

Gresham Carnegie Library

By Carol Ann Raphael

The Gresham Carnegie Library building is one of the finest examples of the Tudor Revival style of architecture in the region. Built between 1912 and 1913 with funds provided by the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, the library served the community for fifty years as both an important educational resource and as a venue for clubs and social activities. The building was purchased by the Gresham Historical Society in 1990 and now houses the Gresham Historical Museum.

After the Oregon legislature authorized a county tax for libraries in January 1903, Multnomah County used the funds to contract with the Portland Library Association to extend its services to all county residents, including those in Gresham. That fall, Gresham opened its first public reading room on the second floor of the town's post office, where residents could gather to read books sent from Portland. By 1906, as the reading room grew in popularity, the number of books increased and a local group established the Gresham Library Association. A librarian was hired in 1907.

In 1911, community members investigated funding options, including the Carnegie Foundation, which had funded libraries in other Oregon communities. With money donated by local residents, the city purchased a site on the corner of North Main Avenue and Fourth Street. Buying property suitable for a library building was a precondition required by the Carnegie Foundation, which agreed to fund construction.

To design the building, the city hired Folger Johnson of Johnson and Mayer, two young architects who had recently moved from New York to Portland. Johnson was a graduate of Columbia University and had trained in the Beaux Arts academic tradition in Paris, which placed a high value on European styles of architecture. In consultation with the Gresham Library Association, Johnson selected the Tudor style, reminiscent of an English country manor house, which was popular following the end of World War I.

As is typical of traditional English Tudor architecture, the Gresham Carnegie Library is a rectangular brick building with a concrete foundation. The façade features false half-timbering and decorative brickwork laid in a herringbone pattern. The leaded glass windows have iron lanterns, carved oak brackets, and unique colophon medallions—depicting emblems printers use to identify their publications. The exterior wood is red, which complements the warm hues of the brick, and the building has a low pitched gable roof with wood shingles and a hipped bay. The front door is framed by a Tudor entry arch.

Inside, the spacious main reading room is filled with light from two bay windows, with additional windows on both sides of the entryway. Built-in bookshelves and wood casement windows add to the classic English interior. Other rooms in the single-floor structure were originally used as a women's room, a librarian's office, and a place to hold story hours.

The library opened on the afternoon of March 1, 1913, with Clarisse H. Haile as librarian. The interior was remodeled in 1962 to make repairs and to accommodate a growing collection. As Gresham's population swelled, a larger building was needed, and the city built a new building one block east of the Carnegie library. The new library was dedicated on January 7, 1990.

The Gresham Historical Society purchased the Carnegie Library Building in 1990. With extensive community support and generous bequests, significant renovations were completed in 2012 and the building was reopened as the Gresham Historical Museum. The building, which looks much like it did when it first opened, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2000 and is on Oregon's Inventory of Historic Sites and Buildings.

Sources

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