“The Greatest Blessing and the Most Valuable Asset of the University”: Miami’s Alumni Library

One of the most recognizable features of Miami University’s Oxford campus is its Carnegie Library. Like other 19th century university libraries, Miami University’s library collection was modest during its first 100 years. Since students recited passages memorized from textbooks in order to complement information gleaned from faculty lectures, books were mostly provided for supplementary reading. However, by the turn of the 20th century, changing teaching methods challenged students to demonstrate critical thinking and research skills. Needs for upgraded facilities, increased book budgets, and improved service to patrons prompted many college and university libraries to appeal to noted benefactor Andrew Carnegie for assistance. Miami University was one such institution that benefited from Carnegie’s generosity.

Inspired by Miami’s impending centennial in 1909, university leaders and a building committee sought a Carnegie grant to construct a main library on its campus. The university matched the $40,000 gift with Alumni Centennial Fund contributions from 158 Miami alumni, students, faculty, and friends. To recognize these contributions, the building was named the Alumni Memorial Library.

Conceived as the most lavish building on campus, the project was awarded to architect Frank Packard of Columbus, Ohio. Inspired by Classical Roman styles, Packard created a library with a main reading room seating 192 people, a periodical room, multiple-tier stacks accommodating 150,000 volumes, and a handful of seminar and faculty study rooms. Notable features of Packard’s attractive building included a Rookwood tile interpretation of the university seal on the north exterior gable, a copper-roofed dome, and a 70-foot-high octagonal rotunda. Salt-glazed brick walls, marble and cast glass floors, bronze railings and skylights completed the building’s interior features.

One year after the library’s completion, all available shelf space was occupied. In 1914, planning for a building expansion was begun. New wings were added to the east in 1922 and to the west in 1951. Funded from both a university fund-raising campaign and the Carnegie Corporation, the 1922 addition was designed by I. Ralph Ridley. This addition included a main reference and reading room and a library stack extension. State funds provided the funding for the 1951 addition that was designed by Potter Tyler & Martin, which enlarged the building and restored its compositional symmetry.

The Alumni Library remained Miami’s main library until King Library was completed in 1966. Alumni Hall was renovated in the early 1990s; today, it is the home of Miami’s Department of Architecture and Interior Design and the Wertz Art & Architecture Library.
Frank L. Packard, Architect

Frank L. Packard was born in Delaware, Ohio on June 11, 1866. After studying architecture and engineering at The Ohio State University, he completed his education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1887.

Packard began his career as an architectural apprentice for the Delaware County, Ohio surveyor in 1881 and an intern with the New York architectural firm of Babb, Cook, & Willard. In 1892, he co-founded the Columbus, Ohio architectural firm of Yost and Packard. When his partner, Joseph Warren Yost, moved to New York City, Packard became sole owner of the firm in 1899.

A leading institutional architect, Packard designed over 3,400 buildings, including Miami University’s Alumni Library. Packard also drafted one of the first master plans for The Ohio State University campus. He died in 1923.
Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919)

Andrew Carnegie emigrated from Scotland to Allegheny, Pennsylvania with his family when he was 13. Rising from a position as a telegraph operator for the Pennsylvania Railroad to become Superintendent of United States Railways and Telegraphs, Carnegie demonstrated remarkable business acumen. Making wise investments and responding to the growing American demand for steel, Carnegie founded the Carnegie Steel Company, which produced steel rails for railroads. By 1900, the company made more than $40 million annually. Carnegie sold his empire to his competitor, New York banker J.P. Morgan, for $480 million. When the two companies merged to form U.S. Steel, Carnegie had amassed a fortune approximating $300 million. Now considered the richest man in the world, Carnegie devoted the rest of his life to philanthropy, giving away almost 90 percent of his fortune.

Carnegie attributed his success to self-education, gained largely in the private library of Colonel James Anderson, a wealthy Allegheny, Pennsylvania businessman who opened his personal library to neighborhood working boys every Saturday. As a young telegraph messenger, Carnegie read his way through the almost 500-volume library, one shelf at a time. Later reflecting on Anderson and his generosity, Carnegie remarked that Anderson “opened me to the intellectual wealth of the world.”

Carnegie saw it as his duty to guide fellow millionaires in responsibly sharing their fortunes with others. Convinced that libraries made a positive impact on people, he began awarding library grants in 1881 to communities that demonstrated their need for a library, their commitment to providing a suitable site, and their ability to offer long-term support. In approximately 30 years, Carnegie made possible the construction of almost 1,700 libraries nationwide; 111 were built in Ohio. Another 820 were built in other countries. Overall, Carnegie spent $56 million on this initiative.

John Shaw Billings (1838-1913)

John Shaw Billings graduated from Miami University in 1857. He was medical inspector of the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War. As head of the Surgeon General’s Library in Washington, D.C., Billings developed the collection that became the National Library of Medicine. He also formed the New York Public Library.

Inspired by Billings’ achievement, Andrew Carnegie provided over $5 million for the creation of 68 branch libraries in New York City. Later, he promised 20 more libraries for Brooklyn. Billings influenced Carnegie to provide funds for the construction of libraries in cities and towns across the country, including Alumni Library. Billings himself contributed a significant amount of money to the project.

After Billings died on March 11, 1913, Carnegie offered the following tribute: “Knowledge is said to consist of two elements – what you yourself already know, and what you know how and where to obtain – of both departments our dear lost friend was master.”

Murder in the Stacks [Boston: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Company, 1934]

With its rotunda and glass-floored stacks, the Alumni Library is said to be the inspiration for the setting of Murder in the Stacks, the first novel of Marion Boyd Havighurst (1894-1974).

The program documents remarks made by Professor Andrew D. Hepburn, facts about the building, members of the building committee, and photographs of some of its features.
During the dedication of the Alumni Library on June 16, 1910, Miami’s acting president, Raymond Hughes, pronounced the Alumni Library as the center of intellectual activity on the campus as “the greatest blessing and the most valuable asset of the University.”