bancroft**

Bancroft, whose name appears on the east side, was one of 250 notables chosen to ride the 1854 Grand Excursion. Tegner, whose name appears on the south side, was a popular Swedish poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## A Temple of Literature

The Rock Island Library's stone walls were quarried in Amherst Township, Ohio. The Berea Sandstone was initially canyon gray in color, but has weathered to a mellow gold due to natural oxidation. Carthage marble was used for the library base and steps. Other materials used include oak, brass and marble. Designed in Classic Ionic style with Italian Renaissance finishes, the library included a



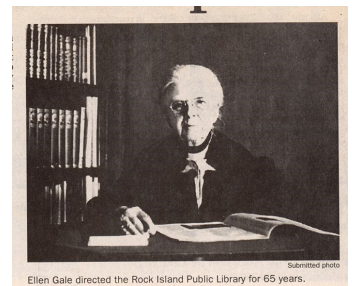
skylight and second floor rotunda with the balcony overlooking a circulation desk on the first floor.



Library interior, date unknown

The doors of the new Rock Island Public Library opened with a simple ceremony on December 15,

1903. Headlines proclaimed it as "Rock Island's new Temple of Literature." Library Director Miss Ellen Gale, who started as the librarian for the Young Men's Literary Association at just age 15 in 1869, continued to serve Rock Island Library from 1872 until her retirement in 1937. At the time of her retirement,



Ellen Gale directed the Rock Island Public Library for 65 years.

her 65 years of service qualified her as the longest serving municipal library director in the nation. Miss Gale passed away in 1948 at the advanced age of 95, having lived through the Civil War, two World Wars, one Great Depression – and one library building project.

Sources: *Miss Gale's Books, The Beginnings of the Rock Island Public Library*, by Roald Tweet; Rock Island Library special collections.

Rock Island Public Library -  
309-732-READ

[www.rockislandlibrary.org](http://www.rockislandlibrary.org)

