

A Brief History of the Naperville Public Library

James Lawrence Nichols was born in Germany in 1851. He emigrated to the United States at the age of 6, was orphaned at 8, and then worked from farm to farm. Eventually, he taught himself English and by age 19 secured a certificate to teach others. Once completing his education at North Central College, he served for 1 year as principal of Naperville's public schools. In 1883, Nichols was appointed "Principal of the Commercial Department of the College" where he taught for 8 years. Following his success in writing and publishing several books on business, in 1891 he launched J. L. Nichols & Co. in Naperville. Early hardships left him in poor health and he died in August 1895, at the age of 44. Among his bequests, he left \$10,000 to Naperville, newly organized as a city, to establish a library, so that no child would be without books as he had been. Wisely, Nichols made certain that his legacy would be cared for. His gift was contingent on the city's agreement to maintain the library, supply its materials, and provide employees, ensuring that residents could continue to use its library.

On September 22, 1898, 67 years after Joseph and John Naper and their families and friends formed Naper Settlement in 1831, Nichols Library opened its doors to serve Naperville's 2,200 residents. Thanks to the gift from Professor Nichols, the City purchased the land, hired the architect, built and furnished the library. The Women's Club provided the 500-volume opening day collection and residents immediately donated another 200 books. A dream was fulfilled at 110 S. Washington Street.

Six hundred thirty-nine books were checked out that first year. By 1900 the number would reach nearly 7,000. Surely J. L. Nichols had identified a critical need within the community. The first 10 years saw four head librarians: Edna Goss, Hannah Ditzler Asplough, Jennie Niederhouser, and Rose Barnard. Mary "Matie" B. Egermann followed in 1908 and would remain at Nichols Library until 1950.

In 1950 the nation's economy was ready to take off, and Naperville was positioned to join. The population had already grown to 7,023, the library's collection had 12,323 volumes, and its annual circulation reached 21,119. Miriam Fry had been assistant librarian for several years, when the Board asked her to take over as head librarian. Katherine Finkbeiner, a good friend, offered to help. Neither of them knew that this was the start of a joint career that would last into the 1980s. In the early days they did everything – ordered, cataloged, and mended books. They did reference, readers advisory, story times, and checked out books. As Naperville grew, so did the community's demands on the Library.

In 1961 Nichols Library received an addition to the south of the original structure. When Children's Services and Technical Services were moved to the basement in 1975, it was evident that the Library would soon need a larger location. Within 4 years the library was again at capacity.

Like a microcosm of the community it served, the library was growing so quickly that it could no longer contain itself. Books were everywhere. Ten thousand books, as well as some artwork and records, were stored off-site. A new library was needed to meet patron needs. In 1984 Miriam Fry retired and Roger Pearson was appointed Library Director. The City acquired the property at 200 W. Jefferson Avenue, and the new Nichols Library opened on March 11, 1986. The \$6 million, 63,300 square foot facility was almost 5 times the size of the former library. On opening day it had 143,191 books, CD, audio-visual materials, periodicals, and other items with which to serve the 67,371-member community.

Soon after the opening of the new Nichols Library, the Library Board recognized the need for a non-traditional approach to plan for this community. They expanded on J.L. Nichols' dream to include talk of a "triangle" of full service libraries, adding one in the southeast and one in the southwest.

Through the '80s, as Naperville doubled its population, the Library's usage continued to soar. By 1990 circulation reached 943,355 – just short of one million items through one facility!

On December 29, 1992 the Naper Boulevard Library in the southeast, a 32,000 square foot facility, opened on the upper of two floors. In its first year, it had acquired 52,113 books, videos, and CDs and answered 36,000 reference questions. Within only 3 years Naper Boulevard expanded to the lower level. In 1996, for lack of space, Nichols under went a major renovation and relocated the administrative offices to Naper Boulevard. As predicted, both libraries, like the geography surrounding them, also began to fill to capacity and struggle with the volume of traffic. The Library Board purchased a 3-acre parcel at 95th Street and Book Road in southwest Naperville on January 4, 1996.

In May 1996, Donna Dziedzic became the new Library Director. With the support of the City Council, the Library Board, and the staff, she continues to meet the challenges of serving a demanding community.

In 1998, at the 100 year mark, Naperville Public Library served a population of 118,835, circulated almost 2 million items, and housed about 450,000 volumes between the two facilities. They served almost 1,000,000 visitors in one year.

By 1999 the process of building on the third site was under way. Studies were conducted to construct the largest building possible within the constraints of the location. On the Library's behalf the City Council negotiated with the Park District for a 6.5-acre parcel west of the original site. On April 28, 2002, ground was broken for the construction of a 73,000 square foot building. The \$15.8 million structure will open for business on September 21, 2003, one day short of 105 years, since the first Nichols Library opened its doors.

Under the leadership of the Board and the Director, the Naperville Public Library constantly strives to interpret and meet the community's increasingly diverse needs. Naperville residents place significant value on their public library. Today, cardholders access the library 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Materials can be located and reserved online via home computer and renewed via telephone. In fiscal year 2003 nearly 3,000,000 items were checked out of the two facilities. It took 100 years to reach an annual circulation of 1,000,000. It took only 8 more years to reach 2,000,000 and only 5 more to reach 3,000,000. More than a collection of books and periodicals, the Library is now a multi-faceted resource center that gleans and disseminates information in a wide variety of formats. In addition to materials found in Dynix, the computerized catalog, a large network of databases and public access to the Internet are available. While residents continue to view the library as a physical place, Naperville's Neighborhood of Knowledge, expands the definition of "place" to providing equitable service according to individual needs.

The bequest of James Lawrence Nichols I has served Naperville well. From the philanthropic spirit of a man who valued books and education to the hard work and vision of those who continue to develop his dream, Naperville Public Library is an integral part of the community and will continue to provide service to its patrons well into the 21st century. It is a library, indeed, of which the community can be justly proud.

Sources:

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North Central College & Naperville: A Shared History 1870-1995 by *Ann Keating and Pierre Lebeau*

Timelines: North Central College and Naperville History 1831-1995 by *B. Pierre Lebeau*

Naperville Public Library – various annual reports.
