

By the Books

What do Ben Franklin, Andrew Carnegie, Bill Gates, and Martha Reid have in common? A belief that public libraries should be active hubs of every community.

Story and photos by
Maria Buteux Reade

In 1731, Ben Franklin and his peers established the first public library in America. The Library Company of Philadelphia was open on Saturdays from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m. Within a decade, public libraries were arising in other American cities. Ben Franklin believed that “these Libraries have improved the general Conversation of Americans, made the common Tradesman and Farmer as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries.” (From ushistory.org/franklin/philadelphia/library.)

Some 150 years later, Andrew Carnegie provided nearly \$42 million from 1887 to 1917 to build more libraries across the United States. A century after that, Bill Gates supplied public libraries with thousands of computers, many of which are still in active use across Vermont. These visionaries understood the inestimable value of a library as both a resource for information and a gathering place for intellectual stimulation.

And Martha Reid? She is the state librarian of Vermont, a role she has held since 2008. This Ohio native moved to Vermont in 2001 and worked in Colchester’s Burnham Library. She has spent more than three decades as a librarian in four states. As the state librarian, she is based in Montpelier. Martha exudes enthusiasm, humor, and vocational passion and is as comfortable showing guests the leather-bound volumes of the State Law Library as she is poking in the colorful stacks in the children’s section. Martha believes that “libraries are the most democratic of all public institutions. Anyone can walk through the doors and have unfettered access to knowledge, ideas, and opinions.” However, she notes that while a librarian may gather materials and establish programs, a patron should never



The potted plants in the foreground mark the international boundary line between Derby Line, Vermont and Stanstead, Québec, Canada. Inside the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, a black line on the floor continues the delineation—right through the reading room and circulation desk.



The stately interior of the St. Johnsbury Atheneum (left) contains both books and paintings, many of which date from the building's original, 19th-century role as a free library and art gallery. Much smaller, more contemporary, and highly mobile is Cobleigh Library's Books on Wheels III, which travels the immediate Lyndonville area above St. Johnsbury.

be able to ascertain a librarian's personal views by looking at the collection. "Intellectual freedom is the hallmark of a public library," Martha asserts.

So what does it take to become a public library? There are four main guidelines. The bulk of the library's funding must come from the local municipality; there must be a governing Board of Trustees; and the library must be open a minimum of 14 hours a week, and at least four hours after 5:00 p.m. Last, the library must have a working landline with a listed phone number. Beyond those parameters, a library has significant leeway to create programs and utilize the facility as it sees fit. Much like Vermont country stores, public libraries meet the needs of their communities, maintaining time-honored traditions and services while providing the modern amenities people want. For public libraries to stay relevant in the 21st century, they must embrace technology and use it to their advantage. "We have one foot in the print world and one foot in the digital world," says Martha.

A Vermonter equipped with a library card has free access to standard materials, such as books and movies, as well as electronic sources of information like the Vermont On-Line reference service (a statewide database of information) and the Vermont Automated Library System, essentially an electronic card catalogue. In theory, a resident from Brookfield has the same access to materials as someone who lives in Burlington. The *Listen up! Vermont* website allows people to download audio and ebooks onto their mobile devices. Readers with visual impairments are eligible to receive "talking books," recorded on special digital cartridges, made possible through the Library for the Blind and Visually Handi-

capped. Another opportunity is Universal Class, an online resource offering more than 500 noncredit continuing education courses. Beyond books and technology, libraries also serve as lively centers for community gatherings. Following are some unique ways that libraries have connected with their communities.

Nine libraries (Brattleboro, Essex Junction, Manchester, Middlebury, Montpelier, Newport, Norwich, Rutland, and St. Johnsbury) host the First Wednesdays lecture series sponsored by the Vermont Humanities Council. The program began at Montpelier's Kellogg-Hubbard Library in 2002, and topics range widely from history and politics to literature, food, art, and music. The speakers include national authors, professors, artists, musicians, and political and media figures. All presentations are free to the public and run from October through May.

MUSIC PRACTICE ROOMS

RICHMOND FREE LIBRARY

Through a variety of fundraising efforts and grants in 2002, the library, which occupies the former Universalist Church, was able to incorporate several music practice rooms into the second floor of the converted space. According to Library Director Rebecca Mueller, Trey Anastasio, founding member and lead guitarist of Phish, and his wife Susan were Richmond residents at the time. The couple helped to cover the additional expense, and the rooms now house electric pianos and have provided space for voice, violin, fiddle, harp, guitar, mandolin, and piano lessons. The library also offers space for private tutoring, counseling sessions, test taking, interviews, and quiet workspace for those needing it.

BOOKS ON WHEELS III

COBLEIGH LIBRARY, LYNDONVILLE

For the past 13 years, the Cobleigh Library's bookmobile has been on the road five days a week to the neighboring towns of Burke, East Haven, Newark, Sheffield, Sutton, and Wheelock. When "Books on Wheels II" was nearing its end, Charlotte Albright featured the popular bookmobile on Vermont Public Radio in April 2012. That piece caught the attention of a philanthropic foundation that purchased a new vehicle, aptly named "Books on Wheels III." Abbey Heimlich, an Americorps volunteer who has overseen the truck for the past two years, reminisces, "The day I started, Books on Wheels II broke down, so we began to bring the children bags of books out of my personal vehicle. The kids really missed the mobile library experience though. In June of 2013 we got our brand-new bookmobile, much to the kids' approval. It's been a dream job to help children get ready to learn to read and help them discover the joy of books."

SEED SAVERS LIBRARY

WARREN LIBRARY

The Warren Seed Library grew from a discussion about the availability of heirloom seeds and vegetables. Library Director Deborah Kahn and Gillian Grimm applied for a grant for seed-saving equipment, and then worked closely with Sylvia Davatz, a Vermont seed saver, who advised them to start with seven varieties of tomatoes, peas, and beans. Patrons volunteered to "check out" and plant the seeds and then save seeds to return in the fall for future circulation. Children in the local elementary school illustrated the seed packet labels. Deborah explained, "We now have our seed-saving equipment available to check out and are encouraging patrons

to bring in seeds from any successful heirloom plant they grew this summer, to help expand our seed library. We've had a great response from our patrons so far and are excited to keep the project going, both for the good of our community and for the preservation of some rare and interesting vegetable varieties."

CROSSING THE DERBY LINE

HASKELL FREE LIBRARY AND OPERA HOUSE
How many libraries double as opera houses? Or vice versa? If you are seeking an international experience but left your passport at home, visit the Haskell Free Library and Opera House in Derby Line in the Northeast Kingdom. Half the library is in the United States while the other is in Stanstead, Québec. A black line on the floor delineates the international border that runs right through the reading room and the circulation desk. In the adjacent opera house, some of the performers could be in the United States while others are in Canada. This cultural curiosity built in 1901 intentionally straddles the border so both Americans and Canadians can enjoy easy access to the library and the opera house. Not surprisingly, most of the staff are bilingual.

THE HOTSPOT

GREENSBORO FREE LIBRARY
In the Northeast Kingdom, Greensboro Free Library consists of a warren of rooms meandering through a two-story, white clapboard house overlooking Caspian Lake. With 775 year-round residents, the town's population leaps to nearly 3,000 in the summer. Head Librarian Mary Metcalf explained, "We strive to meet the needs of an eclectic mix. In the summer, we see a lot of professors, writers, businesspeople. Come winter, we serve farmers, teachers, construction workers, members of the service sector." The library's biggest draw is its Internet connection, which can be spotty in the



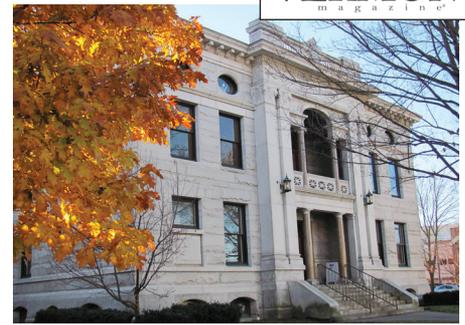
Northeast Kingdom. Board Chair Ed Stehle chuckles, "It's hard to know when the library is closed because we'll often have a full parking lot with people tapping into our wireless system!"

MOBILE APPS AND MUSHROOMS

BRADFORD'S WOODS LIBRARY
Co-directors Debra Tinkham and Gail LaVaude, who welcome any and all programming suggestions, run Woods Library in Bradford. The library offers "Tech Savvy – Ask Arvid" Wednesdays, when people bring their computers or mobile device questions and Arvid (that is truly his name) will help them out. This program resulted from a Vermont Community Foundation grant geared to technology training for local citizens. The "Mushroom Club" is also popular, with opportunities to forage for wild mushrooms in the area. Last spring, volunteers made mushroom logs drilled and filled with shiitake spores. A board member, who has a passion for and, yes, training in mycology, spearheaded this initiative.

MEMPHREMAGOG MINSTRELS AND MOVIE LOVERS

GOODRICH MEMORIAL LIBRARY, NEWPORT
Goodrich Memorial Library anchors a busy corner of Newport's Main Street. Built in 1899 for \$20,000, the library underwent an extensive renovation in 2005 for \$635,000. This renovation ensured that Goodrich Memorial Library will remain a crucial hub for the citizens of Newport, located a few miles from the Canadian border. People can rent the facility for weddings, graduations, reunions, business meetings, and art shows. "Friends and Drifters," a group of local musicians, gathers to play music in the second floor Assembly Room. Last February, more than 150 people showed up for this free concert. Movies are also in high demand, as Newport no longer has movie rental stores. "People checked out more than 6,000 DVDs last year! Fortunately, we also have members who donate their entire movie collection," says staff member Irene Farrar.



Montpelier's Kellogg-Hubbard Library offers a plethora of activities, events and worthy services (among them are computer tutoring, e-book downloads, and even home delivery for people who are unable to come to the library, especially during winter months, courtesy of library volunteers).

All told, Vermont has 183 public libraries, the most per capita in the country. Fletcher Free Library in Burlington is the largest, with 44,000 square feet, while Westminster West in Putney takes care of business in a microscopic 180 square feet. Post Mills was the first town to dedicate a specific building as a library in 1867. Until then, village libraries existed in private homes, town offices, or available spaces within stores. Ninety percent of the libraries have high-speed Internet access, with each library having on average six computers available for public use. Staff members often help patrons with technology skills. "We have grandparents come in sheepishly asking for training on their new iPad or help with Skype so they can communicate with their grandkids across the country," says a volunteer at one library. "It's wonderful when they come back later, proudly showing us photos of their kids on their Dropbox account." Many Vermonters use library computers to apply for jobs or to create a résumé. Some seek assistance completing electronic government forms. "We strive to meet the needs of our visitors in any way we can," says Martha Reid.

Vermont is blessed with crown jewels like the stately St. Johnsbury Atheneum with its museum-worthy collection of Hudson River School paintings and the bustling granite Kellogg-Hubbard Library in the heart of Montpelier. Yet perhaps more intriguing are the smaller treasures found in villages and tucked away in rural communities. Wherever you travel in Vermont, a vibrant library will surely offer a welcome haven. Exercise your right to enjoy this "most democratic of all public institutions" and pick up a newspaper, check email, or simply sink into a comfy chair and...read a book. **■**

Maria Buteaux Reade has a home along the Battenkill River in Arlington, VT. When not teaching English, she works at Someday Farm in East Dorset and writes in a sugarhouse converted to a studio.