

THE HAMILTON TOWNSHIP LIBRARY

By Alice Grove and Frank Coleman

By 1920, Hamilton Township was growing rapidly in population and industry, and the need for a public library was recognized. During the fall of 1922 through the efforts of James W. Alexander, Superintendent of Elementary Schools in the township, and members of the Parent Teacher Association, a petition was circulated and more than enough required signatures were secured to place the library question on the ballot. The referendum was passed in November, 1922 and according to the New Jersey library laws, not less than one-third of a mill of every taxable real estate dollar was available for library use.

Early in 1923 the township committee appointed the following Board of Trustees: Mrs. Francis Arthur, Mrs. Frank Vliet, Mrs. Frank Morris, Mrs. E. S. Willey, Mrs. Herbert Ball, Mr. James Alexander, and Mr. John Harter, Chairman of the Hamilton Township Committee as ex-officio members.

The first meeting of the library trustees was held in March, 1923, and with valuable advice and friendly cooperation of Miss Sara Askew, director of the New Jersey Library Commission, plans were made to organize and distribute supplementary reading books to the sixteen elementary schools as well as recreational reading for adults.

The library began operating in September, 1923 when small deposits of juvenile books were placed in each of the schools, and small collections of adult books were placed in library centers in fifteen to twenty locations throughout the township. These centers were maintained on a voluntary basis in homes, stores, community houses, churches, and fire houses wherever community-minded people offered space and time. Mrs. Fred Gardner's house in Edgebrook, Goldy's Grocery Store in Lakeside Park, Chamberlin's Ice Cream Parlor in Hamilton Square, Ocker's Barrel in North Crosswicks, Mrs. Miriam Morris's home in White Horse, and Neff's Drug Store in the Bromley area, to name a few, were among these centers.

The books in the schools and adult centers were rotated to give the readers a selection of titles. This plan, especially in the adult centers, spread a feeling of neighborly interest throughout the township.

Mary Freeman was appointed the first librarian by the library trustees at a salary of \$125.00 per month. The first library was a classroom in the Maple Shade School in White Horse, where it remained until August, 1925 when it was moved to a vacant room in

Kuser School. After a few months it was moved to larger quarters in a new addition to the Hamilton Square School. There it remained until August, 1929 when adequate space was provided in the basement of the new township municipal building on Greenwood Avenue, where it remained for over forty years.

In June, 1924 Parent Teacher Association members asked, "What about summer reading for our children?" Many people housing adult books in the library centers came to the rescue and found space for children's books for the summer. The children were eager to read for pleasure. One mother said the books "steadied" her children and another said, "The books opened roads and lanes in their minds that had only been rugged paths before."

As the township expanded, the library also grew. By 1930 there were two professional librarians, two full-time assistants and several part-time assistants, mostly high school seniors. Because of popular demand for better library service, the library was open to the public Monday through Friday afternoons, Monday evenings, and Saturday mornings. Library cards were issued, and many took advantage of the extended service, especially high school students doing reference work. Three parochial schools were now being supplied with books in addition to the public schools. For several summers the library truck was scheduled for visits to various local yards so that elementary school children could choose books for two-week periods. During the school terms, student classes and teachers were invited to visit the library, but lack of space in the library and insufficient transportation ended this project.

During the Work Projects Administration (W.P.A.) era in the 1930's several persons joined the staff, and two remained as permanent personnel on the payroll.

The population explosion in the township following World War II impacted on the township's library services, which soon expanded to three branch libraries in rented quarters: one on South Broad Street near Chambers; one in Yardville over the Post Office, and the third in Hamilton Square in the Arthur-Margerum Hall on Nottingham Way. The branches were maintained by library staff, assisted by high school seniors, and were open at least two afternoons and one evening a week. By this time, additional reading and educational materials, such as magazines, phonograph albums, film strips, slides and mounted pictures, were available in addition to source books such as encyclopedias, New

Jersey special history collection, government pamphlets, college catalogs and business directories. The New Jersey Library Commission loaned books on request, and every effort was made to satisfy the public demand for better library service in its limited quarters with a small staff.

The main library continued to "push out its walls", using almost all available space in the basement of the municipal building.

In October, 1948 the library celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with a luncheon for all of the people who had given of their time and talent to maintain the centers. A special commemorative program, held in the township's sole high school, Hamilton High West attracted many of the township's citizens.

At the outset of the 1960's the library annual budget had grown to \$53,425, a nearly ten-fold increase from the first budget. There were 16,748 registered borrowers, and 146,140 books were circulated with a staff of two professional librarians and three full time and eight part-time assistants.

The library services and continued utilization by Hamilton Township residents, young and old, continued to grow, thanks in part to the dedicated efforts of the library staff. Although small in number, they worked as though they were fully staffed; attending county and state library conferences, giving book reviews and presentations before various groups and otherwise endeavoring to enhance the township's awareness of the library and its services. By early 1970 it was readily apparent to the township, council and the library trustees that a modern facility was needed to appropriately serve the community. The long hoped for dream was realized when the modern facility on Municipal Drive was dedicated in October, 1975. Many additional services were offered, including copy machines, films, video cassettes, and microfilm equipment. A meeting room accommodating 250 people is also available.

The Hamilton Township Quilt, which is kept in the library, is the most outstanding artistic representation of the Township and its history. Completing the quilt was a monumental project, which was first proposed by Elizabeth Kramer to the Office of Senior Citizens' Programs. The township endorsed the project and obtained the help of Louise Gavenda to train the quilters. The quilting class supplied the ideas to be displayed in the blocks, drafted sketches for the displays, made the patterns. The group completed the quilt by working three hours a week for two years.

The quilt, which is seven feet, eight inches high and six feet, five inches wide, resides above and to the left of the entry to the reference room of the library. It is made up of 24 blocks, each thirteen inches square with

a two inch border all around, and a twenty-six by thirty inch center block. Each block represents a story, which may be found in a loose leaf binder kept near the quilt. The information in the binder was assembled for presentation by a committee of the Friends of the Library, headed by Mildred Brearley.

By the end of the 1980's the library had again outgrown its space. Renovations to the existing building were made, the collections rearranged and additional collections housed in the library facilities.

Still maintaining its philosophy of community service and outreach, the library offers tours for school and special groups, film service to the elderly in nursing homes, and adult basic reading services.

By this time the annual report revealed the library's staff had increased to a director, at least seven professional librarians, more than 20 full-and part-time assistants; films circulation exceeding a quarter of a million, and an annual budget of approximately \$800,000, generated by tax, state aid and other revenues.

Hamilton Township owes its thanks to the original library Board of Trustees, to James Alexander, Sara Askew and enthusiastic members of the Parent Teacher Associations, urged on by Mrs. Frank Vliet, for their outstanding library and services. Time marches ever on, the library now nearly 25 years old is keeping in step with the times.

An expansion program in 1990 added an additional 5,500 square feet to the original 49,000 square foot building, for a total of 54,500 square feet. The expansion was primarily to add book storage space which increased the capacity of the Library by an estimated sixty thousand volumes (approximately 30%) to the existing two hundred thousand volumes. The cost of the addition was approximately \$335,000, of which twenty percent was subsidized by a grant from the State Library with funds provided by the Federal Library and School Construction Act (LSCA). The architect for the Library expansion project was Faridy, Thorne, Maddish, whose partners include the library building's original architect.

At this time, the adult service area of the library was also rearranged, better utilizing available space and anticipating addition of computer installation.

In 1992, the Library installed an automated library system, including a computerized book circulation system and an on-line public catalog. In addition, the Library installed CD-ROM (Compact Disc-Read Only Memory) technology, which allows Library patrons to do personal computer based research of magazine indexes and business resources.