

Grass Roots for Library System Established in 1816

[*Walpole Times*, April 2, 1964]

The grass roots of our public library system was established in 1816 when the Ladies Literary, Moral Society was founded. Meeting every second Thursday for five hours to read books affording "useful information to the mind and improvement to the hear," the women of Walpole braided straw while the reading was in progress. The end result of their labor was sold for profit and the money used to purchase new books. Within a few years they had accumulated a sizeable number of books for circulation among the members and these were also made available to non-members for a fee of one dollar a year.

Undoubtedly inspired by the ladies, a group of men, about 60 in number, formed the Walpole Social Library, circa 1826. The men purchased shares in the library which entitled them to two books per share, and although the endeavor initially was successful, it was not long lived. A number of the volumes once owned by the group were presented to the Walpole Library some years ago by Isaac Newton Lewis.

Following a lapse of about 50 years, Miss Mary R. Bird was instrumental in starting a library in East Walpole in 1872. Housed in Bird Hall (the old Morse Tavern) it, the library, was removed to Walpole center when through the efforts of Miss Bird, her father, Francis W. Bird, James D. Dupee and George D. Kendall, the library became a town institution. In 1876 it was located on Main street near the Common in the store of F.O. Pillsbury and in ensuing years maintained in the Town Hall.

Walpole is indebted for its present building to F. W. Bird and his son, Charles S. Bird and the philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie. The thoughtfulness and generosity of the Birds provided the impetus, money and site while Carnegie endowed the building, thereby providing the town with a source of education and pleasure since the structure was dedicated in 1903. Originally built at a cost of \$25,000, the library has grown and expanded in volume and circulation during the past 60 years and today is sorely in need of larger quarters.

As the population grew and public demand widened, the Walpole Library Trustees acquired space first in the Bird School in 1933 and later in 1934 the building at the corner of Wolcott avenue and Union street in East Walpole for a branch library. It is interesting to note that the charming old building originally

was the home of the First Church and later the Wednesday Club held its meetings there. In time a branch library was required in North Walpole and in May 1959 a portion of the Old Fisher School on Main street was obtained for the purpose of circulation of books to adults in the area, in addition to the children who had enjoyed borrowing privileges through the school for a number of years.

The Walpole Historical Society in sponsoring National Library Week (April 12-18), together with the Walpole Library Trustees and Staff, anticipates a more active interest and participation in our local libraries as a means of greater knowledge and source of pleasure. The late John Fitzgerald Kennedy, while President, once aptly stated, "Books and libraries and the will to use them are the most important tools our nation has to diffuse knowledge and develop our creative powers. The community public library is one of the richest and more enduring assets of our historical heritage."